



FACULTY OF ENGINEERING AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING TEST/EXAMINATION ANXIETY

Stress is your body's warning mechanism - it's a signal that helps you prepare for something important that's about to happen. Some level of stress or anxiety is normal, even beneficial as one performs better when you feel some stress. However, too much stress may result in you being unable to perform to your full potential. Many students find themselves highly anxious during a test or an examination. Test anxiety is a condition where a person experiences distress before, during or after a test or exam to such an extent that the anxiety causes poor performance or interferes with learning.

What does test or exam anxiety look like?

- *Physiological symptoms:* headaches, nausea, faintness, feeling too hot or too cold, perspiring, fatigue, stomach aches, difficulty breathing, problems sleeping, etc.
- *Emotional symptoms:* feeling irritable, or getting frustrated quickly, feeling upset, angry, excessive feelings of fear, disappointment, uncontrollable laughing or crying.
- *Behavioural symptoms:* fidgeting, pacing, substance abuse, avoidance, being easily distracted.
- *Cognitive symptoms:* difficulty concentrating, negative self-talk, comparing yourself to others; difficulty retrieving information ('going blank'), racing thoughts that are difficult to control.

A major problem of test anxiety can be its effect on your *cognitive functioning*.

It is important to recognize the signs of anxiety in yourself.

What causes test or exam anxiety?

Anxiety is a reaction to anticipating something stressful and affects the body and the mind. When you're under stress, your body releases the hormone **adrenaline**, which prepares it for danger (referred to as the "fight or flight" reaction). That's what causes the physical symptoms, such as sweating, a pounding heart, and rapid breathing. These sensations might be mild or intense.

Focusing on the bad things that could happen fuels test anxiety. For example, someone worrying about doing poorly might think thoughts like, "What if I forget everything I know?" or "What if the test is too hard?" Too many thoughts like these leave no mental space for thinking about the test questions.

Lack of confidence, fear of failure, and other negative thought processes may contribute to test anxiety. Test anxiety can create a vicious circle: The more one focuses on the bad things that could happen, the stronger the feeling of anxiety becomes. This makes one feel worse and can increase the possibility that you will do worse on the test.

People who worry a lot or who are perfectionists are more likely to have trouble with test anxiety. People with these traits sometimes find it hard to accept mistakes they might make. In this way they might really pressure themselves. 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.

Students who aren't prepared for tests but who care about doing well are also likely to experience test anxiety. They may not have studied enough or they may find the material difficult.

What can you do to manage test anxiety?

There are ways to relieve stress or anxiety and the more things you do the more your anxiety decreases.

Be prepared. Develop good study habits and be well prepared. Include as much self-testing as possible. Go over old test or exam papers. Ask if you need help with what you don't fully understand. Remember that no amount of cramming the night before can take the place of the deeper level of learning that happens over time with regular studying. Structure your time and protect it. Being able to anticipate what the exam will cover, and knowing that most of the information has been covered, can help you enter the test or exam with a more positive and confident attitude. Many students find that their test anxiety is reduced when they start to study better or more regularly.

Maintain a health lifestyle. Make time to eat proper meals, exercise (it's said to sharpen the mind), get enough sleep, have a reasonable amount of social interaction. Fresh fruits and vegetables are often recommended to reduce stress. Stressful foods can include processed foods, artificial sweeteners, chocolate, eggs, fried foods, junk foods, pork, red meat, sugar, white flour products, chips, stimulants such as coffee, soft drinks, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs.

Self care. Take time to yourself and the things you enjoy. Find a way to deal with personal issues (and if they are on-going realize that they are going to affect your work). Feelings of inadequacy are not uncommon among students, so be gentle on yourself.

Adopt stress releasing strategies: Determine which strategies are helpful in calming yourself and getting centred when you're tense or anxious. For some this may mean learning a simple *breathing exercise*. Practice breathing regularly when you're not stressed so that your body sees these exercises as a signal to relax.

Learn *progressive muscle relaxation* or meditation techniques. These need to be started at least a month before the test or exam for maximum benefit as you need time to practice.

On the day of the test or exam

Approach the exam with confidence. Strive for a relaxed state of concentration.

View the exam as an opportunity to show how much you've studied and to receive a reward for the studying you've done.

Before you go to bed on the night before the test or exam, organize anything that you will need ~ pen, pencil, ruler, eraser, calculator, etc. Double check the time of the exam and the location.

Get to the venue early and sit where there are as little distractions as possible.

Avoid people who express negativity or who will add to your stress. Be cautious about talking to other students about the exam material just before going into the exam. It may leave you feeling more anxious.

As the test or exam papers are distributed, calm yourself by taking slow deep breaths.

Read the instructions on the exam carefully.

