

TEST AND PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

Many students experience some nervousness or apprehension before, during, or after an exam. This kind of anxiety can be a powerful motivator. However, some students experience test-related anxiety to such a degree that it can lead to poor performance and interfere with their learning.

Symptoms of test anxiety

Physical – headaches, nausea or diarrhea, extreme body temperature changes, excessive sweating, shortness of breath, light-headedness or fainting, rapid heart beat, and/or dry mouth.

Emotional – excessive feelings of fear, disappointment, anger, depression, uncontrollable crying or laughing, feelings of helplessness

Behavioral – fidgeting, pacing, substance abuse, avoidance

Cognitive – racing thoughts, ‘going blank’, difficulty concentrating, negative self-talk, feelings of dread, comparing yourself to others, difficulty organizing your thoughts.

During exams, do you...

- feel like you “go blank”?
- become frustrated?
- find yourself thinking “I can’t do this” or “I’m stupid”?
- feel like the room is closing in on you?
- feel your heart racing or find it difficult to breathe?
- suddenly “know” the answers after turning in the test?
- score much lower than on homework or papers?

When performing, do you...

- become distracted?
- feel overwhelmed?
- miss important cues from your surroundings?
- “go blank” and forget what you are supposed to do?
- have distracting thoughts of failure or a poor performance?
- perform more poorly than in practice?

If you answer “yes” to some of these questions, you may be experiencing test or performance anxiety.

What causes test anxiety?

Test anxiety can develop for a number of reasons. There may be some prior negative experience with test taking that serves as the activating event. Students who have experienced, or have a fear of, blanking out on tests or the inability to perform in testing situations can develop anticipatory anxiety. Worrying about how anxiety will effect you can be as debilitating as the anxiety itself. This kind of anxiety can build as the testing situation approaches, and can interfere with the student’s ability to prepare adequately. Lack of preparation is another factor that can contribute to test anxiety. Poor time management, poor study habits, and lack of organization can lead to a student feeling overwhelmed. Student’s who are forced to cram at the last minute will feel less confident about the material covered than those who have been able to follow a structured plan for

studying. Being able to anticipate what the exam will cover, and knowing all the information has been covered during the study sessions, can help students to enter the testing situation with a more positive attitude.

Lack of confidence, fear of failure, and other negative thought processes may also contribute to test anxiety. The pressure to perform well on exams is a great motivator unless it is so extreme that it becomes irrational. Perfectionism and feelings of unworthiness provide unreasonable goals to achieve through testing situations. When a student’s self-esteem is too closely tied to the outcome of any one academic task, the results can be devastating. In these situations, students may spend more time focusing on the negative consequences of failure, than preparing to succeed.

What are Test and Performance Anxieties?

Anxiety is a natural human response to a threatening situation. Anxiety is a form of the “fight-or-flight” response—the body and mind become aroused and alert to prepare for attack or to escape from a threat. Test and performance anxieties describe responses specific to *evaluative situations*—situations in which you are being observed or evaluated by others. The primary “threat” in these situations is the possibility of failure and loss of esteem. Depending on the intensity of the anxiety response, the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive components of anxiety can interfere with your ability to perform the task at hand (e.g., test score, athletic or artistic performance). If you experience test or performance anxiety, you are not alone—approximately 20% of US college students experience symptoms of test anxiety and most athletes and artists experience performance anxiety at some point in their careers.

Test or performance anxiety typically occurs:

1. in the presence of a difficult, threatening or challenging situation,
2. when you believe that you are inadequate or incapable of meeting the challenge, and,
3. you fear the consequences of possible failure.

Arousal and Anxiety

In order to perform well in a challenging situation, you must be psychologically and physically alert. You certainly won’t perform well on an exam or in an event if you are nearly asleep! This level of “alertness” is also called *arousal*. Some degree of arousal is essential for optimal performance. Increasing arousal is the idea behind “psyching up”— and it works — in many cases, *psyching up* enhances performance. The problem is that when the intensity of arousal gets too high, we often begin to feel nervous and tense and experience anxiety. At this level, anxiety becomes distracting and performance declines — we get “psyched out.” For optimal performance, you need to keep your arousal at an intermediate level — *psyched up*, but not *psyched out*!

Optimal Arousal

So, how do you know when you are “up” enough, but not too much, for an exam or performance? When psyched up, you’ll be able to focus on the task at hand and performance will feel natural. When psyched out and anxiety takes over, you may experience:

- distracting thoughts of failure
- an inability to pick out important environmental cues
- becoming distracted by irrelevant environmental cues
- interpreting the results of physical arousal (muscle tension, heart rate, respiration) as signs of fear
- excessive muscle tension
- attempting to avoid or escape the situation
- giving up

Some tips for reducing test anxiety

Fortunately, there are several things that can be done to make test anxiety more manageable:

- **Preparation** – develop good study habits, spreading studying over several days; ask for additional help when needed; eat good foods, get adequate rest, and exercise to build energy; attend class regularly and complete all assignments in a timely manner; make and take practice tests
- **Keep a positive attitude** – develop reasonable expectations; do not allow your grades to become dependent on the outcome of one exam; avoid negative and irrational thoughts about catastrophic results; set up a system of rewards for dedicated studying and good test performance; encourage yourself
- **Relaxation techniques** – deep breathing exercises, imagery and visualization, and muscle relaxation techniques can help to increase focus and concentration; don’t arrive too early or get distracted by others preparing for the test; check to make sure you have everything you will need;
- **Learn good test-taking skills** - do not panic if you can’t remember something right away; answer questions you know well first, and then go back to other ones; read questions and directions carefully before you begin; outline essays before you begin to write; keep short-answers short; don’t spend a lot of time reviewing answers.

