

# Test Anxiety

## Why does test anxiety happen?

1. **Lifestyle issues.** For example: not sleeping, not eating well, using too many stimulants (energy drinks, coffee), not having a schedule, or not prioritizing your commitments.
2. **Poor preparation.** For example: not prepared for course requirements, teacher's expectations, exam dates, or testing location.
3. **Poor study habits.** For example: inconsistent content coverage, trying to memorize the textbook, binge/massed studying, all-night studying before exams, inappropriate study environment, not studying at all, or not attending classes.
4. **Psychological factors.** For example: feeling no control over the exam situation (rather than knowing and applying exam strategies), negative thinking and self-criticism (rather than being one's own best friend), irrational thinking about exam outcomes, irrational beliefs ("if I don't pass my parents/partner/boss will kill me"), irrational demands ("I have to get 100% or I am stupid"), or catastrophic predictions ("I'll fail no matter what I do").



## Strategies to combat test anxiety

- **Create a 'sample testing environment'.** Approximately two days before your test, complete a sample test or practice questions in an environment that mimics a testing environment (i.e. quiet, no answers available).
- **Complete a 'memory dump' at the start of your test.** Before you look at any test questions, use a scrap piece of paper, or back of the test to write out everything you remember, or ideas you are worried you will forget.
- **Find an anxiety managing method that works for you** – and use it consistently.

- **Palming method.** Place your palms over your eyes to cover them, close your eyes if you like, and focus on your ideal safe, relaxing place. In your mind, send yourself there for 15 to 30 seconds. Breathe easily and enjoy the relaxation.
- **Total tension release.** Tense your whole body one part at a time: lift your toes and tense both calves, tense your thighs and buttocks, tighten your abdomen, tense your chest and back, tighten your arms and clench your fists, tense your neck and clench your jaw, and tightly close your eyes. Take a deep breath and hold it for five seconds and then let everything relax at once while you exhale; notice the tension leaving your body.
- **Focus on your feet and legs.** Imagine them becoming warmer and warmer. Imagine them becoming heavier and heavier. Continue focusing on your feet and legs. Imagine the tension in the rest of your body flowing downward into your feet and legs making them heavier and warmer. Emphasize exhalation in your breathing.
- **Breathe your tensions away.** Focus on your feet and legs; draw all tensions into your breath and exhale those tensions away from your body. Focus on the abdomen; repeat the cycle. Focus on your chest and back; repeat the cycle. Focus on your arms and hands; repeat the cycle. Focus on your shoulders, neck, jaw and face; repeat the cycle. Focus on your total body tension; repeat the cycle.
- **Take a deep breath.** Take a deep breath and hold it for three seconds. Exhale audibly all at once and let your head, jaw and shoulders drop. Breathe easy 'into' your neck, jaw and shoulders and exhale again into the relaxed state. Repeat the cycle once or twice.
- **Mindfulness of breathing.** Focus on the tip of your nostrils; notice the air only at that point is cool going in and warm going out. Notice the sensation of the contact of air against your skin. Notice if your breath is fast or slow, deep or shallow, rough or smooth, or easy.
- **Smile!** Really feel that smile spread throughout your body. Take a deep breath and exhale through your mouth.
- If test anxiety is significantly impacting your test results, **visit Counselling Services or a Doctor at Health Services.**

Adapted from University of Waterloo Counselling Services

