

**FAST FACTS****Fighting  
Test Anxiety**

*Do you ever find yourself “freezing up” during exams? Do you sometimes have trouble sleeping the night before an exam? Do you question your mastery of course material even after you’ve completed all the assigned homework and have studied as much as is reasonably possible? If so, you may be experiencing a form of test anxiety.*

You apprehensively climb the steps to a row about halfway up the auditorium and sit down at a desk. You position your pencils, eraser and calculator, knowing that you’ve studied hard for this test. You want to do well. You nervously watch the second hand on the clock as the last few students filter into the front rows during the final two minutes before the exam.

Finally, the TA passes out the exam. You sign your name and look at the first problem. That one’s easy enough. The next one seems a bit more difficult, though. Turn the page to problem number three. Well, that one should look familiar enough; you’ve done a thousand problems like it for homework . . . though for some crazy reason . . . you can’t seem to dredge up the formula you need to solve the problem. That’s odd. And what about problem four? How do you go about solving *that* one? *Uh oh.*

You’re suddenly hit with the horrifying realization that you can’t do *any* of these problems. Shaken, you flip erratically through the pages. Your heart begins to beat wildly and your stomach feels sick. All the information you packed so carefully into your brain over the past weeks now seems impossible to recall. You glance at your watch—30 minutes gone already! You’ve got to concentrate. But you are continually distracted by the muffled sounds of bags closing and students confidently descending the steps, handing in what you are sure are perfectly completed exams. *How can they be finished so fast?* you wonder frantically. *I barely finished the first page!*

An agonizing hour later, it’s time to turn in the exam. You’ve managed to answer some of the questions, but there’s still a lot of embarrassing white space left. You didn’t even get to the problems on the last two pages. To add insult to injury, as you head for the door, the formula you needed to solve the second problem suddenly pops into your head, as clear as if it were written on the blackboard in front of you. How could you have forgotten something so *simple?*

**The Causes of Test Anxiety**

Do you ever find yourself “freezing up” during exams in this way? Do you sometimes have trouble sleeping the night before an exam? Do you question your mastery of course material even after you’ve completed all the assigned homework and have studied as much as is reasonably possible? If so, you may be experiencing a form of *test anxiety*.



## Fighting Test Anxiety

Text anxiety is a result of worry and stress. It manifests itself physically through episodes of sweating, nausea or “butterflies” in your stomach, and psychologically through confusion, mental blocks and panic attacks. Whatever the form, test anxiety most often arises for one of three reasons:

### **Poor study skills**

A lack of efficient study skills can greatly contribute to exam stress. Organization and preparation are key weapons in your fight against test anxiety.

### **Prior negative experiences**

Let’s say you put forth a great effort preparing for a chemistry exam. But when exam time came and the test was passed out, to your horror you discovered that the questions were gleaned from material you didn’t review. As a result, you bombed the test. A bad experience like this may undermine your confidence and negatively affect your performance the next time you take a test.

### **Fear of the unknown**

Not knowing what to expect on an exam is a fundamental source of anxiety. Things go much more smoothly when you have some idea of what to prepare for.

## **Controlling Test Anxiety**

Fortunately, test anxiety is a well-recognized problem that can be effectively controlled with proven techniques.

### **Plan your attack**

You will feel most anxious when you are least prepared. For that reason, it’s important that you develop good study habits. Set up times to work on your homework on a regular basis;

plan to cover a specific amount of homework during each work session. Schedule your study time so that you are best able to concentrate free from distraction and fatigue. Recognize your individual procrastination habits and learn to overcome them.

If you think you need help developing good study skills, you can seek help in a number of ways. Ask academically successful friends for tips on how they study. Organize study groups with friends in order to force yourself to be conscientious in your work. Hunt Library and the Carnegie Mellon Bookstore both contain informative books on developing good study skills. You might also consider contacting a study skills tutor through the walk-in tutoring service of Student Affairs.

### **Make known the unknown**

Often, finding out additional bits of information about an exam can greatly reduce the anxiety you feel. Inquire beforehand about the type of questions that will be on the exam, how many points each question will be worth, how much time will be allotted and so on.

### **Give yourself a pep talk**

Consciously try to stop yourself from thinking negative thoughts. Turn bleak messages into encouraging ones. For instance, before the exam begins, instead of thinking, “Boy, I’ll be lucky to get a ‘D’ out of this,” give yourself positive encouragement: “I’ve attended class, I’ve read all the material, I’ve studied as much as I could—I’m as prepared as I can be.” Say this out loud to help drive the thought home. Even if you don’t believe yourself at first, repeatedly encouraging yourself this way will

ultimately help you gain confidence.

### **Visualize success**

Visualization is a powerful tool for success. Pro basketball players imagine the ball swishing the net before they shoot; baseball players imagine the feel of the bat smacking the ball. Instead of imagining yourself failing the test and feeling miserable afterward, turn that thought around. Imagine yourself turning over the first page and finding that each problem was exactly like a homework problem that you worked out. You work through the questions confidently, answering each one; turn the exam in; and, finally, receive word of your good grade. The key to effective visualization is *detail*. Be specific in imagining the good things that are going to happen.

### **Focus on detail**

Whenever you feel an inordinate amount of anxiety—say, as an exam is being passed out—you can help calm yourself by focusing your attention on some small detail. Study the face of your watch or concentrate on the noise of a fan. Filling your attention so completely leaves no room for anxious thoughts.

### **Concentrate on breathing**

Deep-breathing exercises are a well-known technique for combating nervousness and anxiety. Whenever you feel your heart racing or your forehead sweating, force yourself to *slow down* and take deep, calm breaths. Concentrate on the air flowing in and out of your nose and lungs. Do this for four or five minutes and you’ll find yourself feeling much more relaxed.

## Fighting Test Anxiety

### **Imagine the worst**

Before the exam begins, imagine the worst that can happen if things go wrong. Will you get a “B,” a “C”? Will you flunk the exam? If so, will you immediately get kicked out of school, or will you have a chance to redeem yourself? Usually our fears are far more disturbing than reality. Explore your fears to the point of absurdity and they’ll seem far less frightening.

### **Don’t study the last minute before the exam**

You’ll find that studying right up until the last minute hurts more than it helps. In the last few minutes before an exam, you can’t learn anything new and you’ll mix up what’s already in your long-term memory. Frantically searching for that one last bit of information you think you need only results in more anxiety and confusion. Relax—you’ve studied as best you can. Give yourself only calming, positive messages before the exam.

### **Don’t go into the classroom until the exam is about to begin**

Often, while you’re waiting you’ll overhear other students guessing about what might be covered. Although it’s a good study strategy to brainstorm with others in the days before the test, at this point listening to all these conjectures may only undermine your confidence. Trust yourself—you’ve planned your attack and it’s a good one, no matter how much it differs from others’.

### **Take good care of yourself**

Inadequate sleep, poor eating habits and insufficient exercise are destructive to your mind as well as to your body. Stay away from foods high in sugar and fat content; these make you sluggish. Exercise, even if

only by taking short walks. Doing so helps energize your mind and body.

### **Expect setbacks**

You will always experience setbacks whenever you try to change your behavior. Don’t let them get the best of you. If you have a bad experience, your efforts haven’t all been in vain. Simply try again with a firm resolution to make things better; if you do, ultimately they *will* be better.