

Overcoming Test Anxiety

Tests can be nerve-racking experiences. Like athletes, test-takers can find themselves being defeated by “lapses in concentration, nervousness, self-doubt, and condemnation.”¹ Or, exams can be stimulating experiences that offer the sense of a challenge met and a goal accomplished. If you feel tests produce more anxiety than exhilaration, try some or all of these strategies.

1. **This is essential: be prepared.**

There is no substitute for knowing the material. Study well, learn thoroughly. (See the handout “Learning and Remember.”)

2. **Start a mental offensive.**

Beyond academics, prepare for the exam as though you were an athlete training for an important contest. Your brain is part of your body and is affected by your overall physical condition. So, **take care of your body!**

Eat well all the time, but especially eat before the exam—breakfast and lunch, depending on the exam time.

Avoid excessive caffeine, sleeping pills or stimulants, and alcohol.

Get adequate sleep. Most people need 7-9 hours per night; exam week is not an exception. Sleep not only rests your body, it also gives your brain time to assimilate the material you’ve been studying.

Assemble all necessary equipment the day before the exam. Sharpen those No. 2 pencils, buy the blue books, dust off the calculator—get everything you’ll need, and pit it where you can grab it on test day.

Plan your time so that you will **arrive at the test location five minutes early.** If you live off-campus, allow extra time for car trouble, traffic, a late bus, or finding a parking space.

Abandon the “victim mentality” that blames a poor performance on having a bad day, having a poor teacher, an unfair test, or “test anxiety.” Instead, say to yourself that you have studied hard, you are smart, you can pass any test, and you will do your best.

Think through what your performance on this test really means. While it is true that a test score can mean the difference between graduating and not graduating on given date, or between losing a scholarship and keeping it, in most cases one exam does not carry that much weight. And even if it does, in the history of the universe—even in the history of your life—the consequences of one test may not be as monumental as you think. If you miss graduating in June, you can graduate later. This may not be how you want things to be; nevertheless, you can still graduate. If your course grade, as a result of this exam score, puts you out of contention for a scholarship, or even for remaining in school, that will be a problem. But it will not be the end of the world. Perhaps it will instead be the beginning of some realistic thinking about how to study, how to use your time, and what major you have chosen.

So let go of any “do or die” thinking. Not only are those thoughts probably out of step with reality, they are counter-productive. One writer has said that the thought “I have to get an A” can have the same effect on your test performance as a drowning person to his rescuer has on the rescue attempt: it can be disastrous.

3. **Learn to relax**

Spend some time each day—just ten to twenty minutes is enough—learning to relax your body (see page 5, “Perform Music Relaxation”). Do this regularly so that you are able to call up a relaxation response whenever you need it. This will help you to remain calm

¹ *Ibid.*

throughout an exam (it is also great when you need to give a speech or go for a job interview). For help with this, contact the University Health Center.

4. Practice deep breathing.

This is really art of the relaxation process. A few deep breaths before you begin an exam, and periodically throughout it, will help you relax and also provide oxygen to your “little gray cells.” (see page 6, “Use Controlled Breathing”)

5. Practice visualizing your success.

Use some time in the days before the exam to create a mental image of yourself doing well. Imagine being well prepared, entering the exam room confidently, taking deep breathes to relax. Visualize how the room will be, including other students, noises, smells, the look of the test answer sheet or blue book. Picture yourself calmly yet purposefully going through the test, successfully matching your knowledge and skills with the questions presented. Imagine yourself running into a difficult item, taking a few breaths, and then summoning what you know to make the best effort you can. Visualize yourself being satisfied with the fact that you have given your best effort (see page 7, “Visualize Success!”).

6. Practice test-taking

As you study throughout the term and again near the date of an exam, write test questions. As you become familiar with a particular professor, you will be able to pick out topics and formulate questions that anticipate the actual exam items. As alternate, use the old tests from earlier in the term or from a test bank.

Use these example questions as you review. Objective items are good for drill, especially in a study group. For essays, make an outline for the answer. Then write out the essay, keep to the approximate time limit that you will have in the class. For math and physics, use old homework problems; do these over and over until you have mastered the process and are able to do the problem in good time.

