

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Dealing With Test Anxiety \*

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When you take tests, does your mind seem to race out of control, filled with thoughts of disaster? Do you spend much of your test time worrying whether you will fail? Do you "go blank" even when you should know the answer? Do you consistently feel hurried, inadequate or panicked? If one or more of these conditions exist, you have a high level of **test anxiety**.

Essentially, test anxiety involves excessive **worry** — thoughts or fears of embarrassment, failure and frustration — during test taking. If you have ever "*freaked out*" during a test, you know that heightened **physical arousal** — uneasiness, tension, sweating, pounding heart and nervousness — is also a part of test anxiety. This combination — worry plus arousal — tends to distract students and keeps them from doing well on tests.

Of these, worry seems to be the greater culprit. Almost everyone gets nervous when taking tests, so heightened arousal is not limited to those with high test anxiety. In fact, during actual tests, people with high test anxiety show no more arousal on physical measures than those with low test anxiety. However, test-anxious students seem to pay more attention to the distracting physical sensations. During the test, the high-anxiety student is probably thinking something like this:

*"I'm not sure about any of these answers. I must be too stupid. I can't do this. I'll never pass. Look at how much time has gone by already. What if I flunk? What if I blow this test so bad that I can't even pass the course? I might have to drop out of school. What will my friends think? What will my parents say?"*

These worries directly interfere with thinking about the test. As long as you are worrying — your mind is filled with negative thoughts — keeping you from thinking about the test questions and their answers. Some test-anxious students spend as much time worrying as they do working on the test. This is probably why they complain about going blank or forgetting known facts. With a storm of doubts, fears and worries raging inside, who can think clearly?

How can you deal with this test anxiety? You may not like the answer. Psychologists have found that the most direct antidote for test anxiety is **hard work**. Many test-anxious students simply study too little or too late for exams. To add to this, the more students expect to fail, the less they are likely to study. Thus one solution is to **overprepare** — try to study *each* assignment as if you will get a test on it the next day. When the "*big day*" actually comes, you will be ready. Psychological studies repeatedly show that students who are well prepared score higher, worry less and are less likely to become overly aroused.

To help you relax, studies show that **support from others** is helpful. If you have problems with test anxiety, it might be helpful to discuss these problems with your teacher. Preparing for tests with a supportive classmate can also help.

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**Beside hard work and preparation,  
coping statements can also reduce test anxiety.**

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If none of this works, there is still something else you can try. Test anxiety can often be reduced by carefully rehearsing how you will cope with upsetting events. Imagine yourself going blank, running out of time or feeling panicked. Then calmly plan how you would deal with each situation — keeping your

attention on the task, reading each question carefully, determining what is being asked, going over possible alternatives and so on. As you rehearse, remember that some anxiety during tests is normal. Your goal is to manage anxiety — not to prevent it completely.

The best solution for high anxiety can be to **change your self-defeating thinking patterns**. Test-anxious students are often helped by listing the kinds of distracting thoughts they have during exams. Then they can learn to counter each worry with a **coping statement** — a calm and rational reply to the worry. For example, a student may think, *"I'm going to fail the test, and all my friends will think I am stupid."* To cope with that upsetting thought, the student could say, *"If I prepare well and control my worries, I will probably pass the test. Even if I don't, it won't be the end of the world. My friends will still like me, and I can try to improve on the next test."*

To counter test worries, watch out for **irrational beliefs** that lead to distracting thoughts. For example, it is irrational to think that you should know absolutely everything, that you should be 100% at ease or that you must be perfect. Since nobody can ever reach any of these goals — these beliefs essentially insure failure and the negative thoughts that follow. Students who cope well with tests merely try to do the best they can, even under trying circumstances. With practice, you can learn to do the same.

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\* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West Publishing, 1986, pages 351-352.