

What Can You Do About Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety can be a real problem when you are so stressed out over a test that you can't get past the nervousness to focus on the test questions and do your best work. Feeling ready to meet the challenge, though, can keep test anxiety at a manageable level.

Use a little stress to your advantage. Stress is your body's warning mechanism - it's a signal that helps you prepare for something important that's about to happen. So use it to your advantage. Instead of reacting to the stress by dreading, complaining, or fretting about the test with friends, take an active approach. Let stress remind you to study well in advance of a test. Chances are, you'll keep your stress from spinning out of control. After all, nobody ever feels stressed out by thoughts that they might do well on a test.

Ask for help. Although a little test anxiety can be a good thing, an overdose of it is another story entirely. If sitting down to a test gets you so stressed out that your mind goes blank and causes you to miss answers that you know, then your level of test anxiety probably needs some attention. Ask your professor, your friends, or your parents for advice, or check the internet for suggestions. If you have extreme test anxiety, see the counseling office for help.

Be prepared. Some students think that going to class is all it should take to learn and do well on tests. But there's much more to learning than just hoping to soak everything up while sitting in class. That's why good study habits and skills are so important - and why no amount of cramming or studying the night before a test can take the place of the deeper level of learning that happens over time with regular study.

Many students find that their test anxiety is reduced when they start to study better or more regularly. It makes sense – the more you know the material, the more confident you'll feel. Having confidence going into a test means you expect to do well. When you expect to do well, you'll be able to relax into a test after the normal first-moment jitters pass.

Watch what you're thinking. If expecting to do well on a test can help you relax, what about when people expect they won't do well? Watch out for any negative messages you might be sending yourself about the test. They can contribute to your anxiety.

If you find yourself thinking negative thoughts ("I'm never any good at taking tests," or "It's going to be terrible if I do badly on this test"), replace them with positive messages. Not unrealistic positive messages, of course, but ones that are practical and true, such as "I've studied hard and I know the material, so I'm ready to do the best I can." (Of course, if you haven't studied, this message won't help!)

Accept mistakes. Another thing you can do is to learn to keep mistakes in perspective - especially if you're a perfectionist or you tend to be hard on yourself. Everyone makes mistakes, and you may have even heard teachers or coaches refer to mistakes as "learning opportunities." Learning to tolerate small failures and mistakes – like that one problem you got wrong in the math pop quiz – is a valuable skill.

Take care of yourself. It can help to learn ways to calm yourself down and get centered when you're tense or anxious. For some people, this might mean learning a simple breathing exercise. Practicing breathing exercises regularly (when you're not stressed out) helps your body see these exercises as a signal to relax.

And, of course, taking care of your health – such as getting enough sleep, exercise, and eating healthy food before a test – can help keep your mind working at its best.

Everything takes time and practice, and learning to beat test anxiety is no different. Although it won't go away overnight, facing and dealing with test anxiety will help you learn stress management, which can prove to be a valuable skill in many situations besides taking tests.