

## Additional Coping Strategies

**Be Healthy:** If you are physically and emotionally exhausted, your body and mind are less able to tolerate stress and anxiety. You can improve your resistance to anxiety by getting adequate rest, eating appropriately and taking care of your physical health.

**Be Prepared:** Practice...practice...practice...study... study... study. This may sound a bit repetitive, but nothing can help reduce anxiety like confidence. In fact, if you over-prepare a bit, your responses become more automatic, and your performance will be less affected by anxiety. Preparation for an exam may include improving your study, time management and test-taking skills. Also, make sure you have everything you may need for the actual exam (required ID's, documents, calculator, etc.).

**Practice the Performance:** The time limits of an exam, testing conditions and requirements are all stimuli that increase your level of arousal and add to your experience of anxiety. If you practice under similar conditions, you'll become less sensitive to these stimuli. Work through a practice exam (or two!) under the same time and exam constraints that will exist when you take the test. For conditions you cannot reproduce, create them in your mind—close your eyes and “see” the test environment.

**Regulate Your Arousal Level:** In cases of anxiety, the goal is to lower your level of arousal. Some of the most effective ways involve altering your physical responses.

**Deep breathing:** When anxious, we often take shallow breaths. We feel like we aren't getting enough air and get more anxious. If you focus on breathing deeply and slowly, this cycle is interrupted and the body and mind begin to relax. To learn to breathe deeply, place your hand on your stomach and inhale in a way that makes your abdomen expand. As you exhale, your abdomen should move inward. Practice taking 10-15 slow deep breaths in a row, 2-3 times per day—training your body to breathe deeply and relax. Then, during a stressful situation, focus on taking 2-3 deep breaths and your body will relax.

**Progressive muscle relaxation:** We also tense our muscles when we're anxious. Consciously relaxing your muscles will help your body and mind relax. Practice muscle relaxation during deep breathing by focusing on a particular muscle group (e.g. shoulders). Alternatively, tense and relax the muscle—focus on releasing all of the tension in the muscle.

**Practice visualization:** Close your eyes and create a detailed mental picture of yourself doing the best you can on the test. Visualize it over and over again with all of your senses (i.e., What do you see? How does it feel? What do you hear?) Seeing yourself already achieving your goal makes your brain believe that attaining that goal is possible.

**Reduce distractions:** Distractions are additional stimuli that increase arousal. Explore ways to reduce distractions in your immediate environment (e.g. use noise reduction headphones, wear a sweater so you aren't distracted by being cold, inform the test proctor of distracting noises).

**Control Fear:** The underlying source of test anxiety is the fear of failure. Pay attention to what you are thinking and saying to yourself in anxious situations. This self-talk will likely reflect an expectation of or fear of failure. You can begin to control this fear or change the expectation by changing your self-talk.

**Positive self-talk:** Purposefully filling your mind with positive statements about yourself and your abilities can offset or crowd-out the negative self-talk. Even if you don't believe the positives, say them anyway—“I'm ready...I can do this...Do it!” Determine the most important positive messages for yourself by writing down your 3-4 most common negative thoughts (e.g. “I can't do this”). Next, write down the opposite for each statement (“I can do this”). Repeat the positives to yourself daily for at least two weeks and again just before and during the test.

**On-task self-talk:** Counter distractions and help yourself focus on the task at hand by telling yourself what to do—talk yourself through the task step-by-step and tell yourself you're succeeding! Thinking about past mistakes or future consequences is not helpful. Keep your mind focused on the present—one thing at a time!

**Gain perspective:** Sometimes the negative thoughts people have in stressful situations focus on potentially drastic consequences of failure. In most cases, these drastic consequences are much more severe than the reality of the situation—this is called *catastrophizing*. Focusing on such catastrophic consequences increases anxiety and interferes with performance. **It is important to recognize that one mistake does not equal failure and that one bad performance does not mean you're worthless.**

*Adapted from “Test and Performance Anxiety” developed by the University of Cincinnati Psychological Services Center*

## DO YOU SUFFER FROM

# TEST ANXIETY?



## You are NOT alone!

Many people experience some nervousness or apprehension before, during or after an exam. This kind of anxiety can be a powerful motivator. However, some people experience test-related anxiety to such a degree that it can lead to poor performance.

### During exams, do you...

- ✓ Feel like you “go blank?”
- ✓ Become frustrated?
- ✓ Get distracted?
- ✓ Feel overwhelmed?
- ✓ Find yourself thinking “I can't do this” or “I'm stupid?”
- ✓ Feel like the room is closing in on you?
- ✓ Feel your heart racing or find it difficult to breathe?
- ✓ Have distracting thoughts of failure?
- ✓ Suddenly “know” the answers after finishing the test?
- ✓ Score lower than you do on sample tests, homework or papers?

**If you answered “yes” to some of these questions, you may be experiencing test anxiety.**

For additional help with test strategies, contact the Student Success Coordinator in the University Advising Center at 918.444.3238. or [advising@nsuok.edu](mailto:advising@nsuok.edu)

## What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a natural human response to a threatening situation. Anxiety is a form of the “fight-or-flight” response—the body and mind become aroused and alert to prepare for attack or to escape from a threat.

