

Overcoming test anxiety

Instructions: Read through each of the strategies below. Check off the strategies for overcoming test anxiety that you use now. Then highlight the ones you would like to start using.

In the weeks before

- Put exam into perspective
- Determine the value of the text/exam in terms of the course grade
- Calculate your existing grade and determine what grade you need to reach your goal
- Calculate how much work is required to get the grade you really want
- Know your stuff. Don't Cram!
- Manage your time well and organize a study schedule. Stick to it as much as possible.
- Ask for help from T.A., senior students, the prof, your friends – join a study group!
- Self-testing: review, do old exam, take a mock exam
- Try doing a 'mock' exam under strict time limitations.

Practice relaxation daily

- Do deep breathing and muscle relaxation
- Imagine success and coping

Use positive self-talk and affirmations

- Tell yourself you can do it!
- Sleep and eat and exercise WELL

Day/night before

- Review your material. Do NOT add any new information. It's too late to learn it now.
- Continue all the same relaxation and imagery practices as above and add MORE!
- Imagine yourself coping before, during (handling it well and any possible negative effects), and after.

Just before!

- Do 5-10 minutes deep, abdominal breathing.
- Do 5-10 minutes of stretching and moderate exercise (e.g. walk to your exam venue).
- Drink water. Avoid coffee, cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, unhealthy food (sugars and fats).
- Avoid highly stressed people/situations.
- Listen to calming music.
- Do a guided visualization e.g. a safe place.
- Repeat your positive affirmations.

During the exam

- Breathe!
- Examine the marking scheme and plan to divide your time evenly among the available marks (i.e. 10 minutes of your time on 10% of the marks). Following timelines gives you a sense of progress and feedback on how you are doing. It's better to write a 75% answer on all questions than having a perfect answer on 50% of the exam.
- Build Confidence: Peruse the whole exam and then do the easiest stuff first.
- Close your eyes for a minute and visualize success.
- Walk yourself through it using calming and coping statements and affirmations.
- Set mini-breaks at specified points e.g. close your eyes, relax your hands, take a deep breath.
- Accept that you are anxious and that some stress is necessary/good.

After the exam

- Celebrate!
- Affirm your strengths and successes.
- Evaluate what strategies worked the best.

Other things I do to help with my text/exam anxiety:

ACTION PLAN for overcoming test anxiety

What things will I try in the future?

Letting go, part 1: Physical sensations of anxiety

1. Breathe.

You can calm the body by focusing on breath. Concentrate on the air going in and out of your lungs. Experience air passing through your nose. If your breaths are short and in your chest, imagine a balloon in your stomach and begin to take longer, deeper breaths. Imagine the balloon expanding as you fill your abdomen with air and the balloon deflating as you exhale.

2. Scan your body.

Sit or lie comfortably and close your eyes. Slowly scan your body starting with the top of the head to the tips of your toes. As you focus on each muscle group, notice if they are relaxed or tense. Gently massage tense areas with your mind and tell the muscles to relax.

3. Tense and relax.

You can use this before or after a body scan to relax tense muscles. Find a muscle that is tense and increase the tension by contracting the muscle for up to 5 seconds. Then release for 5 seconds. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation. Repeat up to 3 times. With each repetition, you might notice the tense muscle getting more relaxed. You may wish to tense an individual muscle, e.g. your left hand, or muscle groups, e.g. hands and arms together.

4. Use guided imagery

Once you're relaxed, take a quick fantasy trip to a place where you feel totally safe—a place you know or a place created in your imagination. Close your eyes and get comfortable in your chair or on the floor. Spend several minutes imagining yourself in this beautiful, peaceful setting. Use all your senses. Be specific. For example, if you are walking on a beach, hear the waves lapping onto the shore; feel the warm sun on your skin, smell the fresh breeze, etc.

5. Describe it.

Instead of placing it aside, focus directly on your anxiety. If you are feeling nauseated, dizzy, etc., concentrate on that feeling. Describe it: size, colour, shape, location, weight/volume, etc.

6. Accept and be with it.

As you describe your anxiety in detail, don't resist. Accept that it is there right now and just be with it. If you can completely experience the sensation, often it will disappear. This technique has been used successfully for people suffering from acute and chronic pain.

7. Exercise aerobically.

Before your test or exam, do some exercise that gets the heart pumping. You'll need about 15-20 minutes of aerobic exercise. Why don't you consider riding your bike or jogging to the exam venue? This is an excellent way to reduce body tension just before sitting down to write.

Letting go, part 2: Dealing with thoughts of anxiety

1. Visualize success.

Our bodies react to our thoughts. So, if you are having thoughts of failure, you increase your chances of doing poorly. Counteract negative thoughts by seeing yourself succeeding. To create a powerfully positive visualization, engage all your senses. Imagine what you will do, see, hear, and say. Mentally walk yourself through the imagery seeing yourself succeed at each stage. Repeat this visualization daily up to and including the day of the test.

2. Praise yourself.

When you talk to yourself positively, your anxiety decreases and increases your chances of success. Build a list of positive but realistic affirmations and repeat them daily. Say, "I am very relaxed. I am doing a great job on this test." As a reminder, hang them up in a visible place.

