

OVERCOMING TEST ANXIETY

WHAT IS TEST ANXIETY?

"Test anxiety is being so anxious and stressed about taking an exam that it leads to a poor performance and interferes with learning. While slight anxiety before an exam is normal, too much anxiety can cause a "crash and burn" scenario at test time. The grades students with test anxiety receive may not accurately reflect their knowledge or ability."

- Serena Brown, eHow Health, 11/2013

Test anxiety typically **blocks you from clearly recalling what you know you know** and showing your instructors what you have learned, even if you are extremely comfortable with the material you studied.

Test anxiety is **very common** among students, even highly motivated ones.

Lack of knowledge is **not** test anxiety; it is just a lack of knowledge.

The good news? Test anxiety is **extremely fixable!** It is a learned habit that you can overcome by **re-training** your body to react to tests and/or pressure situations in a different, more effective way.

TYPICAL SYMPTOMS OF TEST ANXIETY:

Blanking out	Picturing everything on a page of notes but the one piece of information you need	Messing up details (i.e. rounding in math or labeling dosages)
Tip of the tongue sensation	Not seeing clues in other questions on the test	Recalling something right after you turn in your test
Mixing up words or concepts you are usually comfortable with	Placing answers on the wrong line on your answer sheet	Panic attack/hyperventilating
Sweating, dry mouth, nausea	Reading questions incorrectly	Unexplained rashes/hives
Elevated blood pressure	Making "stupid" mistakes	Bizarre dreams
Negative self-talk		Fainting
Racing pulse		

WHY DOES TEST ANXIETY CAUSE THESE SYMPTOMS?:

Your body cannot tell the difference between different types of stress. High levels of stress, good or bad, are the same to your body, and all types of stress can produce anxiety.

- If a tornado was about to hit the building, would you continue to sit there and attempt to recall your med terms? No – you would go into survival mode instead – fight or flight.
- The reason you blank out when experiencing test anxiety is that your body thinks there is a tornado-level threat in the exam room. Even if your stress is just due to a test, not a life-threatening situation, your anxiety sends your body into survival mode. Your brain will then block the recall of information that is not directly connected to your surviving the threat. Although this survival mechanism works to your advantage when there is an active threat present, it creates a huge barrier when you are just trying to answer test questions.

YOU HAVE TO BANISH THE TORNADO FROM THE ROOM!

- The back of this handout contains strategies that have greatly reduced the test anxiety levels of countless Bel-Rea students and greatly improved their performance on exams. Test them all out to see what works for you.
- Most students solve their test anxiety issues with the suggested strategies. However, if you are in need of further assistance after you try the suggested actions, please meet with the Student Services Coordinator in the Media Center.

ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE:

LEADING UP TO THE TEST DATE –

Reduce anxiety and increase your learning capacity with nutritious food, plenty of water, exercise, adequate sleep, and study breaks.

- The better the care you take of yourself, the better your body will handle the mental demands in your life.

Transition to testing mode before an actual test time.

- In the days leading up to an exam, create practice tests for yourself so that you can get used to “producing” information before being tested on it, not just “recognizing” the information in your notes.
- Create tests in the same formats utilized by your instructors.
- Ask yourself questions based on each page of your notes. Drill with a study buddy. Utilize a Student TA or tutoring clinic to further test you on your knowledge level.

RIGHT BEFORE THE TEST –

Sit strategically.

- Do you do better against a wall because it reduces traffic that may walk in front of you?
- Do you like to be on an aisle or against a wall so that you can turn away from anyone near you?
- Are you most comfortable near a window or door?
- Do you need to put in earplugs to reduce the amount of auditory distractions?

Take the last 10 minutes before every test to “go to your happy place” and to banish any tornadoes.

- Ask your friends not to talk to you during the time leading up to the test. Do not listen to the nervous chatter of your fellow students, but actively reduce your anxiety level instead.
- Put in earplugs or listen to relaxing music. Close your eyes and/or put on sunglasses. Visualize yourself in a place where you feel calm and happy (i.e. the beach, mountains, your Grandma’s kitchen). Enjoy the moment and scan your body for any tension. Relax and let go of any stress while waiting for the test to start.

DURING THE TEST –

Create relaxation reminders to keep the tornado out of the room.

- Star every 3rd question. When you reach a star, close your eyes for 5 seconds and breathe. Scan your body for anxiety and choose to release it. Roll your shoulders, stretch your neck, and slow your breathing each time.
- Affirm your efforts – if you feel the tornado starting to creep back into the room, remind yourself that you have studied hard and that you know the information.

Approach the test strategically.

- Start with a section that contains the type of questions you are most comfortable with.
- Start at the end of the test and work backwards. Starting somewhere other than #1 can reduce pressure.
- Read each question twice before answering it. Underline key terms to help your brain focus on what is important.
- Do a “brain dump” on the back of your test before starting to answer any questions (i.e. write down all math formulas you may need).

AFTER THE TEST –

Continue to polish your testing routine.

- Utilize the same routine for every test you take even if you aren’t struggling with test anxiety in all of your classes. Review what went well and what you still need to work on. When you train your body regarding appropriate responses, you will master overcoming your test anxiety!