

# How to Overcome Test Anxiety

It's completely normal to experience some form of test anxiety prior to an exam; however, anxiety becomes problematic if it gets to a point where it begins to negatively affect your performance. In case you find yourself getting caught in a test-related worry-spiral, we've prepared some strategies to help you relax, prepare, and focus on the task at hand.

## What is Test Anxiety?

The term "test anxiety" refers to the emotional reactions that some students have to exams. The fear of exams is not irrational. After all, how you perform on college exams can shape an academic career; however, an excessive fear of exams can interfere with your ability to be successful.

## What Causes Test Anxiety?

The root of test anxiety may seem self-explanatory (the obvious answer being, it's a test!) according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), there are three primary causes of test-related anxiety:

1. **Fear of Failure:** If your self-worth is tied to your test score, the pressure to perform well may become unbearable.
2. **Lack of Preparation:** It's easy to get anxious and overwhelmed if you wait until the last minute to study (or don't study at all).
3. **Poor Test History:** A negative mind-set that stems from poor past results may influence how well you do on future tests.

## What are the Components of Test Anxiety?

- A physical component to test anxiety involves the typical bodily reactions of acute anxiety: a knot or butterflies in the stomach, sweating, trembling hands, tense shoulders/neck, dry mouth, pounding heart, or rapid breathing.
- The emotional component of test anxiety involves fear or panic.
- The mental component of test anxiety involves problems with attention and detail. For example, "My mind jumps from one thing to another" or "I go blank."

## Finding the Right Technique

Finding the right technique is a very personal endeavor that will likely involve some trial and error. The goal here is to refocus your attention towards calm and increase your

awareness of your body. What works for someone else may not be the best option for you. If at first you don't succeed, try these:

1. **Deep Breathing:** This is a simple technique that you can do unobtrusively in a classroom. Get comfortable in your chair. Close your eyes or focus on a point in the distance. Take a deep breath from your diaphragm and hold it for several seconds. Then, slowly exhale and experience the tension leaving your body. Repeat several times. If you silently say the word "calm" or "relax" to yourself as you exhale, over time thinking of this word alone will be able to evoke a sense of relaxation.
2. **Progressive muscle relaxation:** This technique involves slowing, tensing, and relaxing each of your muscle groups. For example, start by flexing and releasing your toes, then working your way up to your head and neck (or vice versa). Tense your muscles for at least five seconds and then relax for 30 seconds. Repeat this several times.
3. **Imagery:** The visualization technique consists of forming calming mental images while trying to use as many senses as you can. For instance, start by closing your eyes (ideally in a quiet spot) and imagine yourself on beach, focus on the smell of the salt water, the sounds of the waves crashing, and the warmth of the sun on your body.
4. **Control Your Worries:** Another approach to calming test anxiety focuses on reducing the negative thoughts that provoke anxiety. Test-anxious students tend to say things to themselves that are negative or exaggerated. Research shows that test anxiety can be reduced if these negative thoughts can be replaced by constructive thoughts. Try saying "Yes this is a difficult test. I'm going to do the best I can. If I get a low grade, I'll do what it takes to perform better next time." vs. "If I do badly on the test, I'm a failure."

In addition to testing out the above relaxation techniques, you can also try calming activities such as meditation, massage, yoga, or anything that includes soothing repetitive movement such as walking, swimming, or knitting.

## Building a Strategy for Success

The thing about anxiety is that it thrives on the unknown. To that end, there are some concrete steps you can take to reduce your fears and ensure that you're at the top of your game when you sit down for your test. So take a deep breath and get ready to:

- **Improve your time management skills:** It's easier to develop good study habits if you create a schedule to manage your time. Start studying class materials in small increments (so you don't get overwhelmed) at least a week or two before the exam. Avoid cramming as this may crank up your anxiety.
- **Be prepared:** Discuss test content with the instructor and classmates. Taking a practice test under exam-like conditions is also a great way to get more comfortable with both the material and the circumstances you'll face during the actual test.

- **Approach the exam with confidence:** Visualize successfully completing the test and practice shutting down negative thoughts (you can say “NO” aloud or in your head). Remember that you are not your test grade!
- **Treat your body well:** Get enough sleep (more on that below), eat nutritious meals regularly, and give yourself time to decompress. Stress and anxiety are amplified when you’re exhausted.
- **Sweat it out:** Moderate exercise can help reduce future stress and anxiety, and the emotional and mental health benefits may have lasting effects. It can also improve restful sleep. Just don’t do it close to bedtime.
- **Visit the Counseling Center:** Winthrop University has mental health resources available to provide you with support. Take advantage of them by scheduling an intake appointment with one of our counselors. Currently enrolled students are eligible for up to 10 free counseling sessions per year. Call 803-323-2206 or stop Counseling Services in the Center for Student Wellness, located on the third floor of Joynes Hall.

## How to get a Good Night’s Sleep

When you are well-rested, you can have more energy, be more productive, and feel more emotionally balanced; however, sleep and anxiety don’t mix. Whether you have trouble falling asleep because you can’t stop your mind from racing or you wake up multiple times throughout the night, the following are some simple strategies to help you sleep better:

- **Stick to a sleep schedule:** Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every day (that includes weekends!) as this consistency reinforces your body’s sleep-wake cycle to promote a better sleep.
- **Give it 15 minutes:** If you can’t fall asleep within 15 minutes or so, get up and do something else (like reading a book you’ve already read) rather than trying to force it. Remember, no televisions, computers, or Smartphones as the blue light emitted from the screens will inhibit melatonin (the hormone that induces sleep) production.
- **Be careful of what you eat and drink:** Physical discomfort from going to bed hungry or stuffed will keep you up. Nicotine, caffeine, and alcohol before bed can also disrupt your sleep (and cause middle-of-the night trips to the bathroom.)
- **Create a bedtime ritual:** Whether it’s taking a warm bath or listening to soothing music (try classical), doing relaxing activities before bed is a great way to wind your body down for sleep.
- **Make your bedroom your haven:** An ideal room for sleeping is cool, dark, and quiet. Black-out shades, earplugs, or white noise machines can do wonders. Comfy bedding also helps.

## Tips for Test Day

So you've done your studying, perfected your relaxation techniques and slept like a baby – now it's time to take the test. Don't be discouraged if you still feel pangs of anxiety, as a little worry is normal, no matter how prepared you are. Here are some helpful hints to get you through the hardest part:

- Allow yourself plenty of time (arrive early).
- Make sure you eat a healthy snack beforehand.
- Before you start, read the directions carefully.
- Budget your time wisely. You can always skip a question and go back.
- Dress comfortably and in layers.
- If you have to write an essay, create an outline first. Doing so may trigger the answer in your mind.
- Stay focused on the test and not the other students. There is no reward for being the first one done with their test.
- If you feel yourself starting to panic take a deep breath and try one of the relaxation techniques discussed above.
- Remember, you are capable, confident, and prepared!

## Anxiety Test

Anxiety currently afflicts more than 20 million Americans, making it the most common mental illness in the US. Find out if you're too anxious with this [anxiety test](#). It will determine whether you should consider seeking help, and to what degree.

The test only takes about ten minutes to complete. For each statement in the questionnaire, please indicate how often you feel that way. After finishing this test you will receive a free snapshot report with a summary evaluation and graph.