

Managing Test Anxiety

According to psychologist Kendra Cherry¹, test anxiety is a psychological condition in which people experience extreme distress and anxiety in testing situations. While many people experience some degree of stress and anxiety before and during exams, test anxiety can actually impair learning and hurt test performance.

There are many causes of test anxiety. Some of the most common causes of test anxiety include fear of failure, poor testing history, and unpreparedness. According to Dr. Cherry, if you connect your sense of self-worth to your test scores, the pressure you put on yourself can cause severe test anxiety. Moreover, if you have done poorly on tests before, either because you didn't study well enough or because you were so anxious, you couldn't remember the answers, this can cause even more anxiety and a negative attitude every time you have to take another test. Working with tutors or other individuals who can help you prepare for tests can mitigate some of the anxiety you experience because of unpreparedness. The strategies below can help you deal with any psychological causes of your anxiety.

Identify Your Fears

Because worry is the primary cause of test anxiety, developing responses to both rational and irrational fears you have about performance on a test can be beneficial. First, use the space below to identify any rational fears you have about taking a test and then come up with a solution to your problem or develop a response to reframe your thinking about the situation. Then, in the second box, identify any irrational fears you have and develop alternative responses to these thoughts.

Rational Fears:
Response:

Irrational Fears:
Response:

Visualize Your Success ²

Research shows that visualization of a one's performance before a certain event can lead to positive feelings and beliefs, which in turn can positively affect one's actual performance. You can use this exercise to reduce anxiety around a number of events, for example, before taking a test or giving a presentation, or to increase the likelihood of just having a good day.

1. Set a time for 7 minutes or whatever amount of time works best for your schedule.
2. Start the visualization with a quick breathing exercise.
3. Visualize yourself accomplishing your goals.
4. Visualize yourself again, this time accomplishing each specific step of your goal.
5. End the visualization with another quick breathing exercise.

Diaphragmatic Breathing ³

Breathing exercises work because they help your body feel more like it does when you are relaxed. Belly breaths, also known as diaphragmatic breathing, is particularly effective because it focuses on breathing from the diaphragm, which introduces more oxygen into the body. To practice belly breaths, follow the steps below.

1. Get into a comfortable position, either by laying down or sitting in a chair.
2. Put one hand on your chest and one hand on your belly.
3. Breath in through your nose, allowing your stomach to fill like a balloon. Your stomach should poke out and the hand on your chest should remain still.
4. Breath out slowly through your mouth. This time your belly should be like a deflating balloon. Again, the hand on your stomach should be moving while the hand on your chest remains still.

Superhero Stance ⁴

Power posing has gained a lot of popularity in the media recently. Power posing is standing with an open, expansive body posture, like a superhero. Research shows that power posing has been found to result in increased risk tolerance, higher self-esteem, reduced negative emotions, and increased positive emotions. It's a great way to connect with your internal strength and set your intentions for the day. Follow the steps below:

1. Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart with your hands on your hips with taking deep breaths.
2. Hold the pose and say, out loud, a mantra that you've developed as a class or individually for 1 minute. It can be something as simple as "I am well-prepared and am going to do great on this test."
3. Repeat this process with as many mantras as you'd like for at least 2 minutes.

The Anxiety Control Procedure ⁵

Having a routine to help you relax during an exam is another important tool when trying to manage test anxiety. Because situations like taking a test releases certain stress hormones, implementing a sequence of steps that combines breathing, which decreases these hormones, and positive self-talk can be especially beneficial. Use the routine below or develop your own.

1. Close your eyes.
2. Breathe in slowly to the count of seven and exhale to the count of seven.
3. Continue this slow breathing until you actually feel your body begin to relax. (Most people find that it takes 2 to 4 sequences.)
4. Open your eyes and give yourself a positive, very specific self-talk (i.e., "You're sure to do well. You studied hard. You're doing the best you can.") This whole procedure should take only about a minute and it's well worth the time.

Final Tips ⁶

As you prepare for your test, here are some final tips counselors at Brown University suggest for managing any difficult emotions you might be experiencing before the exam.

1. **Put things in perspective.** Remind yourself that your upcoming exam is important, but your entire future doesn't depend on this exam. (For example, many successful medical professionals have a few academic struggles in their past.) Also, it might be helpful to tell yourself that regardless of your performance on the test you will not be diagnosed with a terminal illness at the end of it.
2. **Remind yourself of past successes.** It's easy to lose perspective when you find that you are no longer the top student in the class. Intellectually, you understand that you're competing against many other bright students, but you may need to remind yourself of that. Also, bring to mind your past successes on exams and remind yourself that the admissions officers know what they're doing, and they have "bet" on your success.
3. **Don't give a test the power to define you.** An exam won't tell you whether you're the most brilliant (or least brilliant) student in your class. Your performance on an exam mostly depends on how effectively you studied for the test, the quality of your prior education, and the test-taking strategies you use.
4. **Visualize completing the test successfully despite your anxiety.** Using vivid images, play the entire "tape" in your mind – from the moment you wake up on the day of the exam to the moment you finish the exam.
5. **Remind yourself that a certain level of anxiety is actually helpful in performing your best.** And remember, you can always use anxiety control strategies to moderate your anxiety level if it becomes excessive.

6. **Give yourself practice tests and use them not only to work on your test-taking but also to practice controlling your anxiety level.** Deliberately induce anxiety by saying negative things to yourself and then practice the Anxiety Control Procedure. If you're afraid of not being able to finish the exam in time, do timed practice questions.
7. **Get a good night's sleep for several days before the exam.** With adequate sleep, your ability to think clearly and to deal with anxiety will both improve. You might try imagining yourself as a professional athlete: ask yourself how you would prepare yourself mentally and physically for an important game. Doing a moderate workout early in the evening (5:00 or 6:00) may help you sleep more soundly at night. If you often have trouble sleeping, consult your physician.
8. **High anxiety can increase the impact of caffeine, so on test days reduce your intake.**

¹ <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-test-anxiety-2795368>

² Battistin, J. M. (2019). *Exercises to feel calm, stay focused & be your best self: Mindfulness for teens in 10 minutes a day*. Rockridge Press.

³ Galanti, R. (2020). *Anxiety relief for teens: Essential CBT skills & mindfulness practices to overcome anxiety and stress*. Zeitgeist.

⁴ Körner, R., Petersen, L.-E., & Schütz, A. (2019, July). Do expansive or contractive body postures affect feelings of self-worth? High power poses impact state self-esteem. *Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issues*.

⁵ <https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/support/counseling-and-psychological-services/managing-test-anxiety>

⁶ <https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/support/counseling-and-psychological-services/managing-test-anxiety>