

6.1 Test Anxiety and How to Control It

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Learn what test anxiety really is.
2. Gain strategies for controlling anxiety.

Take the true-or-false quiz below (circle T for true or F for false). There are no wrong answers.

ACTIVITY: TESTING YOUR TEST ANXIETY

T	F	I have a hard time starting to study for a test.
T	F	When studying for an exam, I feel desperate or lost.
T	F	When studying for an exam, I often feel bored and tired.
T	F	I don't sleep well the night before an exam.
T	F	My appetite changes the day of the exam. (I'm not hungry and skip meals or I overeat—especially high-sugar items like candy or ice cream.)
T	F	When taking an exam, I am often confused or suffer mental blocks.
T	F	When taking an exam, I feel panicky and my palms get sweaty.
T	F	I'm usually in a bad mood after taking an exam.
T	F	I usually score lower on exams than on papers, assignments, and projects.
T	F	After an exam, I can remember things I couldn't recall during the exam.

If you answered true to any of the statements in the table above, you have suffered some of the symptoms of test anxiety. Most of us have experienced this. It is normal to feel stress before an exam, and in fact, that may be a good thing. Stress motivates you to study and review, generates adrenaline to help sharpen your reflexes and focus while taking the exam, and may even help you remember some of the material you need. But suffering too many stress symptoms or suffering any of them severely will impede your ability to show what you have learned. **Test anxiety** is a psychological condition in which a person feels distress before, during, or after a test or exam to the point where stress causes poor performance. Anxiety during a test interferes with your ability to recall knowledge from memory as well as your ability to use higher-level thinking skills effectively. To learn more about critical thinking and study skills, see [Chapter 3 "Thinking about Thought"](#) and [Chapter 4 "Listening, Taking Notes, and Remembering"](#), respectively.

There are steps you should take if you find that stress is getting in your way:

- **Be prepared.** A primary cause of test anxiety is not knowing the material. If you take good class and reading notes and review them regularly, this stressor should be greatly reduced if not eliminated. You should be confident going into your exam (but not overconfident).
- **Bounce bad vibes.** Your own negative thoughts—"I'll never pass this exam" or "I can't figure this out, I must be really stupid!"—may move you into spiraling stress cycle that in itself causes enough anxiety to block your best efforts. When you feel you

are brewing a storm of negative thoughts, stop what you are doing and clear your mind. Allow yourself to daydream a little; visualize yourself in pleasant surroundings with good friends. Don't go back to work until you feel the tension release. Sometimes it helps to take a deep breath and shout "STOP!" and then proceed with clearing your mind. Once your mind is clear, repeat a reasonable affirmation to yourself—"I know this stuff"—before continuing your work.

- **Visualize success.** Picture what it will feel like to get that A. Translate that vision into specific, reasonable goals and work toward each individual goal. Take one step at a time and reward yourself for each goal you complete.
- **It's all about you!** Don't waste your time comparing yourself to other students in the class, especially during the exam. Keep focused on your own work and your own plan. Exams are not a race, so it doesn't matter who turns in their paper first. Certainly you have no idea how they did on their exam, so a thought like "Kristen is already done, she must have aced it, I wish I had her skills" is counterproductive and will only cause additional anxiety.
- **Have a plan and follow it.** As soon as you know that an exam is coming, you can develop a plan for studying. As soon as you get your exam paper, you should develop a plan for the exam itself. We'll discuss this more later in this chapter. Don't wait to cram for an exam at the last minute; the pressure you put on yourself and the late night will cause more anxiety, and you won't learn or retain much.
- **Make sure you eat well and get a good night's sleep before the exam.** Hunger, poor eating habits, energy drinks, and lack of sleep all contribute to test anxiety.
- **Chill!** You perform best when you are relaxed, so learn some relaxation exercises you can use during an exam. Before you begin your work, take a moment to listen to your body. Which muscles are tense? Move them slowly to relax them. Tense them and relax them. Exhale, then continue to exhale for a few more seconds until you feel that your lungs are empty. Inhale slowly through your nose and feel your rib cage expand as you do. This will help oxygenate your blood and reenergize your mind. [Chapter 10 "Taking Control of Your Health"](#) has more tips for dealing with stress.

EXERCISE: TALKING BACK TO BOOGIE TALK

You've learned how negative thoughts contribute to test anxiety and keep you from doing as well as you can. Take some time to disarm your most frequent offenders. From the following list, select three negative thoughts that you have experienced (or write your own). Then fill in the second and third columns for each statement, as shown in the example.

- I don't know anything....What's the matter with me?
- If I fail this test, I'll flunk the course.
- I should have studied more....I'll never make it through.
- I just can't think....Why did I ever take this course?
- I know everyone's doing better than I am.
- If I fail this test, my dad (or husband/wife, boyfriend/girlfriend, teacher) will be mad. I don't know how I can face them again.
- I'm going to be the last one done again....I must really be stupid.
- I'm getting really tense again; my hands are shaking....I can't even hold the pen.
- I can't remember a thing....This always happens to me....I never do well on anything.

My boogie statement	How rational is this thought? Do you have any evidence that it is true?	Reasonable reinforcing or affirmation statements you can use to replace it.
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Example: I'm drawing a blank....I'll never get the answer...I must really be stupid.	I've missed questions on things that I studied and knew before.	I studied this and know it. I'll visualize where it's written in my notes to help me trigger my memory.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Some stress before a test or exam is common and beneficial.
- Test anxiety is stress that gets in the way of performing effectively.
- The most common causes of test anxiety are lack of preparation and negative attitudes.
- The key to combating test anxiety is to try to reduce stressors to a manageable level rather than try to eliminate them totally.

CHECKPOINT EXERCISES

1. List three things you should do before a test or exam to combat test anxiety.

2. List three things you can do during an exam to reduce stress.