3. Replace doom with pleasure.

You can't be anxious and relaxed at the same time. So, try replacing thoughts of doom and gloom with pleasant thoughts. When you notice yourself worrying, substitute the thought with images of things you love to do and/or people you like to be with. Prepare a bank: brainstorm a list of 20 ideas then pick several activities that seem especially pleasant and elaborate on them.

3. Use humour to overtake catastrophic thinking

Rather than trying to force yourself to stop worrying, have some fun with your fears. Take the fear to the most absurd limits. For example, you might say to yourself, "If I fail this test, I will fail the course. If I fail the course, I will get kicked out of school. If I get kicked out, I'll never get a good job. If I never get a good job, I'll be poor. If I'm poor, I'll be eating out of a dumpster. If I have to eat out of a dumpster, etc." Continue catastrophizing until it becomes so ridiculous that you find yourself chuckling. Then, go backwards through your list to find a reasonable level of concern.

4. Focusing.

This technique helps to discipline your mind and take you away from worries. Focus your attention on a specific object, something you find interesting. Examine each detail of it: its colour, shape, smell, taste, temperature, weight, etc. During the exam, take a few minutes to listen to the soundscape in the exam venue. Perhaps you would like to listen to the hum of the lights overhead. Another focusing practice you can try is the "3 feelings at 5 times" technique where you see, hear, and feel 5 things and name them. In the exam room, you see 5 things (e.g. I see a green sock); then you hear 5 things (e.g. I hear a cough), finally, you feel 5 things (e.g. I feel cool air on my face). You don't judge or evaluate, just name. When you are done, repeat the cycle. Accept and be with it.

As you describe your anxiety in detail, don't resist. Accept that it is there right now and just be with it. If you can completely experience the sensation, often it will disappear. This technique has been used successfully for people suffering from acute and chronic pain.

5. Zoom out.

When you are in the middle of the test or exam, zoom out. Imagine you are a film director dollying a camera out and away from the object. The point of this is for you to imagine yourself floating away and viewing your situation as a detached outside observer. If you are extremely distressed, zoom yourself out even further. See yourself rising above and beyond the exam venue to encompass your city, country, the planet, etc. From this big picture vantage point, ask yourself if the test/exam is worth worrying about. An alternative is zooming out in time. Imagine yourself one week, one month, one year, one decade from now. Assess how much the current situation will matter when that time comes.

Adapted from Ellis, D. (2000). *Becoming a Master Student*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. pp 175-177.

Guided imagery for test anxiety

Use the following imagery before AND during your tests and exams.

Imagine Success—seeing yourself doing it well

Imagine yourself in an exam room. It's the day of the test. You see yourself sitting in your chair. You notice your surroundings. You **hear** the other students shuffle in their seats. You feel the desk. You **feel** the pen in your hand. You see the test being handed out. Now, the exam is in front of you. You are looking over the exam calmly and confidently. You discover that you know all the answers. You feel relaxed, happy. Now, you are writing quickly. The ideas are flowing from your pen with ease. You are now finished and you close the exam and calmly put away your writing tools. Finally, you are handing in the test with a big smile on your face. The proctor smiles back. Savour this feeling.

Adapted from: Ellis, D. (2000). *Becoming a Master Student*. Canadian 3rd edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin p 178.

Imagine coping with your stress

1. Relax: deep breathing, muscle relaxation, safe-place imagery
2. Imagine yourself before, during, and after the test/exam
3. Add coping statements (see attached sheet with examples of coping statements)

Before/ Preparing for a stressor

You imagine walking into the exam venue.

“When I get to my seat, just think about the situation, not my anxiety... When I get the exam, I will calmly look over the question and then start to organize my time... I will think rationally and not allow my anxiety to take over... I've done well on exams before so there's no reason I can't today ...Breathe and relax...I am ready to meet this challenge.”

During the exam/stressor

You imagine seeing the test/exam paper in front of you. You open to the first page and look over the questions...

a) Confronting and handling a stressor

“I am feeling my anxiety rise...I have a lot of coping strategies I can call on...This is a reminder to use my coping exercises: Take a slow deep breath. Ahhhh. I can meet this challenge.”

b) Coping with Feelings of Being Overwhelmed

You imagine that you look through the exam and don't know some or quite a few of the answers. “This is very upsetting...My heart is starting to pound... I should expect my stress to rise sometimes...What if I blank out!... My stress is a signal. Take a deep breath and slow things

down...I can be anxious and still deal with this situation ...Time for problem-solving. Find a question I know and start there... Breathe into my belly and feel deep relaxation ...Ok, let's start with this one first...Good..."

After the exam/stressor

You imagine that you did ok on the exam/test.

"It worked. I got through it without blanking out! I did feel stress but I managed it. Good for me!"

You imagine that you didn't do very well on the exam/test.

"I didn't do well. That's okay. I handled my stress better than ever before. I'm proud of myself for trying my best."

Adapted from Meichenbaum, D. (1985). *Stress Inoculation Training*. New York : Pergamon Press.