



How to Keep Calm During Tests

Exams are high-stakes. Unless you're in a writing or lab-intensive course, your semester grade in each class likely hinges on how well you do on a few major tests—maybe even just a midterm and a final.

So it's no surprise that exams induce anxiety. Test anxiety can be a good thing. When it's manageable, it can help us develop an urgency to get prepared in advance. But too much anxiety can become crippling by clouding our ability to think, process information, and find answers in our brains when that all-important test is right there in front of us. Here's how to build confidence and reduce test stress:

BEFORE THE TEST

Prepare throughout the Semester

Keeping up with your coursework on a class-by-class basis is the most important thing you can do to go into exams confident and calm. Having regular, shorter study sessions over periods of weeks or months is a better way to learn material than doing one or two cram sessions a day or two before the exam. At the very least you should review your notes and course materials weekly. This will help you learn course content and identify material you have questions about so that you can ask your instructors for clarification.

If you're just reading this the night before a final for which you're unprepared, it doesn't help you at this point to be hard on yourself (though you should be kinder to your future-self next time). The best thing you can do now is study what notes and materials you have and read over chapter summaries or handouts. Don't try to gather new information at this point. Don't stay up all night. Make sure you get at least 4 or 5 hours of sleep. Do a little refresher in the morning, but reserve a half hour to an hour before the test to put study materials away and compose yourself.

Know Where, When and What

Rushing around to make it to your exam intensifies feelings of anxiety you may already be experiencing. If your exam isn't in your regular classroom at your regular class time (finals will likely not be held at class time) confirm in advance where and when it is. Know what you need to bring (i.e., blue books, pencils).

Avoid Others Who Are Anxious

Anxiety is contagious. Don't discuss how anxious you are with other anxious classmates before the test. If you feel the need to vent, call a friend or someone you know who can lighten your mood. Anxiousness feeds anxiousness; break the cycle with positive thoughts and surround yourself with supportive influences.

DURING THE TEST

Plan Your Approach

Once you receive your test, read over it. Read the directions, note the values for answers in each section. Scan the types and content of questions in each section. Make a plan to start with the easiest section and move on to the most difficult, as the content of questions in the easier section may help you when you get to more difficult questions.

Ask Questions

If you see something in the directions and/or on a particular question that makes you unsure of what to do or how to respond, you need to ask your instructor for clarification. Uncertainty leads to increased anxiety. Be sure that you know what you're being asked to do.

Remind Yourself to Relax

Before you rush into answering questions, take a second to calm yourself. Take a deep breath and release it slowly. Do that several times if you need to. Don't punish yourself for not having studied as much as you maybe should have. It's too late for that now. Focus on what you can control in this moment. Remind yourself that the results on this test do not define who you are. What you do on a test is a performance. If you do not perform well, that's all it is: a poor performance.

Keep Your Mind Focused

Once you get started, stay focused on your work. Don't worry about what your classmates are doing or how fast they're moving through the test. Don't spend too much time on a particular question and don't get bogged down with negativity if you forget something or don't know the answer. If your mind goes blank, go on to another question or another part of the test. On an essay, jot down anything you can recall on scratch paper to stimulate your memory and get your mind working.

Avoid Excessive Doubt

Don't return to questions you've already answered and change your answers unless you've suddenly remembered an answer or the right answer was triggered by something else on the test.

Practice Relaxation

If you do start to panic, take a drink of water or take a breathing break. Put your pen or pencil down, close your eyes and do a breathing exercise. Try tensing and releasing your muscles. Remind yourself that this is just a test and, while you may need to prepare better next time, you just have to do the best you can in the moment. That's all you can control.

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