

TEST ANXIETY & HOW TO MANAGE IT

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What is test anxiety?

Almost everyone gets nervous before a test. It is absolutely natural and normal. In fact, being a little on edge – the slightly increased heart rate and hyper-alert state – can have a positive effect on the brain’s alertness, concentration and attention to detail. There is a critical threshold of anxiety however that, once passed, spills over into debilitating fear that impairs memory, concentration and the ability to think and reason clearly. Fear causes a release of adrenaline into the system, which triggers a fight-or-flight response and prevents the brain from thinking.

If this happens to you it is not your imagination that information that you knew yesterday like you knew your own name has all of a sudden vanished completely. Your breathing is rapid and shallow, your heart feels like it will pound out of your chest, and you can’t concentrate on anything at all except how freaked out you are – never mind irregular Italian verbs! This is what real test anxiety is.



HOW TO MANAGE TEST ANXIETY

You address test anxiety on two levels: long term and short term.

Long term solutions:

We cannot be in a state of anxiety and a state of relaxation simultaneously. Therefore, whatever we do to help ourselves get and stay relaxed on an overall level is all good. Think about what you do normally to help yourself calm down when you’re out of sorts: after an argument or having received upsetting news; when you’re frustrated with something or things aren’t going your way. Do you run? Work out? Sing, play or listen to music? Take a walk by the ocean, in the woods, through the neighborhood? Meditate? Talk to a friend who always has the ability to make you feel better? Whatever you do, keep doing it, and do it frequently, especially during busy and stressful times. Don’t wait until you’ve had the argument or gotten the distressing news; if you’re already doing it then your ability to handle the bad news will be that much easier.

Think you don't have enough time to do your favorite things? You can't afford the time NOT to! Allowing yourself to get overly stressed creates huge obstacles to good learning. Rather than say to yourself "I'm so stressed out and busy I don't have time to work out," say to yourself, "I'm so stressed out and busy I'd *better* make some time to work out today."

During busy times at a university you really are running a marathon of sorts – a marathon of your mind and body together. Therefore, do what you'd do before an actual marathon in terms of eating, sleeping, exercising, laughing, playing, working. Treat yourself with care and respect and you'll find your whole being to be calmer, more relaxed, *and* more productive.

Having set this relaxed, rested and calmer state as your default setting, you will be much less likely to become overly stressed out before an exam; at least not so stressed out that it impairs your ability to take the test.

Short-term Solutions:

I. Managing your physical self: Breath, muscles and heart rate

Anxiety is a physical stress-response to a psychological experience, therefore we must meet it on both levels, physical and psychological. On a physical level the goal is to reduce the body's stress response to manageable levels through your breathing, your muscles and your heart rate. In the days and hours before a test, as well as during the test, there are things you can do on both the physical level as well as the psychological.

Addressing the physical aspects of test anxiety: breath, muscle relaxation and heart rate:

Your breath:

Some experts say that the key to reducing all anxiety is found in the breath. Breath carries oxygen, and oxygen is vital to mental and all bodily function. You'll notice when you're nervous that your breathing tends to be shallow and quick. Therefore, before and during a test you want to make a conscious and deliberate effort to *slow and deepen* your breathing. You can do this very quietly in the middle of a classroom, in the middle of an exam, and no one will know. Breathe in through your nose for a slow count of five, hold it for five seconds then breathe out again to another slow count of five, through either your nose or mouth. Exhale completely until your lungs are empty, hold it there, empty, for a count of three, and then breathe in again. Do this three or four times. Then, periodically check in with your breathing and if it has gotten shallow and quick again, repeat the process. Some people even write the word 'breathe' somewhere they'll see it easily (top of the page, in the margin, on your hand, etc.) as a reminder.

