

# Reducing Test Anxiety & Preparing for Tests

*As I walked toward the classroom, my knees began to get weak, my stomach tightened and turned, my mouth was dry and my hands were clammy. I could feel my heart beating faster and faster. It was test day. I was being brought to my knees by an overwhelming case of test anxiety. Suddenly, every bit of information flew from my mind; not to return until I walked from the room after the exam was over.*

**Test anxiety.** We've all felt it at one time or another. A little anxiety can be good. It heightens your awareness, gets you revved up and helps you deliver your best performance. But too much anxiety can be crippling. If test anxiety is bringing you and your grades down, you probably will want to read on to see what you can do to lower your anxiety. There are some things that will help!

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**The will to win is nothing without the will to prepare.**

*--Juma Ikangaa, marathoner*

The Best way to beat test anxiety is so simple that many students forget about it:

## **Be Prepared...**

Almost everything in life is easier if you are prepared for it. Students who feel prepared for a test also feel more confident and are more likely to be successful. In the world of college, being prepared means that you have studied effectively, learned the material, and have a few tricks for dealing with anxiety when it does hit. So, here's how to make sure that you are prepared.

## **Start Early...**

If you wait too long to begin preparing for a test you will succeed at increasing your anxiety.

- ✕ Read your syllabus and hold onto it for the rest of the quarter. Your syllabus will usually tell you when tests are, when projects are due, what information will be covered on a test, and may provide additional information that can be very helpful to you.

- ✗ Seek out additional help if you know you are having difficulty with a class. Don't wait too long. Talk to your instructor. Talk to classmates. Form a study group. Do something! Tutors are available (and free) at the campus library. Also, try the library computer labs. They're free too.

### **They're free too...**

- ✗ Don't wait until the night before a test to start studying. To prepare well for a test and avoid lots of unnecessary anxiety, most students-the good ones anyway-suggest you start studying 4 or 5 days before the test. This gives you plenty of time to make sure you understand the material thoroughly, ask questions and get some help if needed.

### **Stay Current...**

- ✗ If you fall behind in your studying you will succeed at increasing your anxiety.
- ✗ Read your textbook before you go to class. This will help you understand the material better and reinforce ideas and concepts so they will be easier to remember when it comes to test time. If you find it hard to remember what you have read, get the Reading Textbooks at the campus library.
- ✗ Take Notes. Develop a system that works for you. Focus on key ideas and concepts presented in class. If something is covered in class and also in the text, it's probably important and deserves to be in your notes. If your instructor says something like "this is important" or accentuates information, put it in your notes. If you want some suggestions on how to take notes and study effectively from them, get a copy of Effective Note-taking from the library.
- ✗ Review your notes daily. Reviewing notes daily is essential to learning and remembering material. A good system is to review the notes from your last 3 classes each day. You need only spend 10-15 minutes reviewing the notes. Students who do this are surprised to find how much more they remember and how much easier it is when it comes time to study for a test. At the very least, you probably need to review the notes from your last class before going to the next class.
- ✗ Put things in your own words. A general rule of thumb is that if you can't say it, you don't know it. And if you don't know it, you can't write about on a test.
- ✗ Organize your time so you can study effectively and efficiently. Create a plan for how to prepare for tests and follow it. Students who plan what to study and when to study it usually do better on tests than students who don't plan.

## **Mental Preparation...**

If you are not mentally prepared for a test you will succeed at increasing your anxiety.

- ✗ Find out about the test. Ask your instructor what the test will cover and what type of test it will be (i.e., essay, short answer, true/false, multiple choice, etc.)  
*If possible, look at copies of previous test.*
- ✗ Visit the test site. Being familiar with the test site can help make you more comfortable during the test. If possible, do some studying in the room where you will be tested. On test day, get to the room a little early, sit down and relax and think of how well you are going to do on the test.
- ✗ Think positive. Encourage yourself. Think of how much of the material you know, not how much you don't know. See yourself with test success. Visualize yourself confidently walking in to pick up your exam and knowledgeably answering the questions.
- ✗ Relax. Practice deep breathing and muscle relaxation and envision yourself in a place and time in which you were totally relaxed.

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## **The Truth About Tests**

There are some very important things about tests that are helpful to know if you want to lower your anxiety. If you remind yourself of these things when you feel anxious about a test, it just might make the test a little easier to deal with.

### ***Truth #1:***

A test score (A-F) does not measure your worth as a person. It does not determine whether you are a good or bad person. It does not indicate how intelligent, creative, caring, understanding or humorous you are. In fact, a test score is only a measure of how you scored on a test. It is simply a measure of how well you recall information the instructor thinks you should know. If you "blanked out" on a test, then the score will reflect that you "blanked out", not how much you have actually learned.

### ***Truth #2:***

Tests are important. Your future may depend, in part, on how well you do in school. Many employers consider grades important. However, it is very, very rare that ONE test will be that significant. Even if you don't do well on some tests, there will be other tests. Even if you don't do as well as you would like in a class, there will be other classes. While grades are important, a few low grades will have little if any impact on your life and certainly are not worth getting overly anxious about.