Budget your time in order to finish the test. Show as much work as possible to get partial credit.

Look over the questions to familiarize yourself with the test. Underline key words or phrases in the test.

Expect *some* anxiety: It's a reminder that you want to do your best and can provide energy. Just keep it manageable.

If you find yourself tensing and getting anxious during the test

If you feel very anxious in the exam, take a few minutes to calm yourself. Stretch your arms and legs and then relax them again. Do this a couple of times. Take a few slow deep breaths. Do muscle relaxation exercises. You are in control.

Don't panic when you don't know an answer, eliminate options you know are incorrect and then take an educated guess.

If the exam is more difficult than you anticipated, try to focus and just do your best. It might be enough to get you through with a reasonable grade!

Don't think about the fear. Pause. Think about the next step and keep on going step by step.

If you go blank, skip the question and go on.

Positive self-talk: Negative messages you might be sending yourself about the test can contribute to your anxiety. If you find yourself thinking negative thoughts ("I'm never any good at taking tests," or "It's going to be terrible if I do badly on this test"), replace them with positive messages. Not unrealistic positive messages, of course, but ones that are practical and true, such as "I've studied hard and I know the material, so I'm ready to do the best I can." (Of course, if you haven't studied, this message won't help!)

As you anticipate the test and during the test think positively. Use positive self-talk and have a positive attitude towards the test. Talk to yourself (quietly, of course) during the test. Here are some suggestions for self-talk to help you keep focused and positive. Say to yourself:

1. Now let's see, exactly what does the question say—don't interpret or add anything just exactly what does it say?
2. OK, now it's a little puzzling, but what is my basic feeling about it? I can usually trust that.
3. Now don't look for tricks, just what does it say? What's the basic question, the main point?

4. Let's see, I made some notes on that. I can picture the page in my mind towards the end of the chapter.
5. Don't get anxious. Just take a moment off to relax and take a couple of slow deep breaths.....calm.....relax. Good!
6. Umm, lots more to go to the finish. Don't worry about that, just take them one at a time. It'll feel good when it's over.
7. Damn, I should know that OK, let it go for now. No need to fuss. I'll come back later on for a fresh look at it.
8. I don't know how to start on this. Well, let me just start with what I do know and maybe it will get me to where I need to go.
9. Slow down and don't get in a panic. There's time for most of it.

As you work on the exam, focus only on the exam and not on what other students are doing or on thinking about past exams or future goals.

After the test, review how you did. Note what worked, and hold onto these strategies. It does not matter how small the items are: they are building blocks to success. Treat yourself for having completed the exam. Don't dwell on possible mistakes.

Accept mistakes. Learn to keep mistakes in perspective - especially if you're a perfectionist or you tend to be hard on yourself. Everyone makes mistakes; consider them as learning opportunities. Learning to tolerate small failures and mistakes is a valuable skill.

Counselling. If you are generally very anxious and your test or exam anxiety persists despite attempting some of the suggestions above, seek counselling or therapy to determine where your anxiety comes from so that you can deal with it.

Realize that your ability to do well on an exam lies in how well you have prepared, how you approach the exam, what strategies you use to deal with questions on the exam, and the quality work you do during the exam situation. You do not have any say in the questions to be asked, or how other students perform – all you have is *yourself* and *your attitude*.

Everything takes time and practice, and learning to beat test anxiety is no different. Although it won't go away overnight, facing and dealing with test anxiety will help you learn stress management, which can prove to be a valuable skill in many situations besides taking tests.

Make the most of you!

References

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The Progressive Muscle Relaxation of Dr Edmund Jacobson

Progressive muscle relaxation is a systematic technique for achieving a deep state of relaxation. It was developed by Dr. Edmund Jacobson more than fifty years ago. Dr. Jacobson discovered that a muscle could be relaxed by first tensing it for a few seconds and then releasing it. Tensing and releasing various muscle groups throughout the body produces a deep state of relaxation.

Guidelines for Practicing Progressive Muscle Relaxation

The following guidelines will help you make the most use of progressive muscle relaxation.

The *regular* practice of progressive muscle relaxation can go a long way toward helping you to better manage your anxiety, face your fears, overcome panic, and feel better all around.

Find a *quiet location* to practice where you won't be distracted. Don't permit the phone to ring while you're practicing. .