Some students create a mantra that they recite on both the in-breath and the out-breath that reminds them of the energy they want to bring in (calm, relaxation, confidence), as well as send

out (fear, insecurity, doubt, panic). It might sound something like this: “I am breathing in peace... breathing out stress...Breathing in calm...breathing out anxiety...” Others just sit quietly, noticing the feel of their breath as it gently goes in and out, in and out, passing the lips and filling and emptying the lungs. The purpose of the mantra, or noticing the feel of the breath, is to give the conscious mind a place to focus, therefore quieting it.

Your muscles:

When we're nervous our muscles contract and tense up, especially the muscles like your neck and shoulders that support your skull and brain. Therefore, periodically throughout the test, shrug your shoulders and release them, two or three times, adding a little rotation. Then, dropping your chin toward your chest, rotate your head in a gentle half-circle from one shoulder to the other and back again, two-three times. This will help loosen the muscles again. Periodically contract and loosen your hands and feet, your calf muscles, and your abdomen, as well. This will help all of you be calmer and more relaxed. Before the test, if you have time and a quiet place to lie down, start at the top of your head and systematically clench (count of 3) and release (count of 5) each of your muscle groups all the way down your body: the eyes, facial muscles, shoulders, arms, hands, chest, back, abdomen, pelvis, thighs, calves, and feet, even your fingers and toes. Combined with a slow, deep breath? You'll feel much calmer, present and relaxed for the test!

Your heart rate:

Our pulse quickens when we're nervous. It can even race when in full blown test anxiety mode. It is this fast heart rate and the quick and shallow breathing that causes the lightheadedness, buzzing in the ears and cold sweat reported by some people who experience severe anxiety. You'll find that when you consciously deepen and slow your breathing, your heart rate will slow down as well. Splashing cold water on your face is another way to bring your heart rate down a little, so before you go into the test make a quick trip to the bathroom and drink some water, splashing a little on your face. Be sure to arrive plenty of time before the class so you are not rushing (increases both breathing and heart rate) and sit quietly for a few minutes outside the classroom or nearby. Close your eyes and breathe slowly and deeply for a few moments. Then when your breathing has slowed and your heart rate has returned to normal, get up and calmly go and take your seat.



II. Managing the psychological self:

We can manage test anxiety through mental strategies as well, such as by using over-learning, mnemonic devices, mental rehearsal, humor, and visualization:

Overlearning:

What advertisement jingles do you know “by heart?” Which of your mom’s repeated admonitions can you recite verbatim (“Did you finish your homework?”). Of which favorite movies do you know most of the dialog, reciting the lines of a favorite character through an entire scene? You didn’t set out to memorize these things. You simply heard them, recited them, over and over again until they came as naturally as breathing. This is overlearning.

Overlearning is a protection against the tendency for anxiety to dislodge information we’ve learned that is still fairly new to our memory banks. Once we *understand* the concepts, *then* we have to commit to memory the names of the concepts, and the six (or eight or ten) factors associated with the concepts etc.. Time and rehearsal are the keys to this. Most students use rehearsal when they use flash cards, however, they rarely rehearse them the right way. The correct way means learning and rehearsing information in *meaningful chunks*, or groups. Each time you watched your favorite movie you learned another line, then another, and another, according to what part of the movie it was. It happened over time. You need time and repetition to overlearn anything (another reason not to procrastinate!). Once over-learned, however, you’ll be reciting your lists ten years from now from memory, along your favorite actor’s lines.



The Great Lakes: “H O M E S”

Got them?

Mnemonic devices:

Mnemonic devices are tools that take isolated bits and pieces of information and tie them together in artificially meaningful ways for the purpose of being able to remember them. Some

common ones you may be familiar with: My Very Eager Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas (nine planets); Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge (lines of the musical staff); ROY G. BIV (sequence of colors in the spectrum). Did you get the Great Lakes? (Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, Superior!). They are mnemonics because the “glue” for holding onto the information has little to do with the thing itself, yet is effective as a means of holding onto the information in memory.

