

## COMBATING TEST ANXIETY FOR TEST TAKING SUCCESS

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**Test anxiety is most commonly caused by or originates from one of the following areas:**

1. Inadequate or ineffective preparation for class/test
2. Difficulty taking certain types of tests
3. Negative, self-defeating attitude and thoughts about abilities
4. Seemingly uncontrollable physical responses to testing situations

Any or all of these factors can contribute to an increase in test anxiety and/or poor test performance. There are varying levels of test anxiety in all people. Some can cope more easily. But some believe that all is lost once they begin experiencing ANY level of anxious feelings or thoughts. It's easy to see how these individuals conclude that successful test taking is out of their reach.

### **THE FACTS ARE:**

- *It is totally normal to feel anxious when you are being tested*
- *A little anxiety is OKAY*
- *It IS possible to feel anxious and still do great on your tests*
- *Successful class performance and test taking IS within your control*

**How could it be that successful class performance and testing IS within your control when you might feel so OUT of control?**

- You have control over your studying and your preparation for class
- You have control over the things you write down for your homework and test answers
- You have control over the thoughts that you allow to roam around in your head
- You have control over the physical reactions you experience during test time

The only things you don't have control over are  
what your instructor is teaching you and how he or she is teaching you.

### **EVERYTHING ELSE IS WITHIN YOUR CONTROL**

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To begin gaining control and performing the way you want to on tests (in other words...having success) it is first important to find out exactly what the problem is. **GET SPECIFIC**. For instance, "I get anxious and do poorly on tests because..."

- A. there is not enough time for me to study and I never feel prepared."
- B. I don't feel comfortable with lab-type tests or essay tests."
- C. I've never been good in math, and I'll always be this way."
- D. as soon as my hands start shaking, I know I'm going to 'lose it' so why even bother trying?"

The problem is usually much more specific than just "I have TEST ANXIETY." By identifying exactly where your anxiety is originating, you can fix the problem and ultimately, reduce your anxiety.

- A. If your anxiety stems from not having enough time to study, your focus must be on class/test preparation, study skills, and time management to manage and reduce anxiety.**

**A FEW IDEAS FOR IMPROVED PREPARATION AND EFFECTIVE STUDY**

1. Warm-up. Go over things you know first, then move on.
2. Schedule time with no distractions. Do you have to prioritize?
3. Cramming creates more anxiety. Planning ahead helps you to gain more control.
  - a) Visit with one of OTC's counselors to receive one-on-one assistance in time management, goal setting, and prioritizing (ICW 219, 417-447-6974).
  - b) Visit the Counseling web page regarding strategies for effective Time Management Tips at: <http://www.otc.edu/counselingservices>
4. Try and keep your regular schedule as much as possible - even the day of the test.
5. Ask yourself: "Do I need more help with my study skills?" If so, GET IT!
  - a) Visit OTC's Tutoring and Learning Center (TLC) in ICE 212 for independent study or guided assistance in study skills.
  - b) Visit the study skills links on the TLC's website at: <http://www.otc.edu/tutoring>.
  - c) Enroll in one of OTC's self-paced courses available through the Academic Achievement Center. Some of the classes offered include TLC 022 (Study Strategies for College), TLC 023 (Math Study Strategies), TLC 032 (Foundations of Mathematics), TLC 041 (Basic English Grammar), and TLC 050 (Vocabulary). See additional TLC courses and their descriptions at: <http://www.otc.edu/tutoring>. Don't forget CAC 120!

**B. If your anxiety stems from difficulty with a specific subject or specific type of test:**

1. If it is a particular subject with which you're having difficulty:
  - a) spend more time with this subject during study periods.
  - b) get extra help through the TLC (tutoring, labs, independent study ideas).
  - c) speak with your instructor in private about better ways to study for this subject.
  - d) hook up with a "study buddy" or study group for support/encouragement/new perspective.
2. If it is a particular test format that causes your anxiety, learning test-taking strategies may be helpful. Again, visit the TLC for guided assistance in this area. You might also try the following ideas.
  - a) **ESSAY TESTS**
    - 1) Bring scratch paper to class (get permission to do so from instructor).
    - 2) Read all questions first. Underline key words (e.g.: explain, discuss, compare) then jot down initial thoughts on scratch paper.
    - 3) Organize your thoughts. Make a simple outline for easiest questions first.
    - 4) Draft your answer (if time) on the scratch paper.
    - 5) Be realistic. Use short simple sentences to make your point. This does not have to be a literary masterpiece.
    - 6) Move on to more difficult questions.