If you have serious anxiety about exams, you may need to take these sample tests to the actual classroom during “off: hours and practice writing or doing problems there. This will help desensitize you to the test situation. (See page 8, “Desensitize Yourself to the Fear Response”)

7. Have an emergency plan.

You are well prepared—you have done everything suggested above, but you “freeze” in the test anyway. Try using this formula: **R.S.V.P.** As you know “R.S.V.P.”, or “Repondez, s’il vous plait,” is a request for a response. In the exam situation, you can use the acronym to jog yourself into responding to the crisis. Take each letter and remind yourself:

R- is for **respond**. Recognize that your nerves are getting the upper hand.

S- is for **seize** control. Realize that you are not helpless; you do not need to be a victim in this situation. Take three deep breaths. Shake out tense muscles in your shoulders and neck. Do a brief version of the relaxation exercises you have been practicing.

V- is for **visualization**. Pull up the picture you’ve practiced in your visualizing sessions, and capture that image. Your mind should respond by making your body and your thinking match that image of a relaxed, confident test-taker.

P- is for “put”. Pout out some positive effort. Put your best foot forward. Put down what you can—start with anything: facts, formulas, a rephrasing of the question, anything. This may break the “log jam” in your mind and get ideas flowing again.

8. For further assistance, contact a counselor in the University y Health Center. We can help you develop these skills.

Perform Muscle Relaxation

This technique involves learning how to tense and relax each muscle group of your body until all muscle groups are relaxed. This technique requires practice. The basic technique involves assuming a comfortable position and then sequentially contracting and relaxing each muscle group in your body from the head to the toes. When a muscle group is tensed and then released, the muscle smooths out and relaxed. It is not a technique that can be quickly described in a short paragraph. However, the following brief exercise is included as an example:

EXAMPLE:

Find a comfortable chair in a quiet place. Close your eyes and use diaphragmatic breathing taking several deep breaths to relax. You are now ready to begin progressive muscle relaxation. Sequentially move from one muscle group in the body to another, contracting and relaxing each in an even manner. Contract and relax each muscle group for 10 seconds. After each muscle group is tensed and then relaxed, take a deep slow breath using diaphragmatic breathing. As you are relaxing, observe how you feel. Experience the sensation. You may want to reinforce the feeling of relaxation by saying, "My muscles are replacing. I can feel the tension flowing out of my muscles." Remember not to breathe too forcefully to avoid hyperventilation. The following is a sample of muscle groups that should be included in a progressive muscle relaxation routine:

- Bend your head and try to rest your right ear as close as you can to your right shoulder. Count to 10. Assume normal alignment, relax and take a deep breath.
- Bend your head and try to rest your left ear as close as you can to your left shoulder. Count to 10. Assume normal alignment, relax and take a deep breath.
- Flex your head and try to touch your chin to your chest. Count to 10. Assume normal alignment, relax and take a deep breath.
- Hyperextend your head as far back as it can comfortably hyperextend. Count to 10. Assume normal alignment, relax and take a deep breath.
- Make a fist and tense the left forearm. Count to 10. Relax and take a deep breath.
- Tense the right biceps by tightly bending (flexing) the right arm at the elbow. Count to 10. Relax and take a deep breath.

Continue moving from the head to the arms, trunk, and legs, by contracting and relaxing each of the muscle groups within these areas of the body. You can understand and master this technique by obtaining an audio or videotape that is designed to direct and instruct you through the entire routine of tensing and relaxing each muscle group. This technique should be practiced every day over a period of time so that the technique becomes natural. Once you have mastered this technique, you can use a shortened version of progressive relaxation along with controlled breathing at critical times during a test.

