Test-Taking Tips

Do you sweat, chew your pencil, and feel butterflies in your stomach as your teacher hands out a test? A lot of people (adults included) get freaked out when it's time to take a test.

It's natural to feel some stress about taking tests. In fact, sometimes a little adrenaline (a hormone made by your body during times of excitement or stress) is a good thing to jump-start you.

How Can I Get Better at Taking Tests?

Here are some tips for taking tests:

- Go into the test with confidence. In other words, make sure you've done enough studying to feel confident that you know the material. Staying confident makes it easier to remember everything you need to know.

- Get enough sleep the night before the test. Your memory recall will be much better if you've had enough sleep. A scientific study showed that people who got enough sleep before taking a math test did better than those who stayed up all night studying.

- Put away all your study materials before the test. Many students will still be frantically reviewing the material 10 minutes before the test gets handed out, but this won't help you do any better. It's more important for you to clear your mind and relax during this time, so you'll save your mental energy for the actual test.

- Listen closely to any instructions. As the teacher hands out the test, be sure you know what's expected of you.

- Read through the test first. When you have the test in front of you, go through it to see how long it is. This will let you estimate how much time you have for each section and ask the teacher any questions. If something seems unclear before you start, don't panic: ask.

- Answer the questions in any order. As you take the test, if you don't know an answer try not to get stuck on it. Instead, answer the best way you can, or skip over the question and come back to it later. You may find it easier to answer a question you've skipped after you've answered other questions.

- Relax. If you're so nervous that you blank out, you might need a mini-break. You can wiggle your fingers and toes, take 4 or 5 deep breaths, or picture yourself on a beach or some other calm place. You can even stretch a little at your desk (but try to avoid distracting the other students).

- Running out of time? It's OK if you don't finish every question on the test. Do your best to answer the questions you can, and keep an eye on the clock so you know how much time is left for any remaining questions you still need to answer. You can always guess if you're stuck on some of the questions and time is running out.

- Finished already? Although most teachers will let you hand a test in early, it's usually a good idea to spend any extra time checking your work. Take a minute to breathe deeply and clear your mind before reviewing your answers. You may end up adding more details to some of your answers that you didn't think you'd have time for.

These tips should help most people, but some can get serious test-taking stress. If you're one of them, you may need to talk to a parent, teacher, or counselor for help.

Test Anxiety

Test anxiety is that nervous feeling you may get when you're about to take a test. It's normal to feel some pressure before an exam, and a little stress can actually help you focus and do better.

But for some people, the worries are so strong that they can't concentrate and don't do as well they'd like.

Test anxiety is a type of performance anxiety — a feeling you have when how you do really matters to you. You might have performance anxiety when trying out for the school play or getting ready for a big game.

The good news is that you can lessen test anxiety, but first it's helpful to understand what it is and why it happens.

What Happens With Test Anxiety?

When you're under stress (like right before a test), your body releases a hormone called adrenaline, which prepares it for danger. This is the "fight or flight" reaction. It's what causes symptoms like sweating, a pounding heart, and fast breathing.

Test anxiety can also cause you to feel "butterflies" in your stomach, or have a stomachache or headache. You might be shaky, or feel like you might throw up or pass out.

You may feel stressed by how your body reacts: "Oh no, my hands are shaking." And you might worry about doing poorly or forgetting what you studied.

The more you focus on the negative things that could happen, the stronger the feeling of anxiety becomes. This makes you feel worse and can make you more likely to do poorly on the test.

Who's Likely to Have Test Anxiety?

People who worry a lot or are perfectionists are more likely to have test anxiety. It can be hard for them to accept mistakes they might make or get anything less than a perfect score.

Students who aren't prepared for tests but care about doing well are also likely to have test anxiety. If you know you're not ready, you may worry about doing poorly. You might feel unprepared because you didn't study enough, the material's tough to understand, or you're tired from not getting enough sleep.

How Can I Overcome Test Anxiety?

There are lots of ways to stress less over tests:

- Start studying the day the teacher first says there will be an exam. That way you won't be cramming at the last minute.
- Schedule study time. Put it in your calendar or set an alarm on your phone to remind you.
- Focus on smaller chunks of material during study sessions so they're easier to handle.
- Ask someone in the class if you can study together to keep you on track.
- Try breathing exercises to relax.
- Remind yourself that you don't have to get a perfect score on every test. Everyone slips up, so keep mistakes in perspective. Think of them as chances to learn for the next time.

What If I Need Help With Test Anxiety?

If your test anxiety is too hard to handle alone, talk with a parent, teacher, or school counselor. They can help you learn ways to beat it. They may suggest that you visit a therapist, who also can help.