- b) **SHORT ANSWER** (These strategies are excellent for ANY type of test format as well)
- 1) Budget time. Look over all questions. How much time will you need for each one? Are some worth more? Should you spend more time on these/do them first?
  - 2) Do easiest first. Don't dwell on harder ones. If you cannot recall the answer right now, you may as you move through other questions and your memory is triggered. \*
  - 3) Answer each question, even if you don't know the whole answer. Write what you know. More may come to you later as you take the test.
  - 4) Use full time allowed.
- c) **MULTIPLE CHOICE - MATCHING**
- 1) Solve in order given. Earlier questions may help you recall for later ones. \*
  - 2) Formulate your answer in your head BEFORE reading the options.
  - 3) Read each choice carefully. Beware of words like "always" "sometimes" "often" "never."
  - 4) Use all time allowed. Narrow down choices as best you can for those you're not sure.

**\*REMEMBER:**

**We can only recall about one-third of what is in our brain at any one time. At first glance, you may not remember everything. As you move through the material on a test or in your notes, you will begin to recall things as the memory is triggered. It is NORMAL NOT TO RECALL EVERYTHING IMMEDIATELY! That is why it is best to start your studying with the things you feel the most comfortable and then move on.**

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**C. If your anxiety stems from negative, out-of-control thoughts or beliefs about your abilities:**

1. First, become **AWARE** of the thoughts and beliefs that are roaming around in your head.  
Are they getting in your way and keeping you anxious?
  - a. Do you have **THOUGHTS THAT SPIRAL OUT OF CONTROL**? "If I flunk this test, I'll flunk the class, I'll flunk out of school, I'll never get a job...etc."
  - b. Do you have **NEGATIVE, SELF-DEFEATING, 'WORST-CASE-SCENARIO' THOUGHTS**?  
"I could never study enough for this test."  
"I'm just not good in math. I know I'm going to fail this test."  
"This class is totally meaningless. I don't care if I fail."
  - c. Do you **TRULY RECOGNIZE** the negative effect these thoughts have on your **FEELINGS** and **TEST PERFORMANCE**?
2. It is crucial for all of us to get in the habit of changing our "irrational ways of speaking to ourselves" to positive and productive thoughts on a regular basis.  
"If I stick to my schedule, and concentrate, I can do it."  
"I can pass this test."  
"Learning math takes patience. I'll just do my best and give myself time to learn at my own pace."  
"I may not realize why I have to learn this material, but I'm smart enough to learn it anyway."

**Be patient with yourself as you begin countering your negative, irrational and self-defeating thoughts. It took a long time to learn this way of thinking... so it will take some time to learn new ways to think.**

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**D. If your anxiety stems (or gets worse) from what happens to your body physically during testing (e.g.: shaking, nausea, sweating, dizziness, racing heart, black outs), it is critical to learn to calm your body down so that you can calm your mind. It is nearly impossible for a person to think anxiously/go blank when the body is calm and peaceful.**

**1. DEEP, ABDOMINAL BREATHING**

Utilizing deep, abdominal breathing is an effective way to calm both the mind and body and ultimately achieve focus on the matter at hand.

**2. PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION**

Tensing and relaxing muscle groups is a very active and powerful exercise to achieve total-body relaxation.

**3. IMAGERY/VISUALIZATION**

Learning to imagine yourself remaining calm/in control during high anxiety situations is vital to success. Imagery during deep muscle relaxation is an excellent way to get that calm peaceful picture in your mind on a regular basis.

In order for relaxation techniques to be effective, they must be practiced every day. By practicing at the start of tension, before bed, to refresh between study sessions, during imagery exercises, you'll get practice getting yourself into a relaxed state and it will soon become second nature to you. (see the Counseling web pages for more detailed information on breathing and relaxation at: <http://www.otc.edu/counselingservices>).

The following exercises can give you a good start at incorporating deep breathing, relaxation and visualization into your life. We have recorded scripts available to be picked up in the Counseling Office (ICW 219) or you can download the script and exercises from the Counseling Services website. You can also visit the self-help section of most book stores, and pick out relaxation CDs and/or books, which provide relaxation exercises that match your comfort level.