Patricia M. Nugent and Barbara A. Vitale. Test Success: Test-taking Techniques for Beginning Nursing Students. 1993, p. 5-6

Use Controlled Breathing

An excellent way to reduce feelings of anxiety is to utilize the technique of controlled breathing. When you control your breathing, you can break the pattern of shallow short breaths associated with anxious feelings. Deep abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing enhances the relaxation response. When a person exhales, tense muscles tend to relax. Diaphragmatic breathing causes the diaphragm to flatten and the abdomen to enlarge on inspiration. On exhalation the abdominal muscles contract. As you slowly let out this deep breath, muscles will tend to let go and relax. This technique enables you to breathe more deeply than if you just expand your chest on inspiration. Controlled breathing can be helpful to reduce anxious responses that occur at the beginning of a test, when stumped with a tough question, or when you

are nearing the end of the test. During these critical times you can use controlled breathing to induce the relaxation response.

While practicing diaphragmatic breathing, place your hands lightly over the front of the lower ribs and upper abdomen so you can monitor the movement you are trying to achieve. As you become accomplished in this technique you will no longer need to position your hands on the body. Practice the following steps:

1. Gently position your hands over the front of the lower ribs and upper abdomen.
2. Exhale gently and fully. Feel your ribs and abdomen sink inward toward the middle of the body.
3. Slowly inhale a deep breath through your nose allowing the abdomen to expand first and then the chest. Does this as you slowly count to 4.
4. Hold your breath at the height of inhalation as you count to 4.
5. Exhale fully by contracting the abdominal muscles and then the chest. Let out all the air slowly and smoothly through the mouth as you count to 8.

Monitor the pace of your breathing. It is important not to do this exercise too forcefully or too rapidly because it can cause you to hyperventilate. Hyperventilation precipitates dizziness and lightheadedness. Monitor your body. Focus on the muscle group as you inhale and exhale. You may feel warm, tingly, and relaxed. Enjoy the feeling as you breathe deeply and evenly. You should practice this technique so that controlled breathing automatically induces the relaxation response after several breaths. Once you are able to induce the relaxation response with controlled breathing, you can effectively draw upon this strategy when you need to be in control.

Patricia M. Nugent and Barbara A. Vitale. *Test Success: Test-taking Techniques for Beginning Nursing Students*. 1993, p. 3.

Desensitize Yourself to the Fear Response

Individuals generally connect a certain feeling with a specific situation. Controlling feelings requires you to recognize how you consider and visualize events. It is not uncommon to connect a feeling of fear with an event. In a testing situation, the examination is the event and the response of fear is the feeling. If that happens to you, then you need to interrupt this fear response. You have the ability to control how you respond to fear. When you are able to sever the event from the feeling, then you will establish control and become empowered. However, establishing control does not automatically happen. You need to desensitize yourself to the event to control the fear response.

Desensitization involves repeatedly exposing yourself to the identified emotionally distressing event in a limited and/or controlled setting until the event no longer precipitates the feeling of fear. Desensitization is dependent upon associating relaxation with the fear response. To achieve this response, you need to practice the following desensitization routine:

FIRST, you must practice a relaxation response. Controlled breathing is an excellent relaxation technique and has already been described. Once you are comfortable with the technique of controlled breathing, you can use it in the desensitization routine.

SECOND, you should make a list of five events associated with a testing situation that cause fear, and rank them starting with the one that causes the most anxiety progressing to the one that causes the least anxiety. The following is an example:

1. Taking an important examination on difficult material
2. Taking an important examination on material you know well
3. Taking a small quiz on difficult material

4. Taking a small quiz on material you know well
5. Taking a practice test that does not count

Event number 5 should invoke the least amount of fear.

THIRD, you should practice the following routine:

- Practice controlled breathing and become relaxed.
- Now imagine event number 5. If you feel fearful, then turn off the scene and fo back to controlled breathing for about 30 seconds.
- Once you are relaxed, again imagine scene number 5. Try to visualize the event for 30 seconds without becoming uncomfortable.
- Once you have accomplished the previous step, move up the list of events until you are able to imagine event number 1 without feeling uncomfortable.

When you are successful in controlling the fear response in the testing situation, you can attempt to accomplish the same success in simulated tests at home. Once you are successful in controlling the fear response in simulated tests at home, you can take some simulated tests in a classroom setting. Continue practicing desensitization until you have a feeling of control in an actual testing situation.