Keeping Your Cool: Overcoming Test Anxiety

Summary: Provides strategies to help students overcome test anxiety.
Learning Objectives: To name and describe some of the strategies available to overcome test anxiety. To apply those strategies successfully.

It’s time. Your professor is passing out the exams, and now you really start to panic. You think to yourself, “Did I study enough,” “Did I get enough sleep,” “Did I bring a snack?” “Wait....” “Did I even remember to eat breakfast?” All these things rush through your head, and then your exam is laid in front of you.

If panicking before a test has ever happened to you, it sounds like you suffer from test anxiety. Don’t worry. We all do, and it’s obvious why: each of us has a lot on the line when it comes to taking tests.

But wait a minute: Even though you may have a lot on the line, why are you stressing? You know you know this stuff, so you can’t let anxiety interfere with your test results. So how do you get rid of test anxiety? In the next few paragraphs, I’m going to give you a few tips that can help lessen or maybe even get rid of test anxiety. Let’s get started.

Be Confident
The first and probably most important way to lessen or overcome test anxiety is to go in to the test with confidence. So how do you get confidence? **You get confidence by being prepared.**

You have to go into taking a test knowing that you have done all that you could to adequately prepare for this test. That means you organized all your study materials, gave yourself enough time to study, studied hard, got enough sleep, and got enough to eat. You’ve prepared to the best of your ability. You didn’t cram, and you know you’re ready for this. That’s confidence. Now, you’ll sit down to your test with the notion that you’ve already passed it. Confidence through preparation is gold when it comes to overcoming test anxiety.

Try to Relax
We’ve all heard it from someone when we’re stressing out: “just, relax.” Yeah! Good advice, but easier said than done. So how do you relax? Obviously, you have to breathe. **Take in a few deep, deep breaths before you begin your test, exhale, and then get to work.**
And when you come to something that totally throws you for a loop or a problem you just can’t solve, do some more deep breathing... Just make sure you don’t pass out from too much oxygen. Breathing deeply will slow down your heart rate and help calm you down, so you can work through that difficult something or through those difficult “somethings.”

You can also skip the part you’re having problems with and come back to it later—on an essay test, leave a blank or space to come back to, and on an objective test, move on and come back to it later.

**Move a Little**

So you’ve started the exam, and have come to something confusing. You start freaking out again, and breathing deeply doesn’t seem to be working. Now what? This might not work for some people, but something that might help you relax or ease your mind might be to change positions, fidget a little, or chew gum. Just doing something else, something small, could help. (Be careful not to annoy the other students taking the exam, though!)

Once again, this might not work for everyone—it might even do more harm than good—but for some people, it works. Think about it: you’ve been sitting in the same position for a while and your mind has been locked on solving problems for that whole time period. Ease up. Relax. Lean back a little, shift over to the other cheek, chew some gum, quietly tap your foot, or fidget in some way. After all, we’re a generation of multitaskers, so doing one or a few mindless movements while taking a test might help you relax and not be so worried.

**Take a Break or Two**

Following the idea of relaxing and moving a little, a great idea to alleviate some test anxiety is to take a short break or two during a test. You’ve been mentally working hard to answer the questions or solve the problems, so a nice break—or even a few breaks—will help. Take a break in order to relax your brain and move a little. Keep those breaks short—a few seconds or minutes, depending on your overall time for the exam.

After your break, you can dive back into the laborious task of answering questions and solving problems. A test taker needs breaks just like a worker needs breaks. Working, be it manually or mentally, is stressful, so help get rid of some of that stress with some much needed time to yourself. Not too much though. Remember: you don’t have all day to take an exam.

**Recall the Stuff**

Back in the day, Greek and Roman orators (people like Cicero who gave speeches to a particular audience) would first rehearse their speeches in the room where they were to give their speech. These orators would project mnemonic devices onto things in the room in order to better memorize their speech.

A mnemonic device is something—an actual thing or quirky grouping of words—that has some sort of relevance to something that, when thought of or looked at, recalls to mind the something that needs to be remembered. Perhaps the most famous mnemonic device is the one that helps you recall the order of operations in mathematics: “Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally” to recall that first comes parentheses, then exponents, multiplication, division, addition, and lastly subtraction.
With that in mind, to help with test anxiety, while you’re studying for an exam, come up with several mnemonic devices to mentally conjure up during a test. A great idea is to attempt to make them as absurd as possible. The absurdity of the device will really help you visualize what it is you’re attempting to recall. It’s common that words will always project some sort of mental image or concept of the word or group of words, so to help recall information easier and lessen test anxiety, make up some pretty wild mnemonic devices to recall the information you need and in a comedic way. For example, say you want to remember the Greek philosopher Socrates. Think about a sock on top of a cheese crate. There’s nothing like some humorous images to help reduce some of the stress of taking an exam. Make this a common practice in your study routine, and it’ll come to your aid every time.

**Take Your Time**
Taking a test takes time, so use all the time you have. While you don’t want to allow yourself too much time, as time is always limited when it comes to taking exams, you do want to manage your time well during an exam. There’re a couple of things to keep in mind when allowing yourself time to complete a test.

**Read the Directions.** First, make sure that you read the directions carefully. By having a good understanding of what is being asked of you, you’ll be less stressed during answering the questions or solving the problems because you’ll have a clear understanding of what you need to do. If you don’t know what needs to be done or you have a vague understanding of what is being asked of you, you’re going to become frustrated and make mistakes. So, read and reread the instructions if needed, and make sure to ask the instructor if you’re still unclear about the instructions.

A clear understanding of the instructions will give you a better understanding of the questions, thus giving you more time, thus helping you cut down stress. Also, keep in mind that most of the time you can write on the test. Make some notes, underline, circle, anything to help you remember what is being asked or what needs to be done on the exam.

**Don’t Rush.** Second, you definitely don’t want to rush, so make sure you pace yourself so you’ll finish in time. When you get the exam, look through it and see what kinds of questions you need to answer—multiple choice, short answer, essay? How much are each of the questions or sections worth? How long do you have to take the test? Spend a moment or two figuring out which sections are most important to your grade, which will take the longest, and so on, so that you can judge how long to spend in each section.

Also, make sure that you don’t feel the need to rush through and finish your exam just because some students around you are finishing. Work at your own pace. You never know: those people could’ve guessed through the whole test, so don’t feel the need to finish just because others are finishing. You know that you know the stuff on the exam, but you don’t know if they all do. Be prepared to take the whole time.

**Easy Stuff First.** Third and last, you always want to try to work on the easy stuff first. Working the easy problems first will not only boost your confidence, but it will also help you to be able to spend more time on the harder stuff later. Get the easy stuff out of the way at the beginning and get those points
under your belt so you’ll have enough time to work through the difficult stuff later and really cut down on your test anxiety.

Your test is laid on your desk. It’s time to knock it out. You know the stuff that’s going to be asked, and you can recall it at any time; you’re confident and relaxed, and you know how to use your time wisely. Are you still suffering from test anxiety? Absolutely not. You have read all the strategies, and you’re using the strategies that work for you. Now, you’re ready to live up to your expectations as well as your professor’s by acing this exam without being hindered by test anxiety.