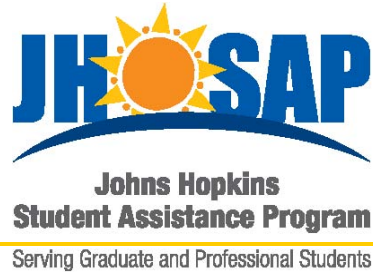


Test Taking and Test Anxiety: How to Take Control



Many students experience some nervousness or apprehension during an exam. This kind of anxiety can be a powerful motivator; research shows that a little anxiety can actually increase energy and sharpen thinking. However, some students experience test-related anxiety to such a degree that it can lead to poor performance and interfere with their learning. If you experience test or performance anxiety, you are not alone – approximately 20% of U.S. college students experience symptoms of test anxiety.

What does test anxiety feel like?

Test anxiety can affect an individual physically, emotionally, behaviorally and cognitively. One or more of the following may be experienced:

- Physical – headaches, nausea or diarrhea, excessive sweating, shortness or breath, light-headedness or fainting, rapid heart beat, and/or dry mouth.
- Emotional – extreme feelings of fear, disappointment, anger, depression, uncontrollable crying or laughing, feelings of helplessness.
- Behavioral – fidgeting, pacing, substance abuse, avoidance.
- Cognitive – racing thoughts, ‘going blank’, difficulty concentrating, negative self-talk, feelings of dread, comparing yourself to others, difficulty organizing your thoughts.

Taking control of test anxiety

A number of strategies can be used before, during and after an exam to decrease test anxiety:

Before the exam

- Be prepared – don’t cram! Begin studying in small chunks of time. This will help you learn and retain the material more efficiently.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle. Adequate rest, exercise, nutrition, and social interaction are necessary components of any study schedule.
- Think positively: “I will pass this exam because I’ve studied and I know my stuff.” Repeating positive self-statements to yourself will help “reprogram” your mind for success instead of failure.
- Approach the exam with confidence and view it as an opportunity to demonstrate how much you have learned.
- Prepare your materials the night before, double check the exam time and location, and get to bed at a reasonable hour.
- Don't go to the exam with an empty stomach. Fresh fruits and vegetables are often recommended to reduce stress. Avoid processed and foods high in sugar and/or fat as these tend to dull brain activity, recall capability, and can cause sleepiness.

- Arrive early. Have confidence that your preparation is going to pay off, and strive for a relaxed state of concentration.

During the exam

- Choose an area that offers the least distractions.
- Read the directions and questions carefully and focus only on the task at hand.
- Answer all the questions you absolutely know, first. Then go back and answer the questions that require extra effort.
- If the exam is more difficult than you expected, just focus and do your best. Your best might be enough to get you a reasonable grade.

Relaxation techniques if you find yourself tensing and getting anxious during the test

Relaxation techniques can help reduce anxiety, aid focus and improve test results. Techniques include deep-breathing exercises, biofeedback, and progressive muscle relaxation (described below).

In **progressive muscle relaxation** you purposefully create tension in individual muscles and then relax the muscle beginning from one end of your body to the other.

Let your body relax, put your arms at your sides, close your eyes, and let your mind go blank. Beginning with your head, tense the muscles in your forehead and scalp and hold for about 10 seconds. Then let them relax completely. Become aware of the difference between the feelings of tension and relaxation. Repeat and concentrate on making these muscles relax more and more. Repeat the process with the muscles of your face, jaw, neck, shoulders, arms, chest, etc., finishing at your toes.

After the exam

- Reward yourself for completing the test. Go to a movie or get together with friends and have dinner.
- Tell yourself that you did your best on the test and that is good enough!

Seek assistance

The Johns Hopkins University is committed to assisting students in managing the challenges they face during their academic careers. The Student Assistance Program provides support to students in dealing with personal, academic, and relationship problems.

If test anxiety continues to interfere with your ability to focus and perform well, you may benefit from more individualized services. Contact the Student Assistance Program (SAP) at 443-287-7000.