

THE LEARNING CENTER • University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Test Anxiety

Feeling nervous for exams is a normal feeling among college students. However, extreme feelings of anxiety and stress before and during an exam can have unhealthy results. Anxiety can be problematic when it prevents you from taking or doing your best on an exam, causes you to feel anxious all the time, or becomes extreme.

Test anxiety is a combination of physical symptoms and emotional reactions that interfere with your ability to perform well on tests. Many students experience varying levels of test anxiety for a number of different reasons. If you're someone who does, check out these suggestions and resources to reduce your test anxiety and improve your overall testing experience in college.

Symptoms of test anxiety

Test anxiety might look different from student to student, but the following is a list of possible symptoms you might experience:

Physical symptoms: Headache, nausea, excessive sweating, shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, lightheadedness, and feeling faint. Test anxiety can also cause panic attacks, which are the abrupt onset of intense fear or discomfort in which you may feel like you are unable to breathe or like you are having a heart attack.

Emotional symptoms: Feelings of stress, fear, helplessness, and disappointment, negative thoughts (rumination about past poor performances, consequences of failure, feeling inadequate, helpless), mind going blank, and racing thoughts.

Behavioral/cognitive symptoms: Difficulty concentrating, thinking negatively, comparing yourself to others, and procrastinating.

Causes of test anxiety

Fear of failure. While the pressure of doing well on an exam can be motivating, it can be detrimental to your self-worth if you associate the grade of the test with your value.

Lack of preparation. Waiting until the last minute or not studying at all can leave you feeling anxious and overwhelmed.

Poor test history. Not succeeding on the previous exam can make you anxious for the next exam. It is important to remember to stay in the present moment when taking an exam so you remain focused. Don't dwell on the past.

High pressure. If you need a certain grade to pass the class, it could increase your test anxiety.

Perfectionism. Perfectionism is having extremely high performance expectations for yourself. Research studies show that students who have high perfectionism and high self-criticism tend to have high test anxiety and do worse on exams. If you struggle with perfectionism, try to let it go. Make sure to take the time to recognize when you have worked hard and allow yourself to make mistakes.

How to reduce test anxiety

Well before the exam

Be prepared. Start studying a few weeks in advance so that you have enough time to prepare for your test. Space your studying out into smaller chunks over time. Use one of the Learning Center's weekly calendars to make a schedule. You can also use Learning Center coaching appointments to help you create a study schedule and remain accountable.

Study effectively. Check out the Learning Center's tips for studying effectively to learn about and use effective study strategies that adequately prepare you for exams and help you learn, understand, and remember material.

Engage in self-care. Take care of your overall health by eating well, getting enough restful sleep, incorporating exercise or movement into your day, and participating in relaxing and fun activities that you enjoy.

Create a calming worksheet. This is a paper that you can carry with you all the time and especially before your exam. On this paper you can put motivational quotes, why you are likely to succeed, breathing techniques, pictures of your supporters, and anything else that will keep you motivated without making you anxious. Create this several days in advance, when you are not stressed and anxious, so that you can turn to it if you do become anxious.

Talk to your professor to get an idea of what is on the exam and what to expect. Look at old exams and practice exams from that class. This can help you better understand what to expect and better prepare. It will also reduce some of the fear and anxiety of the unknown.

Immediately before the exam

Get a good night's sleep (7-9 hours) the night before the exam. Your ability to think clearly and to deal with anxiety improve with sleep.

Eat something nutritious to help with focus and attention. Bring water to stay hydrated.

Avoid too much caffeine. If you've been hitting the caffeine hard to stay awake and study or to stay focused, know that it can also have a negative effect on your nerves.

Gather all of the materials you need in advance, including a pencil, eraser, or calculator, so that you are not rushing around before the exam.

Play calming or familiar music to help you relax.

Arrive to the exam early enough to find a seat that will help, not hinder your focus. (Do you focus best up front? Near a window? Know yourself.)

Bring ear plugs if you get distracted by noise.

Don't let the exam define you. Remember that your self-worth and intelligence does not depend on your performance on this one exam.

Give yourself a pep talk to reframe your anxiety as excitement. Actually telling yourself you're excited will help you see the exam more positively and experience more positive emotions.

During the exam

Calm your body.

- Breathe deeply from your belly.
- Tighten various muscle groups, and then relax them.
- Stand and stretch or shrug shoulders.
- Close your eyes and count to ten.

Sit comfortably.

- Sitting up, relaxing your shoulders, and being mindful of your posture can help you feel more powerful, confident, and assertive. It makes you less stressed, sluggish, and anxious.
- Research shows that slouching and hunching poses decrease people's persistence and creativity when trying to solve complex problems and increase negative self-thoughts.
- Research shows people have higher self-esteem and think of themselves more positively when they sit upright rather than hunched.

Calm your emotions and thoughts.

- Focus only on present moment to help you stay grounded.

Example: "I am sitting at a desk in Carroll Hall. It is 2:00 pm on Tuesday."

- Avoid thoughts about the future or past.

Example: "I need an A on this test in order to improve my g.p.a."

Example: "I should have done more practice problems."

- Replace negative thoughts with positive ones.

Example: "It's okay if I can't answer this question—I can answer another question instead."

- Stay focused on the current task, which is to complete the test, not on how you believe it relates to your self-value.
- Keep realistic expectations. Often times it is not realistic to expect a 100% on an exam. Be okay with doing well, not perfectly.
- Focus on yourself and what you are doing. Ignore other people around you and don't compare yourself to others.

Resources

Make an appointment with an academic coach at the Learning Center to discuss your test anxiety, study strategies, time management, or any other factor one-on-one.

Attend office hours to talk with your professor about ways to best prepare for the exam.

Visit CAPS. If you believe you need more help with your anxiety, consider visiting CAPS.

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