**Remember, in order for ANY relaxation technique to work, it must be practiced daily.**

## **RELAXATION EXERCISES**

### **SHORT BREATHING VISUALIZATION**

"Think about your breathing. Notice the passage of air through your nose, into your lungs, the swelling of your chest. Forget all else; consider only the air and the quiet. As you breathe out, feel the air flow gently over your lips; imagine it moving a feather softly and gently. You are your breathing, forget all else. Concentrate on the breath moving easily in and out. You have nothing to do but breathe, and feel the air refreshing you."

## **TEN-MINUTE GUIDED BREATHING EXERCISE**

"Take a few moments to relax as much as you can totally on your own. Settle back as comfortably as you can. Close your eyes and let your head come forward until it is resting comfortably. Begin by sitting with your arms comfortably at your side, hands in your lap. Let yourself relax to the very best of your ability. Begin to feel that comfortable heaviness that accompanies relaxation. At this time, breathe easily ... freely in and freely out. Try and assume a passive, detached attitude. Concentrate on what is happening and the sensations you feel. When your mind wanders, just gently bring it back to the present.

Now, slowly touch your chin to your chest and then bring it back up; repeat this slowly, three times

Slowly bend your head back to gently stretch the back of your neck and then bring it back; repeat this slowly three times

Slowly bend your head over to your right shoulder and back up (repeat three times)

Slowly bend your head over to your left shoulder and back (repeat three times)

Slowly rotate your head to the right and back (repeat three times)

Slowly rotate your head to the left and back (repeat three times)

Tighten your shoulders by raising them up as if you were going to touch your ears -- hold -- release

Push your shoulder blades back as if you were going to touch them together -- hold -- release

Next are some gentle breathing exercises. Continue to relax as you practice your breathing. Remember to breathe from as low as possible...with your abdominal muscles. Let the motion of breathing be like filling up a glass with water. The glass fills from the bottom to the top. This is how air should fill your lungs...from the bottom to the top. Don't force your breathing; it's not a contest to see how much air you can take in. Just do it in a relaxed, peaceful manner.

Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose. Hold the breath for a bit, filling your lungs up with as much air as you can, not forgetting to fill from the bottom up... and then slowly release the air through your mouth. The key is to breathe slowly and deeply by using your diaphragm to draw air in and out naturally and effortlessly. Feel the comfortable heaviness that accompanies relaxation and deep, cleansing breathing. Continue breathing deeply and slowly as you focus on the following breathing visualization.

As you breathe, imagine that warm, colored air is flowing into your lungs. Choose any color you like, from a single color to a rainbow. With each breath, the warm air fills your body from the tips of your toes to the top of your head. Continue inhaling the colored air until it occupies every part of you, bones and muscles included.

Once you have completely filled yourself with the colored air, I am going to ask that you begin letting go of the colored air with each breath you exhale. Allow a small amount of the warm, colored air to leave your body with each breath you exhale. The level of the air (much like the water in a glass as it is emptied) will begin to drop. It will descend progressively lower, from your head down to your feet.

As you continue to exhale the warm, colored air, watch the level go lower and lower, farther and farther down your body. As you exhale the last of the colored air, the level will drop down to your toes and disappear. Stay quiet for just a moment. Then notice how relaxed and comfortable you feel.

## **ABDOMINAL BREATHING EXERCISE**

1. Note the level of tension you're feeling. Then place one hand on your abdomen right beneath your rib cage.
2. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into the "bottom" of your lungs -- send the air as low down as you can. If you're breathing from your abdomen, your hand should actually rise. Your chest should move only slightly while your abdomen expands.
3. When you've taken in a full breath, pause for a moment and then exhale slowly through your nose or mouth, depending on your preference. Be sure to exhale fully. As you exhale, allow your whole body to just let go (you might visualize your arms and legs going loose and limp like a rag doll).
4. Do several (as many as is comfortable for you in a 2-5 minute time frame) slow, full abdominal breaths. Try to keep your breathing smooth and regular, without gulping in a big breath or letting your breath out all at once. Remember to pause briefly at the "top" of each inhalation. If you start to feel light-headed while practicing abdominal breathing, stop for thirty seconds, and then start up again.
5. Extend the exercise if you wish by doing two or three "sets" of abdominal breaths, remembering to count up to ten for each set (each exhalation counts as one number). Five full minutes of abdominal breathing will have a pronounced effect in reducing anxiety or early symptoms of panic.