***Truth #3:***

A test will not kill you---the words on a piece of paper are not going to jump off the page and lunge for your throat. Even a low score has never been known to attack a student.

***Truth #4:***

It is much easier to do well on a test if you keep things in perspective. Remember, a test is only a test. It has no magical power.

***Truth #5:***

You do not have to get an "A". It would be nice, but the universe will not collapse if you don't get an "A". Not everyone makes "A's" and definitely not on every test. (Refer to Truth #1)

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**Dealing with Worries & Fears**

Many students say that when they enter a room to take a test, their mind starts spinning with fears and worries about failure. This tends to make it very difficult to concentrate and increases your anxiety level. If this happens to you, yell "STOP" in your mind as loud as you can. (If you are in a place where you can actually yell this out loud, go ahead.) Picture a big red stop sign with white letters as you yell "STOP" to yourself. This will break the cycle of worries. After "STOP", use any of the following techniques.

Focus your attention on one thing. Pick out a dirt spot on the wall, observe the grain in your desk, listen to the hum of the lights, etc. When you focus all of your attention on one particular thing, it leaves no room for anxiety provoking thoughts. You can do this anytime you start to feel anxious, while studying, walking to the classroom, or taking a test.

Fill your mind with pleasant thoughts. Imagine someplace peaceful and calm. See yourself relaxing in this pleasant atmosphere. Fill your mind with thoughts of this wonderful, special place. Try this when you notice that you're worrying or thinking about your fears.

Talk to yourself. Reassure yourself that this is only a test, that it's not going to kill you. Tell yourself things like: "I've done this before. I can do it again." "It will be over in a few minutes. I can make it through this." "I can feel the tension go down as I breathe deeply and calmly." "All I can do is my best, I don't have to pressure myself."

Examine your fears. Ask yourself, "What's the worst thing that could happen?" Instead of trying to ignore your fears, take them to the extreme. Don't hold back. "If I fail this test, I'll fail the class. If I fail the class I won't be able to graduate on time. If I don't graduate on time, I'll be stuck here by myself. I'll be so lonely I'll probably take up drinking and end up a bum in the streets. I'll never be able to find a job then and I'll have all those loans from my wasted education to pay back. I'll end up in jail, I just know it. My parents will hate me then and disown me. I'll die a lonely, broke drunk in some jail cell." When you're done laughing at how absurd this really is, go back to the test. Remind yourself that your fears are worse than reality.

Visualize success. As corny as that sounds, there is some truth to the idea that if you expect to fail and rehearse that failure in your head, you increase the chance of making that failure come true. Equally true is that if you expect to succeed you increase your chances of success. Rehearse in your mind what it will be like to do well on the test. Picture yourself turning in the test and walking proudly and relaxed from the room. Be creative.

### **How to Relax...**

Believe it or not, most people don't know how to relax. Learning a few simple relaxation exercises might be just what you need to combat test anxiety. Remember, preparation is still essential and no relaxation technique by itself will help significantly if you're not prepared. But the combination of preparation and relaxation can be very powerful and helpful in making good grades.

If you practice a few relaxation exercises before you start to study, your body will learn to relax while you are concentrating. If you can learn to relax while you're studying, you can also learn to relax during a test. With some practice, you will be able to use these exercises to lower your anxiety about almost anything.

### **The Body More Relaxed...**

Find a quiet place (maybe where you study) where you will not be interrupted by other people or distracted by noises. Make yourself as comfortable as possible. Sit up straight with your feet on the floor and your hands, palms up, in your lap. After finding a comfortable position, close your eyes gently. You are ready to begin relaxing your muscles.

This exercise consists of tensing your muscles as tightly as you can while you count to four, holding them to the count of four, and then relaxing them to the count of four. Begin with your head-tighten the muscles in your face and jaw. Tighten and count... two...three...four... How does the relaxation feel? Remember the feeling so you will know what you are striving for in the future.

Repeat the process of tighten...two...three...four...; hold...two...three...four...; relax...two...three...four...throughout all the muscle groups in your body. Take your time and feel the feelings in your neck, shoulder, upper arms, hands, chest, abdomen, pelvis, buttocks, upper legs, knees, calves, feet, toes. You are finished...relax...two...three...four. You are now ready to begin your deep breathing.

Breathe in through your nose, letting your chest rise as you inhale as deeply as possible...one...two...three...four... Feel the healthy feeling of having your lungs full of life-giving oxygen...hold...two...three...four...Now exhale through your mouth, feeling your

chest drop as you completely empty your lungs...exhale...two...three...four. Repeat the process of inhale...two...three...four; hold...two...three...four; exhale...two...three...four...nine times, feeling your body get more relaxed each time.

Finished? Now you are calm, relaxed, in control and ready to face the world-or your books.