

## Tips for coping with test anxiety

Oral and written exams are a recurring part of university life, but they can be the source of anxiety in the time both leading up to and during the exam. The intensity of this anxiety varies from person to person, but for those who suffer from acute test anxiety, the following strategies may be helpful:

### Test Preparation

Good test preparation is an important component of relieving test anxiety. Careful planning can reduce the fear and stress that accompanies studying and which, in the worst cases, can lead to mental blocks and panic. A good study plan also allows you to enjoy well-earned breaks and leisure activities.

- Take a look at the amount of material you need to cover and plan out the days leading up to the test accordingly.
- Prioritize your study material and concentrate on the most important parts first.
- Examine and optimize your study techniques.
- Keep to a constant and well-structured daily schedule. It helps to create a weekly plan in order to better organize tasks.
- Plan each day in detail the night before: divide the study material into small sections and study in “bitesize” pieces.
- Take advantage of times when you feel most concentrated to focus on new material and memorization.
- Make sure to plan regular breaks and fun activities between study blocks.

### Relaxation and exercise

Relaxation techniques like progressive muscle relaxation and autogenic training are a good way to relieve stress. It is a good idea to practice these techniques over a longer period in order to reduce your stress level generally, especially during exam periods. Exercise is also beneficial in terms of stress reduction. For quick stress relief, try breathing exercises both before and during tests.

### Acceptance

Accept the fact that anxiety is a normal and human response to test situations. Being anxious does not mean that you are unprepared or that you will do poorly. What you feel is a result of increased levels of adrenaline, which in small doses is actually beneficial to performance. It is important to take the test rather than avoid it, as avoiding it will only prolong the anxiety.

### Practice

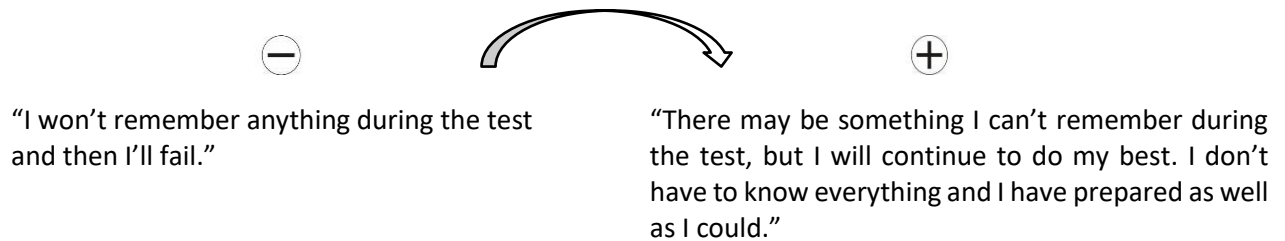
For optimal preparedness, it is a good idea to practice the skills you will need to complete the test. For oral exams, formulate the material verbally, rehearse it aloud, and practice reacting to possible scenarios (not knowing an answer, not understanding a question). If you are allowed to choose an opening topic, practice introducing it in a structured manner and think of an opening sentence. Try to maintain good eye contact, to smile, and to sit with a calm, upright posture. If the test is in written format, take frequent practice tests.

### Test Simulations

Confront yourself with the test situation in advance. This can be with another person playing the role of the examiner or simply with two chairs in your room: sitting in one chair, you are the examiner and ask questions; in the other chair, you are the examinee and answer them. You may also be able to visit the exam location and play through the scenarios in your head. Doing this allows you to face your fears in a controlled environment and makes you better prepared for the real thing.

### Positive Thinking

Those with severe test anxiety often have exaggerated negative, one-sided, and sometimes even disastrous thoughts related to test situations. The goal is to recognize these thoughts, to question them, and to reformulate them into more helpful alternatives as shown in this example:



Once you have found appropriate alternative thoughts, it is important to give them more space—to think them repeatedly and work them into your consciousness. This can have a long term effect on anxiety reduction. For obsessive negative thought processes, you can practice stopping them consciously by picturing a stop sign or instructing yourself to interrupt the intrusive thoughts. Remember your positive alternatives! Another possible strategy is to distance yourself from negative thoughts by not engaging with them but letting them simply pass by as if on a conveyor belt.

### Dealing with Blanking Out

Blanking out is a reversible form of functional memory loss caused by extreme stress. It can happen even to practiced people, but it is often not noticeable because they have learned how to get over the shock and gain access to the “lost” material again. It basically comes down to your perspective: do not view blanking out as a catastrophe, but rather as a problem to be dealt with. Concentrate on the test. Try to maintain your self-awareness, breathe deeply, calm your thoughts, and find the thread again. Focus on the last thing that was said or ask the examiner to repeat or rephrase the question.

### The Day before the Test

Decide how you feel. If you want to study some more, concentrate on repeating, scanning, or memorizing your “personal stumbling blocks”. If you do not want to study any more, be careful not to spend the day brooding. Do something enjoyable and relaxing, like taking a walk or going to the movies. Use this day according to your individual needs.

### Test Day

Don’t forget to eat breakfast. You do not want to have low blood sugar in addition to stress. Stay away from caffeinated drinks, which can increase anxiety. Avoid having to rush; give yourself plenty of time to get ready and get to the testing location. If you are not familiar with the area, it is a good idea to look up the route and travel times in advance.