Using pre-packaged mnemonic phrases can be helpful but the best ones, and the ones you’ll remember the easiest and the longest, are always the ones you create yourself. Your mnemonic phrases should stand out against the background (these are things we always remember first). You do this by making them larger than life, ridiculous, and very, very funny. The very best mnemonics are ones you create together with a friend or small group; when you get each other laughing hysterically you are virtually guaranteed to remember the concept come test-time, and probably for years afterward (you see each other ten years from now and say to each other “Remember when we studied for the Bio test together? Remember that stupid ridiculous song we made up for the names of the muscles...” and then you break out into that stupid song together. Not kidding here.). You still have to understand what the terms mean; the mnemonic phrases are just to guarantee yourself that you’ll remember the names.

Remember this illustration from Chapter 3? In Chapter 3 we were more concerned with the idea below the bar. That does indeed need to come first. But, in order for the learning to be complete you also need the word above the bar. This is where mnemonic devices can be a huge help.

Term: “Styloid Process”

“**IDEA**” (e.g. the place where muscles attach to the bone)

Mnemonic devices are a great help in reducing test anxiety. You’re remembering less information, information that can otherwise feel more isolated and random, and information that your brain has to strain to retrieve (and which stress interrupts, like a poor cell phone connection). Once you retrieve a mnemonic word, image and/or phrase, though, out flows all the relevant information along with it, easy as anything. Many students turn their test over before they even start the exam and write down all their mnemonic words and phrases. Then, knowing they have all the course terms, lists and concepts safely captured they immediately relax, having just taken “I can’t remember!” right out of the equation.

Example of “Styloid process” mnemonic:



“**One muscle, deluxe STYLE. Customer needs ATTACHMENT. Order is in PROCESS!”**

Visualization:

Using visualization is another effective way to both reinforce learning as well as to calm oneself. There is nothing difficult or sophisticated about it and you likely already use it many times a day. Visualize your bedroom. Do you immediately get a picture? Your dog? Mental picture. Your last vacation? Mental picture. Where you last had your car keys? Mental picture (you hope!). Meiosis vs. mitosis. Mental picture. No? Ah, there's the issue. Why not? You use your visual system for virtually everything else (even individuals who are blind have a "visual system" for retrieving information based on location, sound, density of air, etc.). The test asks a question and you can almost see the page in your notebook where the information is, almost read it. Almost...!



Visualization merely adds the visual system (or its equivalent) to the world of words and ideas, of language and thought. It makes the abstract, concrete; the vague, tangible and accessible. Visualization reinforces learning and bolsters it up by giving us an added doorway into the information.

There are many ways to use visualization to reduce test anxiety. The first that we'll examine is a general visualization strategy that helps calm your whole person, bringing both breathing and heart rate down, and helping the muscles let go of tension. It is a wonderful exercise that can be used any time for any reason, even just to start your day...



Visualization Exercise

This can either be read aloud by someone, or read through ahead of time and then recreated. It helps if there is some gentle and soft instrumental or meditation music playing in the background.

Sit comfortably, or lie down if you're in a place where this is possible, hands loosely open, knees, and feet relaxed, back relatively straight, such that tension is not likely to gather in any one spot. Now, breathe in and out: a long slow breath in on a count of six, hold for five, then a long slow breath out on a count of six. Stay in the empty spot at the bottom of the breath for a few seconds, then repeat. To give your busy brain a place to go, you can assign it the job of noticing how the breath feels going in and out, in and out, across your lips and in your abdomen. When your brain starts doing its busy thing again ("Did I pay the cell phone bill?"), just pull your mind gently back to the breath again, without judgment. Now stay there for a few of minutes in that breathing space. Just breathe...

