

Exam Anxiety

What is it?

Exam anxiety can occur while studying for an exam or when you sit down to write an exam (even though you studied). Symptoms can be physical: nausea, racing heart, shortness of breath, sweating, dizziness, shaking, loss of appetite, insomnia, etc. Or they can be emotional / psychological: blanking out / freezing up during the exam, inability to concentrate, inability to understand what you are reading, negative thoughts (“I’m going to fail”), feelings of fear / anxiety, crying for no real reason, irrational anger.



How to cope...

Before the exam:

- **Avoid cramming!** Start studying well ahead of the exam for hour or two a night. Take breaks while studying (5-10 minute break every 45 minutes of studying) and make sure your study environment is comfortable and free from distractions. Use study strategies that work with your learning style (see Ms. Sernoskie if you need help determining what might work for you). Feeling prepared will help limit stress.
- **Talk to your teacher about your exam**—for example, you can ask what type of questions to expect (multiple choice, essay, etc.) and this can help you feel prepared. Also if your teacher knows you are feeling nervous they may be able to give you tips and alleviate some of your stress. Pay attention to the review work and information they give you and use it to guide your studying.
- **Take care of your body!** Avoid studying the night before or in the moments leading up—this can lead to you feeling overwhelmed. Instead, get a good night’s sleep, relax before you go to bed—do an activity that helps you relax (e.g. watch a funny movie). Eat a good healthy meal before your exam and limit the amount of caffeine and sugar you take in. Exercising in the days leading up to the exam can also help—even if you just go for a short walk. Healthy body = healthy mind.
- **Share your fears and worries!** In the hours before your exam try confiding your fears and worries about the exam to someone you trust or even just write them down on a piece of paper. Go over all the worst case scenarios (If I fail _____ will happen). This has been scientifically proven to improve performance on exams and seeing your fears written down or hearing them out loud can help you understand just how unlikely they are to come true.
- **Stop negative thoughts!** If you catch yourself thinking negative thoughts (e.g. “I am dumb”) say “STOP!” (its okay to just say it in your head). Then force yourself to think positive—it can be about a past assignment you did well on, your preparation—or something you are looking forward to with your friends. Even just forcing yourself to smile can alleviate stress—even if there is no reason for it.
- **Visualize and relax.** Visualize yourself writing the exam in confident and calm manner, and getting back and awesome mark. Starting to feel stressed—practice deep breathing. Focusing on one part of your body at a time and relaxing that body part.
- **Be prepared.** Double check the time and date of your exam—what materials you will need. Give yourself plenty of time to get to the gym so you don’t feel rushed. While waiting to write avoid talking about the exam and listening to others who are being negative. Tell yourself “I can do this! I am ready!”

During the exam:

- **Do a brain dump!** Sure you are afraid of forgetting stuff—but all that info swirling around in your head can keep you from focusing on the individual questions. When they say “start” flip your exam over or ask for a scrap piece of paper and do a brain dump. Write down all the bits of information you have clogging up your brain that you need for the exam—get out of your system. Then refer back to that page for the rest of the exam.
- **Bring what you need!** This doesn’t mean simply bringing with you all the supplies necessary (pens, pencil, calculator, study sheet, etc.) But anything that can help you be more comfortable. If chewing gum helps settle you—bring gum. If you get dry mouth or sweat etc. then bring a bottle of water. Scientists have found that touching certain objects can help calm and soothe people (remember your childhood blankie or stuffie?). If you have an object that has positive memories attached to it, or can help you feel calm or more comfortable then bring it.
- **Take a moment to breathe.** Starting to feel panicky or anxious? Take a moment, close your eyes and just breathe. Focus on those positive thoughts and stop the negative ones. Visualize a calming location—maybe your room or a beach. Take the time— it’s worth it. A more relaxed and focused effort is better than a frantic, panicked one.
- **Start with something you know.** Review the entire exam—formulate a plan of attack for the order you will answer the questions in. Start with the stuff you feel most confident about.
- **Force yourself to slow down.** Before you start to respond to a question—read it through—slowly—then read it again. Make sure you understand the first time through will help improve your performance and avoid using time to go back and fix errors— get it right in the first place.

AND REMEMBER:

It is only a test! Yes, it has its importance at this time in your life, but it is not the absolute measure of your entire existence. There is so much more to life than this single test—don’t make it more important than it is in the grand scheme of things.

People who can help if you are anxious:

- **Your Teachers**
- **Ms. Sernoskie (Rm 312), Ms. Cybulskie (303), Mrs. Leslie (303), Mrs. Sweeney (Student Services)**
- **Your family and friends**