Additional Coping Strategies

The techniques for dealing with test or performance anxiety can be divided into 5 basic principles:

1. Be healthy: If you are physically and emotionally exhausted, your body and mind are less able to tolerate stress and anxiety. You can improve your resistance to anxiety by getting adequate rest, eating appropriately, and taking care of your physical health. If you find you don’t have time to be healthy, consider seeking assistance with *time management*.

2. Be prepared: Practice... practice... practice... study... study... study. Sounds a bit repetitive, but nothing can help reduce anxiety like confidence. In fact, if you over-prepare a bit, your responses become more automatic, and your performance will be less affected by anxiety. Preparation for an exam may include improving your *study and test-taking skills*. Be on time and have all the “tools” you may need for an exam (e.g., #2 pencils, calculator, pen). Finally, *learn and practice the anxiety management techniques* in the following points 3-5.

3. Practice the performance: The time limits of an exam, the tied score of a game, or the audience at your performance—all are stimuli that increase your level of arousal and add to your experience of anxiety. If you practice under similar conditions, you’ll become less sensitive to these stimuli. For an exam, work through a *practice exam* (or two!) under the same time constraints that will exist when you take the exam (don’t look at your notes, create as many conditions of the actual exam as possible). For an athletic or artistic performance, *practice with distractions or with an audience*. For conditions that you cannot actually reproduce, create them in your mind—close your eyes and “see” the audience in the seats, give the play-by-play of the last seconds of a tied game. *Imagination* is a powerful tool—it can help you be less anxious when reality hits!

4. Regulate your arousal level: In cases of anxiety, the goal is to lower your level of arousal. Some of the most effective ways involve altering your physical responses like breathing and muscle tension.

- **Deep breathing:** When anxious, we often take shallow breaths. We feel like we aren’t getting enough air, and get more anxious. If you focus on breathing deeply and slowly, this cycle is interrupted and the body and mind begin to relax. To learn to breathe deeply, place your hand on your stomach and inhale in a way that makes your abdomen expand. As you exhale, your abdomen should move inward. Practice taking 10-15 slow deep breaths in a row, 2-3 times per day—training your body to breathe deeply and relax. Then, during a stressful situation, focus on taking 2-3 deep breaths, and your body will relax.

- **Progressive muscle relaxation:** We also tense our muscles when anxious. Consciously relaxing your muscles will help your body and mind relax. Practice muscle relaxation during deep breathing by focusing on a particular muscle group (e.g., shoulders) and alternatively tensing and relaxing the muscle. Then, focus on releasing all of the tension in the muscle, repeating “relax” in your mind. Add muscle relaxation to deep breathing in a stressful situation.

- **Reduce distractions:** Distractions are additional stimuli that increase arousal. Explore ways to reduce the distractions in your immediate environment, e.g. sit in a back corner of the room, take a sweater so you aren’t distracted by being cold, change seats if you are distracted by the person sitting next to you.

- **Rituals:** Rituals are repetitive behaviors that give us a sense of familiarity, help us focus, and reduce anxiety. The basketball player who bounces the ball three times before shooting a free-throw has a ritual. You may already have some rituals—getting a drink of water just before an exam or using a particular pencil or pen. Just a note of caution—make sure your rituals are not harmful or distracting to yourself or others (tapping your pencil 10 times before each question may annoy your classmates!).

5. Control the fear: The underlying source of test or performance anxiety is the fear of failure. Pay attention to what you are thinking and saying to yourself in anxious situations. This self-talk will likely reflect an expectation or fear of failure.

You can begin to control this fear or change the expectation by changing your self-talk.

- **Positive self-talk:** Purposefully filling your mind with positive statements about yourself and your abilities can offset or crowd-out the negative self-talk. Even if you don't believe the positives, say them anyway—"I'm ready...I can do this...Do it!" Determine the most important positive messages for yourself by writing down your 3-4 most common negative thoughts (e.g., "I can't do this"). Next, write down the opposite for each statement ("I can do this"). Repeat the positives to yourself daily for at least two weeks, and again just before and during the test or performance.
- **On-task self-talk:** Counter distractions and help yourself focus on the task at hand by telling yourself what to do—talk yourself through the task step-by-step, and tell yourself you're succeeding! Thinking about past mistakes or future consequences is not helpful. Keep your mind focused on the present—one thing at a time!
- **Gaining perspective:** Sometimes the negative thoughts people have in stressful situations focus on potentially drastic consequences of failure. In most cases, these drastic consequences are much more severe than the reality of the situation—this is called *catastrophizing*. Focusing on such catastrophic consequences increases anxiety and interferes

with performance. It is important to recognize that one mistake does not equal failure and that one bad performance does not mean you're worthless. Take some time to evaluate the most likely consequences of your performance. If you find that you tend to *catastrophize*, develop some phrases that are more realistic and repeat these phrases to yourself prior to and during the exam or performance. An example might be "This is just one exam."

If you have difficulty with any of these techniques, contact your counseling center for additional assistance.

**Psychological
Services
Center**

UNIVERSITY OF
Cincinnati

Your Counseling Service:

Timely, confidential, and professional assistance is available for U.C. students at the University *Psychological*

Services Center (8:00am – 5:00pm, M-F) located at 316 Dyer Hall. Phone (513-556-0648) or stop in for a no charge screening interview.

This fact sheet is provided as a service by the University of Cincinnati Psychological Services Center and the Division of Student Affairs and Services. This fact sheet was prepared by Dr. Warrenetta Mann, Dr. Julia Lash and the professional staff of the Psychological Services Center. Please contact our office (513-556-0648) or our Web Site at <http://www.psc.uc.edu> if you would like additional copies.

© 2004 Psychological Services Center