## **PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION**

1. To begin, take several deep abdominal breaths (as many as is comfortable for you) exhaling slowly each time. As you exhale, imagine that tension throughout your body begins to flow away.
2. Clench your fists; hold for 7-10 seconds and release for 15-20 seconds. Use these same time intervals for all other muscles groups. When you tighten a particular muscle group, do so vigorously, without straining. When you release the muscle group, do so abruptly. Pay attention to the sudden feeling of heaviness/limpness you feel upon relaxing.
3. Tighten your biceps by drawing both forearms up toward your shoulders and "making a muscle." Hold...and then relax.
4. Tighten your triceps-the muscles on the undersides of your upper arms-by extending your arms out straight and locking your elbows. Hold...and then relax.
5. Tense the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as far as you can. Hold...and then relax. Imagine your forehead muscles becoming smooth and limp as they relax.
6. Tense the muscles around your eyes by clenching your eyelids tightly shut. Hold...and then relax. Imagine sensations of deep relaxation spreading all around the area of your eyes.
7. Tighten your jaws by opening your mouth so widely that you stretch the muscles around the hinges of your jaw. Hold...and then relax. Let your lips part and allow your jaw to hang loose.
8. Tighten the muscles in the back of your neck by pulling your head way back, as if you were going to touch your head to your back. Focus only on tensing the muscles in your neck. Hold...and then relax. Since this area is often especially tight, it's good to do this tense-relax cycle twice.
9. Take a few deep, abdominal breaths and tune in to the weight of your head sinking into whatever surface it is resting.
10. Tighten your shoulders by raising them up as if you were going to touch your ears. Hold...and then relax.
11. Tighten the muscles around your shoulder blades by pushing your shoulder blades back as if you were going to touch them together. Hold...and then relax. Since this area is also often especially tense, repeat this tense-relax sequence.
12. Tighten the muscles of your chest by taking in a deep breath. Hold...and slowly release. Imagine any excess tension in your chest flowing away as you exhale..
13. Tighten your stomach muscles by pulling your stomach in. Hold...and then release. Imagine a wave of relaxation spreading through your abdomen.
14. Tighten your lower back by arching it up. (Omit this exercise if you have lower back pain). Hold...and then relax.
15. Tighten your buttocks by pulling them together. Hold...and then relax.
16. Squeeze the muscles in your thighs by pressing your upper legs together. Hold...and then relax. Feel your thigh muscles smoothing out and relaxing completely.
17. Tighten your calf muscles by pulling your toes toward you. Hold...and then relax.
18. Tighten your feet by curling your toes downward. Hold...and then relax.
19. Mentally scan your body for any residual tension. If a particular area remains tense, repeat one or two tense-relax cycles for that group of muscles.
20. Now imagine a wave of relaxation slowly spreading throughout your body, starting at your head and gradually penetrating every muscle group all the way down to your toes.

## **VISUALIZATION (The Forest)**

You're walking along a path deep in the forest. All around you there are tall trees...pine, fir, redwood, oak...try to see them. The rushing sound of the wind blowing through the treetops is so soothing, allowing you to let go. You can smell the rich dampness of the forest floor, the smell of earth and new seedlings, wildflowers, and dampened leaves. Now you look up through the treetops until you can see a light blue sky. You notice how high the sun is in the sky. As the sun enters the canopy of the treetops, it breaks into rays, which waft their way down, through the trees to the forest floor. You're watching the intricate patterns of light and shadow created as the light filters down through the trees. The forest feels like a great primeval cathedral...filling you with a sense of peace and reverence for all living things.

Off in the distance, you can hear the sound of rushing water echoing through the forest. It gets louder as you approach, and before long, you are at the edge of a mountain stream. You're looking at the stream, noticing how clear and sparkling the water is. Imagine sitting down and making yourself very comfortable. You might sit down on a flat rock up against a tree or you might even decide to lie down on a grassy slope. You can see the mountain stream creating rapids as it moves, rushing around a variety of large and small rocks. These rocks are many shades of brown, gray, and white, and some are covered with moss. You can see the sparkling water rushing over some and around others, making whirlpools and eddies. The rushing sound of the water is so peaceful that you can just let yourself drift...relaxing more and more.

You take in a deep breath of fresh air and breathe out, finding the subtle smells of the forest very refreshing. As you let yourself sink into the soft bed of grass or dampened leaves or fragrant pine needles beneath you, you can let go of any strains or concerns...allowing the sights, sounds, and smells of this beautiful wooded area to fill you with a deep sense of peace.