You may already have some rituals—getting a drink of water just before an exam or using a particular pencil or pen. Just a note of caution—make sure your rituals are not harmful or distracting to yourself or others.

5. Control the fear: The underlying source of test or performance anxiety is the fear of failure. Pay attention to what you are thinking and saying to yourself in anxious situations. You can begin to control this fear or change the expectation by changing your self-talk.

- **Positive self-talk:** Purposefully filling your mind with positive statements about yourself and your abilities can offset or crowd-out the negative self-talk. Even if you don’t believe the positives, say them anyway—“I’m ready... I can do this... Do it!” To determine the most important positive messages for you, write down your 3-4 most common negative thoughts (e.g., “I can’t do this”). Next, write down the opposite for each statement (“I CAN do this”). Repeat the positives to yourself daily for at least two weeks, and again just before and during the test or performance.

- **On-task self-talk:** Counter distractions and help yourself focus on the task, telling yourself what to do—talk yourself through the task step-by-step, and tell yourself you’re succeeding! Keep your mind focused on the present—one thing at a time!

- **Gaining perspective:** Sometimes our negative thoughts focus on potentially drastic consequences of failure. In most cases, these drastic consequences are much more severe than the reality of the situation—this is called catastrophizing. Such catastrophizing only increases anxiety and interferes with performance. It is important to recognize that one mistake does not equal failure and that one bad performance does not mean you’re worthless. Take some time to evaluate the most likely consequences of your performance. If you find that you tend to catastrophize, develop some phrases that are more realistic and repeat them to yourself prior to and during the exam or performance.

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Empowering student learning, inclusion and success through engagement.
Typical Nervousness or Test Anxiety?

Most students experience some nervousness or apprehension before, during, or after an exam. While anxiety can be a powerful motivator, intense anxiety can lead to poor performance and interfere with learning.

During exams, do you...

- feel like you “go blank”?
- become frustrated?
- think “I can’t do this” or “I’m stupid”?
- feel like the room is closing in on you?
- feel your heart racing or have difficulty breathing?
- suddenly “know” the answers after turning in the test?
- score much lower on tests than on homework or papers?

When performing, do you...

- become distracted?
- feel overwhelmed?
- miss important cues from your surroundings?
- “go blank”/forget what you are supposed to do?
- have distracting thoughts of failure or a poor performance?
- perform more poorly than in practice?

Why do you feel anxious?

Anxiety is a natural human response to a threatening situation. Anxiety is a form of the “fight-or-flight” response—the body and mind become aroused and alert to prepare for attack or to escape from a threat. With test and performance anxieties, the primary “threat” is the possibility of failure and loss of esteem. Depending on the intensity, anxiety can interfere with your ability to perform the task at hand (e.g., test score, athletic/artistic performance). If you experience test or performance anxiety, you are not alone—approximately 20% of US college students experience symptoms of test anxiety and most athletes and artists experience performance anxiety at some point in their careers.

Psyched Up or Psyched Out?

In order to perform well in a challenging situation, you must be psychologically and physically alert. You certainly won’t perform well on an exam or in an event if you are nearly asleep! This level of “alertness” is also called arousal. Some degree of arousal is essential for optimal performance. Increasing arousal is the idea behind “psyching up”—and it works—in many cases, psyching up enhances performance. The problem is that when the intensity of arousal gets too high, we often begin to feel nervous and tense and experience anxiety. At this level, anxiety becomes distracting and performance declines—we get “psyched out.” For optimal performance, you need to keep your arousal at an intermediate level—psyched up, but not psyched out! When psyched up, you’ll be able to focus on the task at hand and performance will feel natural.

Some tips for reducing test anxiety

Fortunately, there are several strategies you can use to make test anxiety more manageable:

1. Be healthy: If you are physically and emotionally exhausted, your body and mind are less able to tolerate stress and anxiety. Get adequate rest, eat healthy foods, and take care of your physical health.

2. Be prepared: Nothing can help reduce anxiety like confidence. In fact, if you over-prepare a bit, your responses become more automatic, and your performance will be less affected by anxiety. Preparation for an exam may include improving your study and test-taking skills. Be on time and have all the “tools” you may need for an exam (e.g., #2 pencils, calculator, and pen).

3. Practice the performance: The time limits of an exam, the tied score of a game, or the audience at your performance—all are stimuli that increase your level of arousal and add to your experience of anxiety. If you practice under similar conditions, you’ll become less sensitive to these stimuli.

For an exam, work through a practice exam (or two!) under the same time constraints that will exist when you take the exam (don’t look at your notes, create as many conditions of the actual exam as possible). For an athletic or artistic performance, practice with distractions or with an audience. For conditions that you cannot actually reproduce, create them in your mind—close your eyes and “see” the audience in the seats, give the play-by-play of the last seconds of a tied game. Imagination is a powerful tool—it can help you be less anxious when reality hits!

4. Regulate your arousal level: Some of the most effective ways involve altering your physical responses like breathing and muscle tension.

- Deep breathing: When anxious, our breathing becomes shallow. Breathing deeply and slowly allows the body and mind begin to relax. To learn to breathe deeply, place your hand on your stomach and inhale in a way that makes your abdomen expand. As you exhale, your abdomen should move inward. Practice taking 10-15 slow deep breaths in a row, 2-3 times per day—training your body to breathe deeply and relax. Then, during a stressful situation, focus on taking 2-3 deep breaths, and your body will relax.

- Progressive muscle relaxation: We also tense our muscles when anxious. Practice relaxing your muscles while taking deep breaths. Focus on a specific muscle group (e.g., shoulders) and alternatively tensing and relaxing the muscle. Then, focus on releasing all of the tension in the muscle, repeating “relax” in your mind. Add muscle relaxation to deep breathing in a stressful situation.

- Reduce distractions: Distractions increase arousal. Try to reduce the distractions in your environment, e.g. sit in a back corner of the room, take a sweater so you aren’t distracted by being cold, and change seats if you are distracted by the person sitting next to you.

- Rituals: Rituals are repetitive behaviors that give us a sense of familiarity, help us focus, and reduce anxiety. The basketball player who bounces the ball three times before shooting a free-throw has a ritual.