

# Overcoming Test Anxiety

Test anxiety in college students is a fairly common and ***never fatal***. In fact, a small amount of anxiety may be beneficial because it sharpens the senses and the mind. In large excess though, test anxiety may be overwhelming and cause discomforting physical symptoms.

The good news is that there are many strategies that students may use to combat test anxiety. Like tools, they don't work unless they are used and used properly.

## What is Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety, to a large degree, is related to test preparation. The more certain you are that you ***know*** the material the less you experience test anxiety. ***Beware.....***, there is a huge difference between ***thinking*** you know material and ***knowing*** that you know the material that could appear on a test. You can use the list of techniques below before and during a test to combat test anxiety.

Anxiety often stems from a fear of losing control or of being out of control. With test anxiety, there is a direct correlation between knowing and understanding the material that could appear on an exam and resulting anxiety. As knowledge and understanding increase, test anxiety commonly decreases.

## Test Preparation: Before a Test

1. ***Set up and follow a study schedule*** and begin studying from the day of the 1<sup>st</sup> assignment. A large part of the anxiety experienced by students is due to the fact that they don't make enough time to prepare for a test. Once a realistic schedule is set up for study time, some of this anxiety is relieved. You can bring back the anxiety with a *thud* if you don't stick to your schedule.
2. ***Self-test to discover what has and has not yet been learned before taking a test when something can still be done about it.*** One way to self-test is to make questions from main ideas and answers from the details and put them on notecards. Do this for lecture and text notes. Include 1 main idea and its details per notecard.

Rehearse the very activity you will have to do when taking a test. Look at a question and practice recalling the answer aloud, from memory, or write it down. Next, turn the card over and check for

accuracy and completeness. Do this for each question as many times as it takes for you to recall answers completely, accurately and correctly from memory, then move on to the next notecard.

Students become better at that which they practice. If students practice *not* looking at questions and recalling answers from memory, they get better at that, also.

**Front**

p. 373-374

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**What are the 5 forms of energy?**

**Back**

1. Mechanical
2. Electromagnetic
3. Nuclear
4. Chemical
5. Heat

MENCH

**Front**

p. 373

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**Define mechanical energy (ME).  
What has ME? Give an example.**

**Back**

1. **ME is motion**
2. **All matter in motion has mech. energy**

**Ex. Car going 50 mph has ME.**

Include problems that the instructor worked in class and concepts the instructor covered on notecards. In textbooks, use bold print, the chapter outline, objectives, or end-of-chapter questions for making possible test questions on notecards.

3. **Ask the instructor** what *types* of questions will be on an exam; (multiple-choice, true-false, essay, etc.) and how many questions there might be. If a review sheet or sample test is provided by the instructor, rely on that more than anything else in preparing for an exam. Exams from previous semesters are also excellent tools for exam preparation. They can tell you how questions may be formatted and the depth of details you need to learn.
4. **Rework all of the problems** assigned for homework and any others that apply to the material. The more problems you work *and the more often you work them*, the more skill and confidence you acquire.

Write out all the steps for solving each type of problem in math, chemistry, and physics; *do not do this work in your head and assume you know the solution*. This puts you at a distinct psychological disadvantage when you take an exam that only serves to increase your stress factor. Set up a system where you **know for sure** that you **know** the steps for solving each type of problem that could appear on an exam.

One easy way to do this is to use notecards. Place a problem on 1 side of a notecard and the solution, step-by-step, on the other. Each day, practice solving the problems. For example, look at a problem, and do the solution before turning the card over and checking. Separate the notecards into 2 piles: One pile for the solutions you got correct and one pile where you still make mistakes or don't

remember the solution. It is a good idea to practice daily notecards in the 'I don't know this, yet' pile. Go over the ones you know every 3 or 4 days to prevent forgetting. This will also reduce careless mistakes, allow you to finish the test faster, bolster your confidence, and combat test anxiety.

