

Managing Test Anxiety

“Even when I study well, I’m so nervous I just forget everything.”

“I’m not a good test-taker. I feel tense and nauseous. I can’t handle it.”

“My test anxiety is affecting my GPA. No matter how well I do on assignments, the tests always bring my mark down.”

Sound familiar? More than 60% of students at Queen’s have felt overwhelming anxiety at some point in the academic year ([NCHA, 2016](#)). **Anxiety is a normal human emotion.** Many people feel anxious before a test or exam, or when they are making an important decision. An anxiety disorder is different—it causes so much anxiety that it interferes with our ability to lead a normal life ([Cleveland Clinic](#)).

In this resource, **we focus on students’ feelings of anxiety about tests and exams.** Our intention was to create a resource to support students who are experiencing feelings of anxiety—but it is not intended as a treatment for those with anxiety disorders. If you have an anxiety disorder, please follow the recommended treatment and management strategies given by your health care providers.

This resource was produced as a collaboration with [Student Wellness Services](#).

Awareness

The first step towards managing anxiety is to **understand how anxiety works** and **how you typically respond to it.** Once you are aware of your own pattern, you can develop tools to help yourself interrupt the cycle. This will take practice, effort and patience, but **it can be done.** Our brains are amazingly malleable!

Understanding anxiety

Anxiety is common. It is usually described as a feeling of apprehension, uncertainty, or uneasiness that arises in anticipation of an impending event or situation, whether real or imagined. Anxiety can feel like stress, worry, butterflies, agitation, jumpiness, nervousness, fear, or panic.

Everyone experiences anxiety, but some of us feel it more often and/or more intensely. When we feel anxious, we may experience some or several of the following signs:

- **Physical** (e.g., rapid heartbeat, headaches, muscle tension, shortness of breath, nausea, sweating)
- **Emotional** (e.g., excessive feelings of fear, irritation, helplessness, shutting down)
- **Behavioural** (e.g., fidgeting, pacing, avoiding, over- or under-sleeping)
- **Cognitive** (e.g., going blank, racing thoughts, negative self-talk, difficulty concentrating)

False alarm?

At manageable levels, anxiety can be useful because it prepares us to take action in response to a situation. It signals that something important is at stake and motivates us to make necessary changes to manage that task. It helps us to be alert and get psyched up to deal with the situation at hand.

It's normal to experience a certain amount of anxiety or nervousness before a test. But if these feelings are too intense, they may negatively affect our performance. As you become aware of your own test anxiety, try to think of it as a resource: it's there to help you face the challenge at hand.

Increasing awareness

- **Recognize your test anxiety.** How does it show up for you (e.g., as physical sensations, thoughts, emotions)? When (e.g., leading up to the test, or just on the day of)?
- **Notice how you typically respond** to your feelings of anxiety. Do you avoid situations that make you feel anxious? Do you distract yourself from your thoughts or emotions? Do you procrastinate?
- **Notice your own story.** What is your anxiety telling you? When you're feeling anxious about a test or exam, what do you say to yourself? What thoughts occupy your mind?
- **Are there other habits and patterns that might be contributing** to your anxiety? Are you getting enough good-quality sleep? Are you getting a reasonable amount of physical activity? Are you eating healthy foods? Do you have someone to talk to?
- **Have you thought about where the pressure is coming from?** It might involve sources such as your own expectations, your parents' expectations, scholarship status, judgement from peers, etc.

Acceptance

Shifting your perspective on test anxiety starts with **accepting it as something that will happen**. Of course you're going to feel anxious; your test results are important to you. The key is to change your relationship with that anxiety. We cannot eliminate our feelings of nervousness and worry, but there are things we can do to **keep their intensity at a more optimal level**.

Begin by simply **acknowledging** that the uneasiness, uncertainty, and physical symptoms feel uncomfortable.

Allow the worry to be there. We are not going to get rid of worried thoughts—sometimes trying to do so will even strengthen our anxiety. Instead, begin to **increase your tolerance** for situations or thoughts that make you feel anxious (e.g., tests and exams). Try:

- changing your self-talk (say, "I can do this. I studied well. I know my stuff.")
- practicing self-compassion (say, "I'll do my best, and that will be enough")
- [practicing meditation](#)
- learning to see emotions as information, not an order (say, "I'm getting excited to take on this challenge; I can feel it! But I won't let this feeling take over.")

- establishing pre- and post-test routines and rituals in advance (e.g., going to the room where you'll write the test to get more comfortable in the space)
- doing grounding exercises when you feel anxious.

