

Managing Test Anxiety

Everyone becomes anxious before an exam. A certain amount of anxiety is a healthy and improves performance. But when your anxiety interferes with your performance, it is time to do some soul searching and to confront the thought process that leads to excess anxiety. Here are some common pitfalls and solutions:

Anxious Thought: "Everyone else is studying way more than me."

Solution: Everyone studies at their own pace. Focus on whether you feel you learned the material for the exam. Do not worry about your friends' learning style.

Anxious Thought: I am worried because I did not study enough for this exam.

Solution: Okay, so you didn't study enough. Tackle the issue and walk into the exam with the purpose of using everything you know to your advantage. Be doubly certain to use good test taking techniques and plan to study more effectively for the next exam.

Unproductive: "I become anxious as I walk to the exam." Or, "I become anxious when I am waiting for the exam to be passed out."

Solution: Examine what you are thinking and doing at these times. If you are anxious about how you will do in comparison to others, distract yourself with a planned activity. For instance, talk to friends or listen to music.

Anxious Thought: "I have to do well on this exam; my future depends on how well I do."

Solution: Remember that no one's future truly rides on a single exam. Find a way to make peace with the reality that not all exams will go your way. Think of several ways to achieve your goal rather than expecting to move from point A to B at a rapid pace and in a straight line. There are many benefits to taking a more circuitous route.

Anxious Thought: "I am anxious because I've frozen on exams before. Now it is becoming a pattern."

Solution: Anxiety feeds on itself. Freezing on an exam once or twice can turn into a chronic issue. Find techniques to reduce your anxiety. For instance, you could talk to the professor before the exam and let the professor know that you are struggling in this way. Ask the professor for permission to leave the room if you freeze. If you feel you cannot talk with the professor, then learn a relaxation technique that incorporates deep breathing. Three minutes spent on deep breathing even in the middle of an exam will be well worth the time if it helps you overcome severe test anxiety.

Anxious Thought: "I am anxious because I never do well on exams, even though I study hard."

Adapted from: Pauk, W. (1989). *How to Study in College* (4th Ed.), Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin;
Reynolds, J.A. (1996) *College Success: Study Strategies and Skills*, Boston, MA, Allyn & Bacon.

Solution: Take a hard look at your exams. Take out three exams and examine them carefully, point by point. What habitual mistakes are costing you points? Often students feel time pressure during exams. These students sometimes do not read directions slowly and carefully or make small errors in math and copying information. If this is the issue for you, give yourself positive, anxiety-reducing messages while you are taking the exam. Tell yourself, "I have enough time to read the directions carefully." Or, "this exam is going well, I have time to carefully copy over this information." Students who are good test takers make these sorts of statements to themselves.

-Also, keep track of how much you are studying, it could be that you are not studying as much as you think you are and working on time management for test preparation may assist you in mastering the material for test day.

Adapted from: Pauk, W. (1989). How to Study in College (4th Ed.), Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin; Reynolds, J.A. (1996) College Success: Study Strategies and Skills, Boston, MA, Allyn & Bacon.