

Simple Steps For Overcoming Test Anxiety

from the American Counseling Association

Even very good students can sometimes suffer from test anxiety. That's the name given to poor performance in testing situations which results from the student seeming to mentally freeze up, despite having really studied the subject matter.

It can happen from early elementary years through college and even in work situations. Most students suffering from severe test anxiety are very aware of it and eager to make it disappear.

A starting point in overcoming test anxiety is accepting that some nervousness is natural. Blame it on our ancestors. In any tension-filled situation – whether it's a snarling bear at the cave entrance or test questions about polynomials – our blood pressure goes up and other physiological and psychological reactions take place. This is good when the threat is a bear but overkill when it's just a snarling math problem.

Try these tips to reduce that level of natural anxiety:

- Prepare, but don't cram, trying to cover the whole subject the night before a test. Instead, take an organized, rational approach and focus on the key points of the subject being tested.
- Anticipate test questions. There may be small surprises, but most tests focus on core concepts and materials. Concentrate your studying and preparation in those main areas and you'll feel more confident about handling the test.
- Be physically prepared. Get a good night's sleep and eat smart. Don't skip breakfast or consume foods high in caffeine, sugar or artificial sweeteners. Fresh fruits and vegetables are often recommended to reduce stress.
- Change your attitude. Tell yourself, repeatedly, that you've studied well, that you're ready to do your best and that you're feeling confident. A positive attitude makes a big difference. Relax at test time, taking several deep breaths and thinking pleasant thoughts. Take that same relaxation break during the test if you feel yourself tensing up.
- Remind yourself it's only a test, not an "all or nothing" situation. Don't worry about the whole test, just focus on the current question. Tell yourself you're doing your best.

Being nervous about a test is natural. Being so anxious that it repeatedly affects performance is a problem that should be dealt with. If simple changes, such as those above, don't seem to help, talk to your school counselor, or consider meeting with a professional counselor outside your school. There are treatments and strategies that can effectively help manage severe test anxiety.

Counseling Corner is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org

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