

Reducing Your Test Anxiety is As Easy As 1-2-3

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What, Me Worry?

We've all heard about students who get so anxious about exams that they can't function normally—some get cold sweats, some get dizzy and faint, some become nauseous. Extreme test anxiety, while rare, can be a tremendous problem.

But did you know that virtually all students experience some degree of anxiety or stress at test time—and that any level of anxiety can negatively affect your performance on an exam? Addressing anxiety is a major success strategy for all students.

A Familiar Scenario

Have you ever felt like you studied well enough for a test, only to take the exam and discover you couldn't remember much? See if this scenario sounds familiar:

It's a multiple choice test. Marina knows she needs to do well on this if she has any hope of getting the grade she wants for this class. She has gotten through the first few questions okay, but now she's run into a little trouble. Answers look familiar, but she can't quite remember anything in enough detail to be sure.

She skips a couple of questions and aims for one that looks doable. She narrows the answer down to two possibilities, but can't settle on one. She tries re-reading the prompt, but it seems to get harder to even focus.

The clock is ticking. Some students get up to turn in their tests and leave. Marina tries to bear down, but it seems the more she tries, the harder it becomes. She feels upset because when she reviewed this last night, she felt like she knew it. Now she can't seem to remember anything.

Marina gets through the test. It's not terrible—but she knows she could have done a lot better. By evening, in fact, she's remembered answers to several questions she knows she got wrong!

Marina realizes that she is having difficulty recalling information. She tries harder to think, but it seems like the harder she tries, the harder it becomes to remember. The more anxious she

gets, the worse she does. As her test anxiety gradually increases, her brain's ability to do the work she needs goes down.

Most test anxiety is mild enough not to cause severe physical symptoms. Marina doesn't break out in a cold sweat. Her heart doesn't start to race. She fidgets in her seat more than usual, and she feels a thick, dull headache coming on just a little bit, but that's all. Yet, Marina's anxiety levels are raised enough over the course of the test to interfere with her brain's ability to think and remember. Her anxiety is not profound, but it definitely costs her points on the test.

Anxiety Reduction: Easy as 1-2-3!

Remember, fight or flight is a response to anxiety, not a cause of it. Most test anxiety comes from two often related sources: insufficient study and a pressure to do well. For example, Marina felt pressure to do well when the test began. As she took the test, she felt as though a lot of what she was reading looked familiar—yet she couldn't be sure. This frustrating feeling raised her anxiety level even further—making recall of what she studied much more difficult than before.

To reduce the chance that anxiety will throw you off course, stick to this simple three-part plan:

1. Before Test Day

- Study more—a lot more. It may seem obvious, but insufficient study time is the biggest underlying problem for students who suffer from test anxiety. The simple fact is that most students who struggle with exams have not studied enough. Don't be satisfied with doing well on homework, when reviewing your notes or on practice tests. Remember that the testing conditions are going to put pressure on you, and this pressure is going to affect your ability to recall things you know. The solution is simply to learn your material so well that you can easily recall it even under difficult conditions.* Repetition widens the pathways to memory. The more times you do something, the easier it will be to do.*
- Breathe! Practicing some form of meditation or deliberate relaxation helps you to control your breathing, your heart rate and your thought processes. Focus your practice on calming yourself—by dismissing unwanted thoughts, refocusing your mind and controlling your breathing. There are many forms of meditation available to you—your college's health center, counseling center or spiritual organizations can help you find a practice that suits your needs and lifestyle.
- Practice positive thinking. The desire to avoid failure is a very poor motivator. To prime yourself for success, you must learn to banish negative thoughts. Instead of thinking, "I have to do well on this exam to lift my grade from the last one," think, "I will do well on this test because I have studied as much as I can and because I know what I need to do to be successful."
- Sleep well and eat well. Few regular activities have as much of a bearing on stress and anxiety levels than resting your brain and eating well. Take care of yourself always, but pay extra close attention in the days leading up to the test.

2. On Test Day

- Don't study. If you've studied well beforehand, you shouldn't need to study on test day. A nice review would be helpful to jog your memory, but you're probably not going to learn a lot of new stuff on the day of an exam. You may make yourself anxious, however, by worrying that you're not ready.
- Prime your brain. Be very thoughtful about what you eat and drink, what medicines you take, etc. For example, if you eat too close to a test, your body may focus more energy on digestion than on thinking. But being hungry won't help either. Eat something healthy one to two hours before your test.

If you take ADHD medication or any medication that helps with focus and relaxation, be sure you follow your doctor's instructions to the letter. As for caffeine—you be the judge. A little may give your brain a helpful spark, but too much will raise your anxiety unnecessarily.

- Visualize success. Fill your mind with affirmation. Remind yourself that you have done everything within your power to be ready, and that you will be successful as a result. Picture yourself answering the test questions with ease. Accept that you will do well, and that you have nothing to worry about.

3. During the Test

- Remind yourself that it's only a game. Remember, tests don't cause anxiety. The anxiety is your creation, and you can control it. Try regarding your test as a puzzle, there for your amusement only. Sure, you're trying to score points—but it's only because winning the game is more fun than losing.
- A final word from your sponsor. Begin with a short private affirmation—a kind word to yourself—and a few relaxing breaths. Remind yourself one last time that you have done everything you could to get ready, and now you'll do all you can to succeed.
- Skim the test—but only if you think you can. Some people find skimming a test—to jog your memory and identify easier questions—is a helpful strategy. Others find that scanning a test makes them nervous. It's a good idea, but it's not for everyone. Decide whether this practice will help you.
- Don't stay stuck in the mud. Don't let yourself struggle with a question. Give yourself enough time on it to try to jog your memory, but then move on to the next one. Remind yourself that even as you answer other questions, your brain is still searching for the answer to the one you skipped. Answering other questions while waiting may just help jog that memory.

Next Steps

For most anxious test-takers, putting this three-part plan into action helps—a lot. Some students, however, find that their anxiety is grounded more deeply—in brain chemistry, maybe, or in profound concerns about their families, themselves or unknown factors. This anxiety can be more difficult to relieve, and it can also be very severe.

If you continue to experience anxiety, or it is too severe for you to handle, it's very important for you to seek help. Your college's counseling center is a great place to start. Centers are staffed with psychologists and other specialists, many of whom do a great deal of work with anxiety and stress.

And remember: while this three-step plan can provide immediate results, those results will definitely improve over time. Stick with it, and soon you'll find your anxiety no longer wanting to accompany you to class.

Test Anxiety—We're Wired for It!

Humans have this amazing natural ability called the "fight or flight" mechanism, a defense system that's hard-wired into our genetic code. If you've ever tried to avoid being hit by a car, threatened or attacked by someone or in some way suddenly frightened or put into danger, you've experienced fight or flight.

Your brain triggers a flood of adrenaline and testosterone throughout your system. Suddenly, you are faster and stronger and able to react physically even before you can stop and think about what you're doing. If driving, you slam on the brakes. If someone sneaks up and scares you, your whole body jumps. Someone pulls a gun in a room, and everybody dives instantly to the floor. The fight or flight response mechanism is an effective defense against sudden danger.

For students, however, fight or flight poses a couple of problems. First, in addition to triggering muscle systems, it slows down the parts of our brain that think and analyze. This is great if you're being attacked by a bear, not so great if you're taking a test and need to think carefully about everything.

Second, the brain reacts to all anxiety-causing stimuli the same way. Whether you're anxious about an oncoming train, or the difficulty in choosing between answer b and answer c, your anxiety—even just a little anxiety—is going to make thinking more difficult.