Keep moving forward, despite your anxiety. By doing so, you will gradually retrain your brain to be less reactive. **The aim is to work with anxiety instead of resisting it or wishing it would go away.**

Working with your anxiety is the goal, but it's not easy! Be kind to yourself. **Acknowledge that it's hard** (e.g., "This feels hard for me right now. We all go through hard times. It's going to be okay—I can do this").

Being kind to yourself also means making peace with anxiety. Let go of what happened in the past (e.g., "the last time I wrote an exam, I..."). You can't change the past. Try to think instead of times when you were anxious but pushed through.

Acceptance strategies

Accepting your test anxiety allows you to create some **space** between your emotions/thoughts and your reactions. This space makes room for a **response** that will help you work toward your goal of overcoming anxiety.

- Accepting that anxiety will happen gives you **the opportunity to plan out possible responses in advance**. Try **WOOP** (Wish-Outcome-Obstacle-Plan) to help yourself anticipate obstacles and make plans.
 - **Wish.** Make a wish that feels challenging but doable. For example, *I feel overcome by anxiety in exams. I wish I felt calmer.*
 - **Outcome.** What will happen when you reach your goal? For example, *if I felt calmer, I could think more clearly and I'd do better on the exam. That would feel great.*
 - **Obstacle.** The main internal obstacle that keeps you from your goal. For example, *I want to feel calmer, but... (negative self-talk, poor study habits, I stay up all night worrying, etc.) prevents me.*
 - **Plan.** What can you do to overcome your obstacle? Try framing it as an if/then. For example, *if I change my _____, then I will feel calmer and less anxious. I'll be able to think better and do better on the exam. If I feel anxious, then I'll remind myself to take deep breaths and persevere!*
- **Externalize or personify your anxiety.** Some students even find it helpful to give it a name to further separate it from themselves. When anxiety is externalized, it's easier to address it and move forward (e.g., *Ah yes, hello anxiety. I expected you to show up today. I hear you, but back off! I need to write this exam.*).
- **Reframe your perspective.** Change how you interpret your thoughts and feelings related to anxiety. You are having an intense or uncomfortable experience of a normal reaction to stress. The goal is to find a way to keep moving forward, even though you feel uncomfortable. For example, *I want to _____, so I am willing to _____.*

Action

Once you've become aware of how you experience anxiety, and have stopped resisting it and started accepting it, you're **ready to take action**. Just take it one step at a time. **Focus on micro-changes**: you don't have to change everything all at once. Pick something, even the smallest thing that you think you can achieve. What do you think you can start with?

What do you want? What are your goals? Use these to motivate yourself. Effort and perseverance are the keys.

Before the test

Effective **study habits** can help you reduce and manage your test anxiety. When you feel you have the tools to meet a challenge, it helps to keep stress at a more manageable, productive level. Try

- keeping up with the workload during the semester so you don't feel overwhelmed: do a little at a time. Use a [term calendar](#) and your [weekly schedule](#) to manage your time and workload.
- **engaging actively** with the course content (when reading, when learning, when studying).
- using the course **learning objectives** (in the syllabus) as a guide to the big picture of the course.
- focusing on re-organizing material meaningfully (rather than re-reading or re-writing it) into a different format (e.g., [a mind map or concept summary](#)), or focusing on [how best to organize it](#), or on the connections and relationships between main ideas.
- giving yourself time to study: [make a study schedule](#) and [use effective study methods](#) like summarizing, memorizing, understanding, elaborating, and self-testing.
- **over-learning** the material. [Understanding, application, and analysis](#) are all important, but so is memorization. **Drill, drill, drill** on the material you just have to memorize.
- **visiting the room** where you will write your test or exam. You might even study there, if possible.

In terms of your **mindset**, try

- **visualizing yourself** successfully writing the test. Imagine what your positive energy feels like and how it drives your performance.
- **noticing your thinking**. We can't always control the thoughts that arise but we can control how we respond to them. Thoughts are like background noise in your head, and this noise can affect your focus, motivation, confidence, and ultimately your performance. Make sure your thinking makes you feel empowered and confident.
- **avoiding procrastination**. Reduce the number of situations in which you'd have to practice self-control. Just as you might avoid buying cookies so you won't have to resist eating them, set yourself up for success by establishing good practices.

- **use encouraging words with yourself** (e.g., “I can do this,” “I’m prepared”) when you notice thoughts of self-doubt.

During the test

Before you go in to write the test...

- Stop studying at least an hour before the test or exam. Give yourself a break instead: have lunch, go to the gym, get some fresh air. Run a flight of stairs to release some nervous energy! Tell yourself, “I’m excited.”
- Keep yourself calm: put on headphones, find a quiet space, engage with [a mindfulness app](#). Don’t engage with friends/classmates who are stressing or cramming!
- Do a brain dump of your worries. Write them all out, then categorize them: which ones can you do something about and which ones are just background noise? Leave your worries at the door when you go to write the test.

