Test Anxiety

Signs and Symptoms

Test anxiety can look different for every student, but generally it is considered an overwhelming fear or apprehension about testing. There are physical characteristics (e.g. faster heart rate, upset stomach, inability to sleep), mental characteristics (e.g. feelings of unpreparedness, thinking you are unable to do it or can’t do it or having your mind go blank), and emotional characteristics (e.g. panic attacks, loneliness, self-doubt). If any of these sound familiar to you, you might want to consider some of the following strategies.

Preventing Test Anxiety

**Good Study Skills:** Take a look at our “Top Study Skills” handout to learn how to study smarter, not harder. Go to: aae.boisestate.edu/flyers/

**Start Early:** Use our Seven Day Study Guide to get organized and ready for your exam. Try not to cram as this only adds to the pressure of the exam. Go to: aae.boisestate.edu/flyers/

**Attitude:** This can really influence test anxiety. Keep a positive attitude by reframing the exam (i.e. don’t catastrophize, it’s not the end of the world if you don’t get 100%), detaching (i.e. stop worrying, accept that you’ve done your best), and giving yourself positive affirmations (i.e. saying or thinking something like “I’ll do well on this test”).

**Relax:** It may surprise you how much of a factor the physiological stress response plays in test anxiety. When you get stressed, hormonal changes occur in your brain that negatively impact your ability to remember material, problem solve, and think rationally. Use relaxation techniques (see back for examples) before you study and before taking your test to reduce your stress response.

Managing Test Anxiety on Test Day

**Have a plan:** Plan a relaxing and enjoyable day before and after the test. Expect the initial panic at the beginning of the test, take a deep breath and let it pass. Employing a relaxation technique for 2-3 minutes when the test is handed to you before starting can be very helpful. (See back for examples)

**Answer easy questions first:** Don’t let yourself get overwhelmed with the questions you don’t know—simply pass them over and focus on the ones you do. This will help you to gain confidence and momentum, which will help you on the questions you don’t know as well.

**Relax:** If you look at a question and you draw a blank, turn the test over and use one of your relaxation techniques. When you feel calm again, turn the test over and go to the next question. Stress really hurts your ability to successfully recall information, so it’s better to take time to calm down than to continue moving forward when you’re anxious.

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Relaxation Techniques

Decreasing your stress response can be fundamental in helping reduce test anxiety. Luckily our brains are fairly trainable, it just requires time, commitment, and consistency to do so. Select one of the techniques below and commit to practicing it for 15 minutes a day for at least 10 days. We also recommend finding webpages or videos with detailed instructions for whichever technique you select.

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Find a comfortable place to sit or lie down. Beginning with your forehead and moving down your body, begin to tense and then relax the muscles throughout your body. Once you’ve reached your toes, travel back up to your forehead, isolating each muscle group individually. This helps to bring greater awareness to your body’s reaction to stress, and teaches you how to control that reaction.

**Imagery/Visualization:** Close your eyes and imagine being in a place that is calming, restful, and peaceful. It could be somewhere you’ve been before or a new place created by your imagination. Utilize all of your senses to bring this scene alive—think about the sights, smells, sounds, and feelings. If stressful thoughts enter your mind, gently push them aside by focusing on the details of your scene. With this technique, you can train yourself to relax within 15 minutes, and eventually with practice you could imagine your scene for 2-3 minutes before an exam and get the same effect.

**Autogenics** This technique can help you to have more control over your body’s reaction to stress. Sit down and silently repeat relaxing phrases that tell your body to relax. For example, you begin with your right hand and say to yourself “my right hand feels warm and heavy.” As you say this, you picture your hand getting warm and heavy—repeat as many times as needed. Once your hand feels warm and heavy, you will move onto the next part of your body, then the next, and so on, and so forth, until your entire body is relaxed.

**Meditation** Find a quiet, comfortable place that is calm, peaceful, and free from distractions. Focus your attention on a word (ex. relax, peace), phrase (ex. “I am relaxed”), sound (clock), thought, feeling, or your breath. When thoughts begin to enter your mind, gently push them aside by bringing your focus back to your selection. This will help teach you how to disregard negative or stressful thoughts, which can cause anxiety.

Are You Having Any of These Symptoms?

- Low Self-Esteem
- Self-Doubt
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Panic Attacks
- Incessant Worry About Tests
- Fear of More Anxiety
- Feelings of Failure, Loneliness and Hopelessness

If any of these sound familiar to you, we strongly encourage you to see a counselor. Counselors can work with you to develop individualized relaxation techniques and can help you work through some of these feelings.

Contact Boise State’s Counseling Services at 426-1459 or healthservices.boisestate.edu/services/counseling/

For more information, check out our study skills workshops at aae.boisestate.edu/workshops/