

How to Tell if You Have Test Anxiety

It's normal to feel a little nervous before an important test. But if you chronically have uncomfortable symptoms before a test, then you might have test anxiety. Test anxiety affects many people of all ages and intelligence, and its symptoms are rooted in your biological "fight or flight" response. For whatever reason, your mind likely perceives an upcoming exam as a threat, and then initiates a cascade of hormones that prepare the body for quick action in the face of this threat.

To see if you have test anxiety, look over the following checklist and make a note of which ones ring true for you:

- Worrying about the test distracts me from studying.
- I can't sleep well when a big test is coming up.
- I don't ever feel ready for a test, even if I study a lot.
- I can't relax physically before a test.
- I "freeze" when taking tests: I can't think and forget things I already know.
- My stomach becomes upset before important tests.
- I have negative thoughts while taking tests.
- My muscles become very tense when I take a test.
- I often have panicky feelings when I have to take a test.

If you checked several or more of these items, you likely have test anxiety that exceeds the normal nervousness associated with test taking. But you don't have to suffer from test anxiety forever. These three ideas will help you cope: 1) embrace the anxiety (rather than fighting against it) by deciding to use it to your advantage; 2) try to work on underlying psychological issues that may be contributing to the anxiety; and 3) set up a study plan for the next test so that you feel better prepared.

Symptoms

Let's say that you have a big exam coming up. Think about the test date in your mind - picture yourself in front of those questions at the testing center. How do you feel? Are you excited, ready to ace the exam and move into the next chapter of your career? Or do you feel an impending sense of dread, with your stomach tied in knots, anxious for the test to be over so you can relax?

If you fall into the latter group, you're not alone. Test anxiety affects many people of all ages and intelligence, and its symptoms are rooted in your biological "fight or flight" response. For whatever reason, your mind likely perceives an upcoming exam as a threat and then initiates a cascade of hormones that prepare the body for quick action in the face of this threat. But with a little training, you can learn to harness the "fight or flight" symptoms to your advantage.

Let's look at the symptoms of test anxiety:

Increased heart rate. This is one of the first symptoms to appear. Even thinking about the test may cause your pulse to quicken involuntarily. For some people this is uncomfortable because they don't feel in control of themselves, and they fear that this lack of control will affect their test performance. But an increased heart rate is actually a good thing in some ways because it gets blood to your brain and helps you think quickly.

Fast, shallow breathing. Another symptom of the "fight or flight" response, fast and shallow breathing, is something you will need to counteract, because your brain needs oxygen to concentrate. Try to take several deep breaths periodically, and make a point of inhaling and exhaling as long as possible.

Dry mouth. The adrenaline that causes you to feel jittery before a test will also dry out your mouth. Keep a bottle of water handy and take sips as needed.

Nausea and other gastrointestinal issues. Since childhood, nervousness of any kind affects our digestive system. If you have test anxiety, you may feel nausea, have stomach cramps, or experience diarrhea. Before an exam, try to avoid excessive amounts of caffeine, and make sure to eat light, healthy meals like toast and fruit or a bowl of cereal. Stay away from fatty or heavy meals, but don't try to test on an empty stomach, either.

When Anxiety Upsets Your Stomach

For people who suffer from test anxiety, what begins as butterflies-in-the-stomach often evolves into an uncomfortable and disturbing array of digestive symptoms including nausea, gas, diarrhea, bloating, and stomach pain. If test anxiety causes you to spend more time running toward the bathroom than getting ready for the test, here's what you need to know:

Stay away from alcohol. At first, a glass or two of wine or some other type of alcohol may seem like a good idea. As a depressant, alcohol will momentarily calm your nerves. But it can also aggravate your digestive process and cause you to feel less "balanced" once its effect wears off.

Avoid excess caffeine. If you need a morning cup of coffee to get going, don't worry - one small cup of coffee won't send you over the edge. However, too much caffeine can interfere with your concentration (making you more jittery) and send your digestive symptoms into overdrive. If you have a history of test anxiety, the morning of the test is not the time to load up on your favorite caffeinated drink.

Consider an antacid. A nervous stomach produces too much acid, causing that "sour stomach" feeling. An over-the-counter antacid may relieve the discomfort, and may also help to reduce gas and bloating. Make sure to check with your physician before taking antacids regularly, especially if you take other prescription medications. Antacids can interact with certain vitamins and prescription drugs.

Brew some tea. Herbal tea, that is. Herbs like peppermint, chamomile, ginger, and licorice have been shown to reduce indigestion and have a calming effect. While the tea itself can be helpful, you will find the most benefit if you adopt your own anti-anxiety tea-drinking ritual. As the tea brews, turn your mind toward positive thoughts about the test. Picture yourself taking the test calmly and successfully. Perhaps you might want to sit down with your tea in a favorite chair and read a good book or do some other quiet activity that you enjoy. You may find that this tea-drinking ritual becomes a regular way to unwind and let go of stress.

Procrastination

Do you tend to put things off until the last minute? Are you more likely to pull an all-nighter than you are to spend a couple of hours studying at the library every day? If so, it should be no surprise that you're reading articles about how to manage test anxiety. Procrastinators have more trouble with severe test anxiety than people who study regularly over time.

Here's the hard truth - to shake test anxiety, you need to stop procrastinating now. Here are some tips:

Set a timer. One of the best ways to beat procrastination is to head into your kitchen or use your cell phone and set a timer for 15 minutes. Then go! Make yourself study until the timer goes off, with no other activities allowed. It's only 15 minutes - we all can do anything for that long, right?

Use a calendar. Pull out your day planner or cell phone calendar and make a schedule for yourself. If you have several weeks before the exam, plan to study for a reasonable timeframe every weekday. Then keep that appointment as you would an important meeting at work or with the doctor.

Start the day with a list. Have you ever climbed into bed at night, wondering where the day went when so many tasks remained undone? Right before bed is the perfect time to make a list of what you need to do the next day. Consult your calendar, especially if you have been using it to plan study times. Then put the list in a place where you'll see it. When you wake up in the morning, you'll know exactly what needs to be done.

Insomnia

Is test anxiety keeping you up at night? Insomnia is a common symptom of test anxiety that can be particularly disturbing. Adequate rest is essential to studying and good test performance, and lack of sleep interferes with concentration and memory.

If test anxiety is getting in the way of a good night's rest, try these tips:

Establish a relaxing bedtime routine. If you have young children, then you know the importance of a bedtime routine - little ones often wind down better after a predictable sequence of relaxing events like a bath, reading a good story, and a nighttime prayer and/or snuggle time with their parents. While we don't often recognize it, as adults we can still benefit from a relaxing routine before bed. Try a warm shower, a bubble bath, a nice mug of herbal tea, a good book, or quiet conversation with your spouse.

Make the bedroom a study-free zone. While it's a good idea to review your study notes before bed, you should probably do so in the living room or office. Studying in bed will make it more difficult for your brain to switch into "sleep mode" once you turn out the lights.

Keep a notepad on your nightstand. Let's face it - we often remember a thousand things to do once our heads hit the pillow. When this happens, turn the light back on and write everything out on a notepad that you keep near the bed. Decide to confront that list in the morning, and then turn off the lights again.

Practice deep breathing. In our fast-paced Western culture, we've forgotten the value of deep, focused breathing. When you inhale deeply, your stomach should rise slightly. If your chest rises instead of your stomach, you need to breathe more deeply from your diaphragm. Inhale as you slowly count to five, and exhale for the same amount of time. As you exhale, imagine all the stress melting into the floor. Do this several times.