

Test Anxiety

As a college student, testing can be a stressful experience. All sorts of pressures, including fears of failure, poor grades, and disappointing oneself or others, can make it easy to feel nervous and overwhelmed. Strategies aimed at reducing these feelings of stress and anxiety may help to promote better test-taking and overall wellness.

What is test anxiety?

Feelings of nervousness before an exam is normal; however, if you experience a combination of physical and emotional symptoms that negatively impact your ability to perform well, you may be experiencing test anxiety. Test anxiety is a form of situational anxiety, meaning that a person may experience anxiety when testing, but may not necessarily experience generalized anxiety or anxiety in other settings.

Symptoms of Test Anxiety

- **Physical.** Physical symptoms may include increased breathing, increased heart rate, sweateness, upset stomach, headaches, dizziness, and shakiness.
- **Emotional.** Emotional symptoms can include feelings of stress, fear, despair, frustration, and helplessness.
- **Behavioral and cognitive.** Behavioral (actions) and cognitive (brain processing) symptoms include racing thoughts, negative thinking, rumination (being unable to stop thinking about something; usually something negative), difficulty concentrating, difficulty recalling information, and procrastination.

Causes of Test Anxiety

- **Pressure.** If getting a poor grade on a test will mean that you won't pass a course or won't be able to continue in your academic program, the pressure could increase test anxiety.
- **Lack of preparation.** Cramming at the last minute or not preparing fully can increase test anxiety. If you feel unprepared going into a test, you are likely to feel more nervous.
- **Fear of failure.** Being afraid of failure is a complex cause of test anxiety. Although the desire for a passing grade can be a good motivator, if your personal self-worth or value is dependent on your grades, failure may feel very threatening. If this is the case for you, working on ways to internally validate your self-worth (recognizing the good things about yourself without having the need for an external source to tell you) could be helpful. Counseling can also assist with this.
- **Difficult testing history.** Past experiences with diffi-

culties or anxiety when testing can increase anxiety.

Try to stay focused on the present moment and make an effort to stop your mind from ruminating on the past. Try picturing a bright red stop sign in your head each time a thought pops up related to past negative testing experiences. Then refocus on something more positive.

- **Perfectionism.** Perfectionism means having very high standards and expectations for oneself. Those who are perfectionistic tend to be very self-critical and experience higher rates of test anxiety. Working to set more realistic self-expectations and finding healthy ways to respond to the experience of making mistakes could be helpful.



Reducing Test Anxiety

- **Preparation.** Preparing well for an exam can be a great way to combat test anxiety. Develop an organized study plan, make use of effective study skills, and start the process of studying early. Before the test, remind yourself of how well you have prepared. Cramming (studying intensely, and often frantically, right before an exam) and reviewing your notes last minute can increase test anxiety.
- **Practice self-care.** Taking care of your mind and body is essential to your ability to manage anxiety (and will also help to promote your test-taking skills). Prioritize getting good sleep, eating healthy, moving your body, and engaging in healthy activities that help you to reduce stress.
- **Monitor Caffeine.** Caffeine can increase feelings of anxiety. If you struggle with test anxiety, avoid drinking excessive caffeine before an exam.

- **Nourish your body and brain.** Prior to the exam, ensure that you are well-hydrated and have eaten something that will give you energy and keep you from feeling hungry. A healthy snack or light meal can help promote cognitive ability.
- **Relax in the moment.** When you start to feel nervous prior to a test, practice a relaxation technique to calm your body and mind. Deep breathing (slowly breathing in for a count of ten and out for a count of ten) or progressive muscle relaxation are both techniques that could be used when sitting in a classroom prior to starting an exam. Lightly stretching or massaging tension from your neck, shoulders, or hands may also help to promote relaxation. Those who find visuals helpful may like to prepare some calming pictures (such as a beach scene or forest) or positive quotes to look at prior to the exam.
- **Positive self-talk.** Negative self-talk (or negative thoughts that run through our minds) can be a key contributor to test anxiety. Pay attention and catch yourself when you are experiencing negative self-talk. Replace the negative thoughts with more constructive, positive thoughts. For example, if you think, “I’m going to fail this test again, just like I did last time.”, consider replacing the thought with, “I have studied hard for this exam and am feeling prepared. I know that I have the ability to do well”. If you have a difficult time coming up with positive responses when anxious, consider preparing in advance by writing down a list of positive, constructive thoughts or positive quotes. This way, you can proactively read through your list prior to the exam and help to keep the negative thoughts at bay.
- **Reward yourself.** Regardless of how you felt it went, take a moment after the exam to give yourself some serious credit for your hard work preparing for and sitting through the exam. Rewarding yourself, in the form of self-praise or a healthy activity, can help your brain to remember the experience of testing more positively, helping to disrupt the negative loop of test anxiety.

Accessibility Services

Some students who experience test anxiety benefit from utilizing accessibility services. Accessibility Services assists students with a permanent or temporary documented disability (this includes a diagnosis of anxiety). Accommodations are made on a case-by-case basis and are designed to allow students to participate fully in the program of their choice. If you live with a disability, you are encouraged to consider if Accessibility Services may be able to

Additional Resources

There are many resources available on test anxiety and related topics. Check out the following resources available online.

- “Examiety” (Exam Anxiety) Resource Guide
 - <https://quizlet.com/en-us/content/examiety-resource-guide>
- Tips for Reducing Test Anxiety
 - <https://jedfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/College-Board-x-JED-Tips-for-Reducing-Anxiety.pdf>
- Six Ways to Take Care of Yourself During Exam Time
 - <https://jedfoundation.org/resource/6-ways-to-take-care-of-yourself-during-exam-time/>
- Understanding Academic Stress in College
 - <https://jedfoundation.org/resource/understanding-academic-stress/>
- Tips for Managing Academic Stress in College
 - <https://jedfoundation.org/resource/tips-for-managing-academic-stress/>

help you in reaching your academic goals. Learn more online here: <https://www.anokatech.edu/student-services/accessibility-services/>

Seeking Help & Support

If you experience test anxiety, you are encouraged to reach out for support. As an Anoka Technical College student, a great place to start is with a college counselor. Counseling services are available to students at no charge. See the box title “Counseling Services” for additional details.

For self-help resources, check out the information linked the “Additional Resources” Section.

Counseling Services

Counseling services are available to support Anoka Technical College students. A counselor can talk with you about any concerns or difficulties you are facing, provide support, and help in developing strategies and skills to promote wellness and goal achievement. Counseling services are confidential and free. You are encouraged to reach out for support.

To learn more about counseling services, visit: <https://www.anokatech.edu/student-services/counseling-services/>

To schedule an appointment with a counselor, visit the weblink above or call 763-576-7860.