Test anxiety describes responses specific to *evaluative situations*—situations in which you are being observed or evaluated by others. The primary “threat” in these situations is the possibility of failure and loss of esteem. Depending on the intensity of the anxiety response, the emotional, behavioral and cognitive components of anxiety can interfere with your ability to perform during the test. If you experience test anxiety, you are not alone—approximately 20% of U.S. college students experience symptoms of test anxiety.

Test anxiety typically occurs:

- In the presence of a difficult or challenging situation,
- When you believe that you are inadequate or incapable of meeting the challenge, and
- You fear the consequences of possible failure.

## Symptoms of Test Anxiety

Listed below are some of the common symptoms you may experience if you have test anxiety.

**Physical:** Headaches, nausea or diarrhea, extreme body temperature changes, excessive sweating, shaking body parts, shortness of breath, a sense of “butterflies” in the stomach, light-headedness or fainting, rapid heartbeat, dry mouth

**Emotional:** Excessive feelings of fear, disappointment, anger, depression, uncontrollable crying or laughing, feelings of helplessness

**Behavioral:** Fidgeting, pacing, chewing on pens or pencils, “drumming” on a desk, faking illness or making other excuses to avoid the test, difficulty eating or sleeping before the test, substance abuse

**Cognitive:** Racing thoughts, “going blank,” difficulty concentrating, negative self-talk, feelings of dread or panic, comparing yourself to others, difficulty organizing your thoughts

## What Causes Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety can develop for a number of reasons. First, there may be a prior negative experience with test taking that serves as the activating event. People who have experienced, or have a fear of, “blanking out” on tests or the inability to perform in testing situations can develop anticipatory anxiety. Worrying about how anxiety will affect you can be as debilitating as the anxiety itself. This kind of anxiety can build as the testing situation approaches and interfere with your ability to prepare adequately.

Poor time management, poor study habits and lack of organization can also lead to feeling overwhelmed. People who cram at the last minute will feel less confident about the material covered than those who have been able to follow a structured plan for studying. Being able to anticipate what the exam will cover, and knowing the information has been covered during study sessions, can help you enter the testing situation with a more positive attitude.

Lack of confidence, fear of failure and other negative thought processes may also contribute to test anxiety. The pressure to perform well on exams is a great motivator unless it is so extreme that it becomes irrational. Perfectionism and feelings of unworthiness can create unreasonable goals in testing situations. When your self-esteem is too closely tied to the outcome of any one academic task, the results can be devastating. In these situations, you may actually be spending more time focusing on the negative consequences of failure than preparing to succeed.

## Arousal and Anxiety

In order to perform well in a challenging situation, you must be psychologically and physically alert. You certainly won't perform well on an exam or in an event if you are nearly asleep! This level of “alertness” is also called arousal. Some degree of arousal is essential for optimal performance. Increasing arousal is the idea behind “psyching up”— and it works — in many cases, psyching up enhances performance. The problem is that when the intensity of arousal gets too high, we often begin to feel nervous and tense and experience anxiety. At this level, anxiety becomes distracting and performance declines — we get “psyched out.” For optimal performance, you need to keep your arousal at an intermediate level — psyched up, but not psyched out.

## Am I Psyched Out?

So, how do you know when you are “up” enough, but not too much, for an exam?

When psyched up, you'll be able to focus on the task at hand and performance will feel natural. When psyched out and anxiety takes over, you may experience:

- Distracting thoughts of failure
- Inability to pick out important information
- Interpretation of the results of physical arousal (e.g. tension, heart rate) as signs of fear
- Excessive muscle tension
- Desire to avoid or escape the situation
- Feelings of wanting to give up

## Tips for Reducing Test Anxiety

There are several things you can do to make test anxiety more manageable:

**Prepare:** Develop good study habits, spread studying over several days and ask for additional help when needed. Eat good foods, get adequate rest and exercise to build energy. Attend class regularly and complete all assignments in a timely manner. Make and take practice tests.

**Keep a Positive Attitude:** Develop reasonable expectations. Do not allow your grades to become dependent on the outcome of one exam. Avoid negative and irrational thoughts about catastrophic results. Set up a system of rewards for dedicated studying and good performance. Encourage yourself.

**Use Relaxation Techniques:** Deep breathing exercises, imagery, visualization and muscle relaxation techniques can help increase focus and concentration.

**Learn Good Test-taking Skills:** Arrive on time to the test. Don't arrive too early and get distracted by others talking negatively—anxiety is contagious! Don't arrive late either as rushing will only increase your anxiety. Don't panic if you can't remember something right away—answer questions you know well first, and then go back to the more difficult ones. Read directions carefully before you begin. Try not to spend too much time on one question. Read each question carefully, look for keywords and don't make assumptions about what the question might be. Pace yourself. Answer all questions (unless you are penalized for wrong answers). Reserve 10% of your test time for review.