

Preparing for Exams...and Avoiding Test Anxiety

Mid-year tests are here... and with them, come stress and anxiety. When we get stressed, the sympathetic branch of our automatic nervous system gets switched on. Initially this is a cool thing – because when this system is activated the neurochemical adrenaline is released. Adrenaline gets us going and helps us to prepare effectively for stressful situations by ensuring we are alert and focused. The problem happens when periods of stress go on for a long time – like they tend to do during test season. When this happens, the sympathetic nervous system stays on and pours adrenaline into our body keeping us on high alert. This causes us to worry more, lose sleep, become forgetful, and experience common anxiety symptoms. For some people, these symptoms can become so intense that it becomes difficult and sometimes even impossible to focus on the test. This interferes with their ability to then perform on the test.

Test anxiety can quickly become a vicious cycle. After experiencing anxiety during just one test or exam, you might become fearful about it happening again that you actually become more nervous during the next one, and the next one, and the next...

The good news is that it's never too late to set up some good study habits to interrupt or prevent that cycle. So, what can you do to minimise your test anxiety?

Start with the structure. Find a quiet place to study without any distractions. Set up your study space by making sure it's not cluttered and has everything you might need. Stick to a routine as much as possible.

Avoid procrastination regrets by being prepared. That means not leaving things to the night before. Everyone has been guilty of procrastination at some time or another. We're more likely to put off studying when it seems like one huge thing that we need to do rather than seeing it as a series of tasks. If you find yourself in this situation, break down your material and analyse what needs to be done in smaller chunks.

Manage your time. As a follow on to the above, manage your time by creating a timetable. This timetable should include everything you have going on including other commitments. Aim to be as practical and realistic as possible. Make sure you know how much content you need to cover and plan accordingly. Be sure to include time to relax in this timetable as well!

Learn your learning style. Everyone studies in different ways and what works for your friend might not work for you. Maybe you learn best in a group where you can talk through material and quiz each other. Maybe you get anxious studying with other people and prefer to review material on your own. Some people learn by talking through their content out loud, others need to be in silence. There are endless ways to study. Try and figure out which techniques are most effective for you and stick with them so you can use your time efficiently.

During your studying period, find ways to maintain a positive attitude and attend to your wellbeing. Keep fit and do some exercise. Eat well and choose healthy options. Take some planned time away from studying rather than feeling like you're avoiding work. Recognise and be pleased with your achievements as you revise. Reward yourself with an occasional treat.

Confront the negative thoughts. If you start to feel anxious and notice defeating thoughts like "I'm not good enough", "I can't do it" or "I know I'm going to fail anyway", push these thoughts away and replace them with positive thoughts. Use self-talk and big yourself up. Deciding on some affirmations or a mantra and repeating this to yourself when you notice negative thoughts creeping in can really help manage your stress.

Get enough sleep. The classic tip for managing your wellbeing that's even more important during tests and exams to help your concentration and memory.

Cut the energy drinks, caffeine, and junk food. They might provide you with a sudden burst of energy but this falls away very quickly and can leave you feeling even more worn out. And can actually increase your nerves. Drink lots of water instead.

Have a clear idea of how you are going to use the time immediately before each test. Try some mindfulness activities to keep yourself calm and keep things in perspective. Maybe think about something that you've achieved that means a lot to you. It will help you acknowledge that the test or exam is not the only important thing and that it is well within your capabilities. You've achieved before, you can do it again!

If you start to feel anxious during the exam, take deep breaths. In through your nose, out through your mouth. Work through each question one at a time taking a deep breath in between each one as you need. Give your lungs plenty of oxygen to help you focus and maintain a sense of calm.

Avoid the perfectionist trap. Don't expect to be perfect. We all make mistakes, and that's okay. While our brains are pretty incredible things, we're not robots that can be programmed. Knowing that you've done your best and worked hard is what matters, not perfection.

Take note of the above to help get you through these next couple of weeks. Remember, there's a holiday just on the other side – put in the work now and make that break even more well-deserved.

Good luck!