

**TEST ANXIETY - WHAT IT IS
AND
WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**

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WHAT IS TEST ANXIETY?

Test anxiety is worry or fear caused by having to take tests. It is a specific type of performance anxiety similar to stage fright, or the anxiety which sometimes comes with athletic performance or a job interview. A person with test anxiety may know the material but "blank out" on the test or only remember the information after the test is over.

Test anxiety may cause a number of physical symptoms: insomnia, "butterflies in the stomach", headache or body aches, loss of appetite or nausea, rapid heartbeat or breathing, sweating, etc. Some psychological symptoms are: blanking out (not being able to concentrate or think clearly, an extreme sense of time pressure, obsessive thinking and self doubt, worry and nervousness). No one experiences all of these symptoms, but even a few of them can make it hard to perform effectively on tests.

The "blanking out" which people often experience with test anxiety is probably related to what psychologists call "state specific learning". It has been discovered that information is best retrieved from memory (remembered) when a person is in the same state (mental/emotional/physical) when they try to remember it as they were when they learned it. Students generally learn material (study) in a non-stressed, non-time-pressured state. The more anxiety and stress they have during a test, the more their mental/emotional/physical state differs from the state in which they learned (and can best remember) the information. In other words, the memories are specific to the state in which they were learned and less accessible in other states.

CAUSES OF TEST ANXIETY

Test anxiety can be caused by a history of unpleasant school experiences; parents, siblings, or teachers who intimidate or ridicule; fear of failure based on past experience; stress in other areas of a person's life; pressure to succeed, and many other factors. I knew someone whose mother punished her by making her do math problems. This person had a severe case of test (and math) anxiety.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT TEST ANXIETY

There are basically three ways to decrease test anxiety:

1. Improve study skills and test preparation.
2. Develop techniques for dealing with the physical and psychological effects of test anxiety.
3. Improve test taking skills.

Here are some methods for achieving each of these goals:

1. Improving study skills and test preparation.

Study skills include reading for comprehension and recall, note taking, memorization techniques, time management, and the use of learning aids. It is impossible to cover all of this information here. Please refer to numbers 2 and 4 in the Suggested readings at the end of this paper.

For test preparation, you should ask your instructor what the format of the test will be (how many and what type of questions, how long you will have, what major topics will be covered, etc.). the more you know about the type of test and what it will cover, the easier it will be to prepare.

Most often, anxiety is related to the unknown. the more you can make the test a predictable situation, the less anxiety you will have. Create a one page study checklist of the main ideas which will be covered on the test. For each of the main ideas, list a few important facts, examples, formulas, etc. Now you are ready to do some practice testing.

There is an important principle in the preparation for any type of performance: "Practice the skills you will be using during the performance". Are studying your text and notes and memorizing facts and formulas the skills you will be using on the test? Of course not. The skills you will be using on the test are; recalling information, answering question, working problems, etc. These are the skills you must practice in preparing for a test. From the material on your study checklist, create a series of questions to test your knowledge. Study guides which go with your text often have practice tests you can use.

Ask yourself the kinds of questions which will be on the test and practice answering them. This technique works for all types of tests; multiple choice, true/false, matching, definition, essay. So this at least twice before the test.

For math, statistics, physics or other quantitative/numerical classes it is very useful to do timed practice tests. Often, students can work problems as homework, but have trouble with the same type of problems on a test. This is probably related to state dependent learning. Doing timed practice tests allows you to become more

comfortable with performing under time pressure.

Write down a list of problems like those which will be on the test and set an alarm clock for the duration of the test (20 minutes, 50 seconds, etc.). Work the problems exactly as if you were doing them on a test. Do at least two timed practice tests before you take the test.

2. Develop techniques for dealing with the effects of test anxiety.

A. Control negative thinking.

Before or during a test, if you are worrying, your thoughts are racing or you are distracted or overly concerned about time, mentally yell, "STOP!". This will interrupt the cycle of negative thinking, but it is necessary to immediately substitute some type of positive thought to replace the negative ones. After mentally telling "STOP!", say to yourself something like: "trust yourself", "calm", "I can do it". The more you practice this technique, the better it will work.

B. Learn relaxation skills.

The audio tape which accompanies this program presents two relaxation techniques; Autogenic Training and Desensitization. Both have been used successfully to treat a variety of anxiety problems.

C. Improve test taking skills.

See the attached sheet "Suggestions on Exam Taking".

By learning and regularly practicing the techniques contained in this program, you will be able to gain control over the test situation and your reactions to it. Your performance will improve and so will your self-esteem.

SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Davis, Eshelman, et.al. The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook. 3rd edition, New Harbinger Publications, 1988.
2. Ellis, David. Becoming a Master Student. 5th edition, College Survival Incorporated, 1985.
3. Tobia, Sheila. Succeed with Math, Every Student's Guide to Conquering Math Anxiety. The College Board, 1987.
4. Brown, S. and Miller, D. The Active Learner. Roxbury Publishing Company, 1992.
5. Pettitjohn, Terry. Psychology, a Concise Introduction. 3rd edition., Dushkin Publishing Company, 1992.