1. Practice at *regular times*. On awakening, before retiring, or before meals are generally the best times.
2. Practice on an *empty stomach*. Food digestion after meals will tend to disrupt deep relaxation.
3. Assume a *comfortable position*. Your entire body, including your head, should be supported. Sitting up is preferable to lying down if you are feeling tired and sleepy.
4. Loosen any tight clothing and take off shoes, watch, glasses, contact lenses.
5. Make a decision not to worry about anything. Give yourself permission to put aside the concerns of the day. Allow taking care of yourself and having peace of mind to take precedence over any of your worries. (Success with relaxation depends on giving peace of mind high priority in your overall scheme of values.)
6. Assume a *passive, detached attitude*. This is probably the most important element. You want to adopt a "let it happen" attitude and be free of any worry about how well you are performing the technique. Do not try to relax. Do not try to control your body. Do not judge your performance. The point is to let go.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Technique

Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and relaxing, in succession, sixteen different muscle groups of the body. The idea is to tense each muscle group hard (not so hard that you strain) for about 10 seconds, and then to let go of it suddenly. You then give yourself 15-20 seconds to relax, noticing how the muscle group feels when relaxed in contrast to how it felt when tensed, before going on to the next group of muscles. You might also say to yourself "I am relaxing," "Letting go," "Let the tension flow away," or any other relaxing phrase during each relaxation period between successive muscle groups. Throughout the exercise, maintain your focus on your muscles. When your attention wanders, bring it back to the particular muscle group you're working on: The guidelines below describe progressive muscle relaxation in detail:

- Make sure you are in a setting that is quiet and comfortable.
- Concentrate on what is happening. Feel the buildup of tension in each particular muscle group.
- When you release the muscles, do so abruptly, and then relax, enjoying the sudden feeling of limpness. Allow the relaxation to develop for at least 15-20 seconds before going on to the next group of muscles.
- Allow all the *other* muscles in your body to remain relaxed, as far as possible, while working on a particular muscle group.

Once you are comfortably supported in a quiet place, follow the detailed instructions below:

1. To begin, take three deep abdominal breaths, exhaling slowly each time. As you exhale, imagine that tension throughout your body begins to flow away.
2. Clench your fists. Hold for 7-10 seconds and then release for 15-20 seconds. *Use these same time intervals for all other muscle groups.*
3. Tighten your biceps by drawing your forearms up toward your shoulders and "making a muscle" with both arms. Hold... and then relax.
4. Tighten your *triceps*~the muscles on the undersides of your upper arms~by extending your arms out straight and locking your elbows. Hold ... and then relax.
5. Tense the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as far as you can. Hold ... and then relax. Imagine your forehead muscles becoming smooth and limp as they relax.
6. Tense the muscles around your eyes by clenching your eyelids tightly shut. Hold... and then relax. Imagine sensations of deep relaxation spreading all around them.
7. Tighten your jaws by opening your mouth so widely that you stretch the muscles around the hinges of your jaw. Hold ... and then relax. Let your lips part and allow your jaw to hang loose.
8. Tighten the muscles in the back of your neck by pulling your head way back, as if you were going to touch your head to your back (be gentle with this muscle group to avoid injury). Focus only on tensing the muscles in your neck. Hold ... and then relax. Since this area is often especially tight, it's good to do the tense-relax cycle twice.
9. Take a few deep breaths and tune in to the weight of your head sinking into whatever surface it is resting on.
10. Tighten your shoulders by raising them up as if you were going to touch your ears. Hold ... and then relax.
11. Tighten the muscles around your shoulder blades by pushing your shoulder blades back as if you were going to touch them together. Hold the tension in your shoulder blades ... and then relax. Since this area is often especially tense, you might repeat the tense-relax sequence twice.
12. Tighten the muscles of your chest by taking in a deep breath. Hold for up to 10 seconds ... and then release slowly. Imagine any excess tension in your chest flowing away with the exhalation.
13. Tighten your stomach muscles by sucking your stomach in. Hold ... and then release. Imagine a wave of relaxation spreading through your abdomen.
14. Tighten your lower back by arching it up. (You should omit this exercise if you have lower back pain.) Hold ... and then relax.
15. Tighten your buttocks by pulling them together. Hold ... and then relax. Imagine the muscles in your hips going loose and limp.
16. Squeeze the muscles in your thighs all the way down to your knees. You will probably have to tighten your hips along with your thighs, since the thigh muscles attach at the pelvis. Hold ... and then relax. Feel your thigh muscles smoothing out and relaxing completely.
17. Tighten your calf muscles by pulling your toes toward you (flex carefully to avoid cramps). Hold ... and then relax.
18. Tighten your feet by curling your toes downward. Hold ... and then relax.
19. Mentally scan your body for any residual tension. If a particular area remains tense, repeat one or two tense-relax cycles for that group of muscles.
20. Now imagine a wave of relaxation slowly spreading throughout your body, starting at your head and gradually penetrating every muscle group all the way down to your toes.

The entire progressive muscle relaxation sequence should take you 20-30 minutes the first time. With practice you may decrease the time needed to 15-20 minutes.