Just before you write, or while you’re writing...

- It can be helpful to **have a routine to follow**. Routines help to smooth the transition into the test-taking process. For example, do some grounding exercises before you begin, do a brain dump before you start answering questions, or start with the questions you know, to warm up and build confidence.
- Make sure you have some water to drink and maybe some gum or a candy.
- Check out some strategies for [taking different types of exams](#).

After the test

Overcoming test anxiety involves building a skill set and forming new habits and routines—this effort takes time and practice! Remember, you’re focusing on micro-changes.

Taking time to **reflect** after the test will help you build your skills. Then make a plan for next time.

Reflect on...

- what **went well** (improvements in your thinking, your breathing, your ability to engage with the test material, your memory, etc.)
- what **you learned** about how you experience test anxiety
- what you might like to focus on improving the **next time** you write a test. Do you need to do some problem solving? Get help from a professor? Change your approach?

Reward yourself! Give yourself a **tangible reward** after a test to celebrate.

Grounding Exercises

When you’re preparing for or writing a test and anxiety takes hold, you can try some **grounding exercises**. Grounding techniques can help you regain your mental **focus** when you are experiencing an intense emotional state. They won’t eliminate anxiety—they are strategies to help you tolerate the

discomfort. By engaging your senses, you divert your mind away from anxious or stressful thoughts and into the moment.

You can do all of these exercises in an exam, without disturbing others or calling attention to yourself. Practice them in advance so you know how to do them.

You can try...

- **squeezing lemons.** Place your hands by your side or in your lap. Imagine you are holding a lemon in each hand. Squeeze your fists tight for 30 seconds. Direct your excess energy/tension into your hands and notice your muscles tightening. Now drop the lemons and feel the tension release as your muscles relax.
- **the 5-4-3-2-1 game.** Name 5 things you can see in the room, 4 things you can feel (chair on my back, cold hands, etc), 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell (or 2 things you like the smell of), and 1 taste in your mouth and then state 1 good thing about yourself.
- **finger breathing.** Spread the fingers of one hand out like a star, palm facing up. Take the index finger of the other hand and place it at the base of your thumb on the open hand. Inhale as you move your finger from the base of your thumb to the tip. Pause. Exhale as you bring your finger down the other side of your thumb. Pause. Inhale again as your finger moves to the tip of your finger. Repeat until you have done traced all your fingers. Repeat.
- **chair body scan:** Sit comfortably with your hands in your lap. Lower your gaze or close your eyes. Direct your attention to your feet on the floor. Now move your attention to your body resting in your chair. Let the chair take the weight of your body. Notice your back in contact with the back of the chair. Let your shoulder relax. Let the muscles around your mouth relax, around your eyes, your forehead. Relax your tongue.
- **rhythmic breathing.** Here are some options:
 - inhaling for a count of 4, holding for 7, exhaling for 8; or
 - inhaling for 4, exhaling for 8; or
 - belly breathing (also called [calm breathing](#)).
- **supportive self-talk and affirmations.** For example, “I’m getting excited to take on this challenge,” “A little stress is going to help me do well on this test,” “This test is not a measure of my worth as a person. It’s one tiny point on my academic path,” and “I can do this. I studied well. I know my stuff.”

Finally, because overcoming anxiety is a process, it’s important to take care of yourself on a day to day basis—not just when you have a test coming up. Build in strategies for regular stress management and self-care (e.g., quality sleep, healthy habits, reducing coffee intake, spending time with friends and family).

Resources

How-tos and apps

- Take five minutes to [practice triangle breathing](#).
- [Meditation 101 from Headspace](#)
- Looking to make micro-changes? [There's an app for that](#).
- [Five free mindfulness apps](#)

Strategies

- [Your breath is your brain's remote control](#).
- Study strategies to [support deep thinking](#) (analysis, application).
- More about [retrieval practice](#) (self-testing) and [spaced practice](#).

More information

- Lyn Lyons' [Bumps in the road](#)
- Susan David's [TED Talk on emotional courage](#): "How we deal with our inner world drives everything"
- Kelly McGonigal's [Big Think: Believe it or Not, Stress Can Be Good For You](#)
- [Use ABRA to help end your negative self-talk](#)

On-campus resources

- [Student Wellness Services](#) (SWS)
 - [groups, workshops, and weekly offerings](#)
 - Tips for [managing stress during exams](#)
 - make an [appointment with a physician, nurse](#) or [counsellor](#)
 - visit [Queen's Student Accessibility Services](#) (QSAS) for accommodations due to a disability