

Is it possible to overcome test anxiety?

Answer From Craig N. Sawchuk, Ph.D., L.P.

Several strategies can reduce test anxiety and increase your performance on test day.

A little nervousness before a test is normal and can help sharpen your mind and focus your attention. But with test anxiety, feelings of worry and self-doubt can interfere with your test-taking performance and make you miserable. Test anxiety can affect anyone, whether you're a primary or secondary school student, a college student, or an employee who has to take tests for career advancement or certification.

Here are some strategies that may help reduce your test anxiety:

- **Learn how to study efficiently.** Your school may offer study-skills classes or other resources that can help you learn study techniques and test-taking strategies. You'll feel more relaxed if you systematically study and practice the material that will be on a test.
- **Study early and in similar places.** It's much better to study a little bit over time than cramming your studying all at once. Also, spending your time studying in the same or similar places that you take your test can help you recall the information you need at test time.
- **Establish a consistent pretest routine.** Learn what works for you, and follow the same steps each time you get ready to take a test. This will ease your stress level and help ensure that you're well-prepared.
- **Talk to your teacher.** Make sure you understand what's going to be on each test and know how to prepare. In addition, let your teacher know that you feel anxious when you take tests. He or she may have suggestions to help you succeed.
- **Learn relaxation techniques.** To help you stay calm and confident right before and during the test, perform relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, relaxing your muscles one at a time, or closing your eyes and imagining a positive outcome.
- **Don't forget to eat and drink.** Your brain needs fuel to function. Eat the day of the test and drink plenty of water. Avoid sugary drinks such as soda pop, which can cause your blood sugar to peak and then drop, or caffeinated beverages such as energy drinks or coffee, which can increase anxiety.
- **Get some exercise.** Regular aerobic exercise, and exercising on exam day, can release tension.
- **Get plenty of sleep.** Sleep is directly related to academic performance. Preteens and teenagers especially need to get regular, solid sleep. But adults need a good night's sleep, too, for optimal work performance.
- **Don't ignore a learning disability.** Test anxiety may improve by addressing an underlying condition that interferes with the ability to learn, focus or concentrate — for example, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or dyslexia. In many cases, a student diagnosed with a learning disability is entitled to assistance with test taking, such as extra time to complete a test, testing in a less distracting room or having questions read aloud.
- **See a professional counselor, if necessary.** Talk therapy (psychotherapy) with a psychologist or other mental health professional can help you work through feelings, thoughts and behaviors that cause or worsen anxiety. Ask if your school has counseling services or ask if your employer offers counseling through an employee assistance program.