

# Understanding and Managing Test Anxiety

Test anxiety is a common condition characterized by excessive nervousness, fear, or apprehension before or during an examination or assessment.<sup>1</sup>

## Common Symptoms of Test Anxiety

Physical Symptoms	Rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, upset stomach, muscle tension, sweating
Cognitive Symptoms	Racing thoughts, inability to concentrate, negative self-talk, blanking out
Behavioral Symptoms	Procrastination, skipping class or tests, difficulty sleeping, not eating (no appetite)

## What can you do to manage test anxiety?

### Before the Test:

#### 1. Study Effectively

- **Create a Study Schedule:** Start early! You need to spend enough time studying. Plan for more time than you think you need.
- **Use Active Learning Techniques:** Passive reading and reviewing notes is less effective than active learning methods. Try techniques like summarizing the material in your own words, self-testing with practice questions, and teaching the content to someone else. Active engagement with the material enhances understanding and retention.

#### 2. Learn Relaxation Techniques

- **Deep Breathing Exercises:** Incorporate deep breathing exercises into your daily routine or you can comfortably use on test day. Deep, slow breaths can calm your nervous system and reduce anxiety.
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** This technique involves tensing and relaxing different muscle groups to release physical tension. Practice it regularly to become more adept at identifying and releasing tension.

#### 3. Engage in Positive Self-Talk

Talk to yourself to yourself as if you were talking to your good friend. Talk to yourself in the third person--that is, use your name. Challenge negative thoughts with evidence of your past successes and strengths.

#### 4. Cultivate a Healthy Lifestyle

- **Prioritize Sleep:** Adequate sleep is essential for cognitive function and emotional well-being. Aim for consistent sleep schedule and create a relaxing bedtime routine. Avoid caffeine and screens close to bedtime.
- **Eat Healthy Food:** Consume a well-balanced diet. Nutrient-rich foods provide the energy and mental clarity needed for effective learning and for test-taking.
- **Move Your Body:** Physical activity can help reduce stress and anxiety. Even short daily walks can be beneficial.

## During the Test:

**BODY** - Racing heart, muscle tension, nausea, sweating, shallow breathing.

Massage shoulders, eat peppermints/ginger, wear layers you can take off, try deep breathing exercises.

**EMOTIONS** - The predominant feeling is usually fear, secondary is anger, frustration, and/or sadness.

- Pretend you are talking to a friend. What would you say to a friend in a similar situation?
- Reframe your fear: being afraid shows you care about this test.
- Visualize yourself in a safe, happy place.

**THOUGHTS** - The “if-then” snowball: “If I don’t do well on this test then... And then... and then...”

- Create a mental image to alert you of the test anxiety spiral, such as a STOP sign to interrupt the pattern.
- Imagine positive outcomes.
- Reframe the situation: you are a high-achiever, you like to challenge yourself, you are persistent and that is why you are taking this challenging course.

## After the Test:

To really learn, you need to review your test results. What questions did you answer correctly? What mistakes did you make? Were your mistakes a result of carelessness or did you not know the answers or only partially know the answers?

## Summary:

Test anxiety is common, but it can be managed with the right strategies and in many cases with support. By implementing effective study habits, practicing relaxation techniques, and maintaining a positive mindset, you can overcome test anxiety and perform your best on exams.

**Remember that seeking help and support is a sign of strength, not weakness.** Make an appointment with an Academic Success Coach today! We will support you on your academic journey.

<sup>1</sup> Tackling Test Anxiety. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/tackling-test-anxiety/>

<sup>2</sup> Mindful University Project. University of Rochester. <https://www.rochester.edu/mindful/>

<sup>3</sup> Kross, E. (2021). Chatter: The voice in our head, why it matters, and how to harness it. Crown.