### FRONT

p. 42

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$$\text{Solve } 2^x = \frac{1}{8}$$

### BACK

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1.  $2^x = \frac{1}{2^3}$       1. Rewrite 8 as  $2^3$

2.  $2^x = 2^{-3}$       2. Define negative exponent

3.  $x = -3$       3. 1 to 1 property of exponential equation

5. **Do not cram.** In most cases, this leads only to confusion of concepts and raises anxiety. Eight to 10 hours of study is much more beneficial when it is spread out over a week or even several days rather than doing it in one sitting. It is a known fact that the brain needs time to absorb new material. So take frequent breaks and schedule your study time evenly over many days or weeks.
6. **Eat well and sensibly.** Your body is an engine that must have proper vitamins and minerals to think, concentrate, learn, and recall properly. To emphasize the effect of nutrition on learning, we can use an analogy. Ask a mechanic what would happen if you filled your car's gas tank with Kool-Aid instead of gas and then you tried to drive away.
7. **Get a reasonable amount of nighttime sleep.** Too little sleep negatively affects learning and recall.

# Mental Preparation

1. **Choose a positive attitude.** Anytime fears come rushing in, regularly visualize yourself taking the exam, doing well, and seeing an A on the paper. Make a list of affirmations - i.e., "I'm doing well in math," "I can learn this material," "I enjoy math," etc. Even if you do not initially believe what you are saying to yourself, it sends a message to your subconscious that, in turn, affects your belief system. It is your belief system that controls your behavior.
2. **If you start to panic.....** Go with the fear and imagine the worst. Go through the whole scenario for not passing the test, failing the course, dropping out of school not getting a job, and ending up pushing a shopping cart down Skid Row. That will help you get your fears in perspective. Practice deep breathing and visualize the opposite such as getting an A on the test, passing the course, getting your degree, etc. Remember that *no test is the difference between life and death or successful and unsuccessful people*. This exam cannot lead to mass destruction of the western world.

# On Test Day

1. **Arrive at the exam room at least 10 minutes early.** Get settled, relaxed and focus on deep breathing. Don't think about the material.
2. **Read the whole exam over before beginning** and figure out how much time you need to allot for each problem. If you spend more than your allotted time on one problem, leave it and go on. If there is time at the end, you can always go back.
3. **Visualize yourself at home** or at the library doing your homework. This will help you create a more relaxed atmosphere, thus allowing that part of your brain needed for complex thinking to function.

# Taking the Test

1. **Do all the problems and questions that you are totally sure of first.** This will increase your confidence level and start the information flowing. A result is often encouragement to try those problems you are not so sure of.
2. **Always go with your first instincts** in solving a problem or writing an answer. Don't second-guess yourself unless you are **absolutely certain** you have the wrong answer. If in doubt, leave it. Have confidence in your preparation and ability to do well.
3. **Answer the questions and problems with the most points first.** Do problems and questions with fewer points per item later.
4. **Work at a reasonable pace and work carefully.** Divide the time allotted for the test by the number of problems. This will give you a rough estimate of how much time you should spend on each answer.
5. **Think positively.** Tell yourself over and over that "you can do it, that you have studied, that you are smart." Remember positive comments from teachers and friends. At the very least think, "*I am doing the best I can do and that is all I can do.*"
6. **Focus** on breathing deeply and regularly.

7. **If your mind begins racing or you start to panic**, say to yourself, "**Stop!**" This can reduce or stop the racing. Breathe deeply. Visualize yourself in a calm peaceful place like a summer meadow or a forest or by a stream keep on breathing deeply. Take a *few minutes* to do this with your eyes closed. Then tell yourself you can only do your best and that is all you can do. Then go back to the test knowing you can only do what you can do and no more.

If test anxiety persists in spite of your efforts to control it, see a counselor in your college counseling center. They help students with test anxiety all the time.

## Use your Brain to Cut Stress

Here is what the experts say about relieving stress in general. To begin, you need to understand which brain hemisphere is stressed.

**If you feel depressed or emotionally overwrought, your stress is in the right hemisphere--the creative, emotional, holistic side.** What to do: Switch to your matter-of-fact left hemisphere by doing math, writing facts, or organizing something. The emotional right brain will calm down.

**If you feel time-stressed and overburdened, the left hemisphere is involved.** Switch to your right brain by singing, playing a sport, or doing something creative.