[silence for three or four minutes]

Now that your breath is slow and deep, picture a place in your mind, maybe a place in nature, that is beautiful and peaceful, where you love to be – or *would* love to be were ever lucky enough to go there. You stand quietly in that beautiful place. You can hear the sounds around you: the surf rushing the shore; the breeze rustling the leaves, or the ravens cawing overhead across the desert; and you see every magnificent detail: the rich colors, the varied textures, the light against the rock or off the water. Is it day? Maybe deep and beautiful night? How does the ground feel under your feet? Can you smell the earth? The salt? The pine or the meadow flowers? You have not a care in the world. You are in love with where you are and with what you are feeling, seeing and hearing. Walk ahead, explore this place, go deeper into the landscape eager to see what's over the next rise. You are completely safe, completely protected. Nothing can harm you here in this magical place of peace and beauty.

You come around a bend and see a small group of people, or just maybe one or two, and you are delighted beyond measure. They are the ones that you love most dearly in this world, and who love you back - absolutely, unreservedly. Who support you totally and without judgment; they want only your happiness in this world. They are there for you, and you for them, always and forever.

Say good-bye to them for now, and continue walking. You are alone again but you feel completely calm and safe, loving this stroll through the beautiful landscape. You lose track of time as you go; there is only peace, beauty, inner calm. Then still more beauty, and more calm.

[silence for three-five minutes]

Eventually you know that it is now time to go home, to return to your life. You feel ready, prepared. The strength and inner peace that you experienced in the place will go with you back into your life; you're not saying good-bye to it. And when you feel the need, you can come back to this place – or maybe a new place – any time you like. It is inside you.

As you begin your return you become aware of the sounds of the room you are in; the feel of the chair under you, your feet inside of your shoes. You wiggle your fingers and toes and listen for the sounds of the room around you as well as the noises from outside: voices walking by, a faucet dripping. And when you are ready you open your eyes, being careful to keep your vision close at first, and then extending to the room beyond. Now return fully to the room and to yourself.

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Visualization specifically for exams:

Another type of visualization involves a specific task, goal or skill that one wants to develop or improve such as taking a test, and uses guided visualization to do it. It is based on the idea that a person cannot be simultaneously relaxed *and* anxious. In it, an individual visualizes him/herself performing an anxiety-provoking task while in an induced state of relaxation, focusing on maintaining their relaxation throughout the visualized task. Later, having practiced the task via visualization, when presented with the actual task s/he will be better able to reproduce and maintain a state of calm throughout the event. There is strong evidence that it works with athletes, students and many others (Arnold, 2001; Boggs, Shields & Janiszewski, 2011; Jeroth, Crawford, Barnes & Harden, 2015; Rivkin & Taylor, 1999).

The process is similar to the previous visualization exercise in that one starts out by first achieving a relaxed state through conscious breath and muscle relaxation. During the phase of guided imagery, however, the content is now specific to a particular task, i.e. taking a test. Below is a sample script that you can use to reduce your test anxiety. In it, you have already achieved a relaxed state and now you are ready for the mental journey:

Test-taking Visualization Exercise

Note: You have already done the progressive relaxation portion of the exercise. Now you're ready for the mental "journey."

You are standing in the hallway near your classroom where you will be taking your test. You feel good, and relaxed. You slept well, ate well, got a little exercise walking across campus, and you are ready. You feel calm, and confident that you learned and mastered the material for this test. You studied deeply and well, you didn't just memorize definitions, you studied meaningfully and in context. Your rhymes, phrases and other mnemonic associations are firmly planted in your mind ready to be put to use. You're ready.

You sit down in your seat and take a couple of moments to breathe quietly and slowly. The professor distributes the test and you look at the first page and immediately feel happy, confident and relaxed. You jot down some of your mnemonic phrases on the back of the test just in case, but you're sure you won't need them.

You begin taking the test, answering each question carefully but confidently. You don't rush. Other students get up to leave but you hardly notice. Everyone has their own pace and this one is yours. It works well for you. With each page you turn you continue to feel relaxed, calm, and assured. That good feeling persists as you proceed through the pages until you get to the end of the test. As you rise to turn in your test you just know you did well; there was little on the test that you had any doubts about. Your good studying paid off.

You leave the testing room as confident as you entered. You nailed it.