

STRATEGIES *for* DIALING DOWN TEST ANXIETY

Before a test or exam, do you regularly:

- Feel like you can't focus, and your brain goes blank?
- Feel dizzy and have a racing heart, shaky hands or difficulty breathing?
- Find yourself thinking things like "I'm going to totally bomb this"?
- Suddenly remember the answers *after* you hand in your test?

If this sounds familiar, you could have test anxiety. Of course, it's totally normal to feel *some* nerves before a test, but too much anxiety can start interfering with your performance. The good news is there are things you can do to help:



Expect to feel some anxiety – It's a sign that your body is making adrenaline to prepare you. Adrenaline gets your blood pumping and puts you on alert, but it's not dangerous. Some anxiety helps you by getting you to prepare and focus on the test.



Relax your body – Stress hormones create physical changes in your body, so you may have tense muscles, nausea or shallow breathing, or feel shaky or jittery. Focusing on these physical changes can increase feelings of anxiety. Taking a minute to settle your body, both before and during the test, can help. Here are some things to try:

- Practise some calm breathing strategies (e.g., square breathing).
- Tense and relax your muscles, starting with your feet and moving up your body (or just drop your shoulders and loosen your jaw).
- Pay attention to your feet on the solid ground and the weight of your body in your chair.



Give yourself a pep talk – Instead of freaking yourself out by imagining the worst, tell yourself more helpful things:

- *A test is just a way to show my learning about this topic.*
- *This feels like a big deal right now, but it's just one test in the whole of my life.*
- *I've done hard things like this before; I can handle it.*
- *I can do this. Focus on one question at a time.*
- *Just breathe.*

TIP: For some guided relaxation strategies and a test anxiety visualization, download the free [Mindshift CBT app](#) (Anxiety Canada) or search online for videos or audio recordings on calm breathing or progressive muscle relaxation.



In addition, here are some practical test-taking tips:

- Practise strategies for answering different types of questions beforehand. For example, see [Multiple-Choice Test Taking Tips and Strategies](#) (Education Corner).
- Show up to class early so you don't feel rushed.
- Read the directions carefully. Decide where you want to spend most of your time on the test.
- In the margins, write anything you are worried about forgetting (e.g., formulas, names).
- Take it one step at a time, one question at a time. Try not to get ahead of yourself.
- Answer the easy questions first to build your confidence. Skip the ones you are less sure about and return to them later.
- Don't worry about how quickly other people are writing or finishing. Just focus on your own test.

Remember:

There is no substitute for knowing the material. Being prepared for the test is the *best* way to reduce test anxiety! But remember to find a healthy balance between being prepared and getting enough sleep and exercise and fuelling your brain and body with healthy food.

A note about test jitters

When you're in cram mode and overwhelmed with deadlines, do you tend to sacrifice sleep and eat more convenient, high-sugar foods or caffeinated drinks to get more done? All that short-term sacrificing can eventually backfire and lead to decreased performance in the long run. Too much caffeine and lack of sleep can mimic the physical symptoms of anxiety, like nausea, jitters and reduced ability to focus or recall information. So, as much as possible, make it a priority to keep your brain rested and fuelled by getting enough sleep and regular physical activity, and eating well-balanced meals. Your test grades will thank you!

More test anxiety resources

Test Anxiety (Crash Course)

YouTube video (8:49) full of helpful tips and strategies for dealing with test anxiety

Test Anxiety meditation (Khan Academy)

Guided meditation on YouTube (9:45) to help decrease anxiety; listen before a test or exam

Test anxiety workbook (Here to Help)

Web page (also available as a downloadable PDF) offers lots of helpful tips, including helpful thinking and preparation and test-taking strategies



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