

2

What to Do About Before-the-Test Worry

If test marks didn't count, nobody would worry about tests. But they do count, and most of us do worry. In fact, those who don't worry at all actually don't do as well as they would if they did worry a little.

Some worry, researchers show, is good for us. It sharpens our alertness. It's only when you worry a lot that you start to lose test points. The worry then interferes with your memory, driving clear out of your mind the things you knew yesterday like the back of your hand.

Other emotions can also hurt your memory and your test marks: anger, depression, and lack of confidence. So it's as important to prepare emotionally for a test as it is to prepare all the information you need. In fact, for standardized tests, it's often practically the only kind of preparation you can make.

STRATEGY 1: BOLSTER YOUR CONFIDENCE

If you have taken any psychology courses, you've heard

about the “self-fulfilling prophecy”—the tendency to do as well, or as poorly, as you expect to do. This is particularly true for exams. If you feel confident about passing, you’ll lose some of your anxiety about the test. If you believe that you are going to do well, you will. Testwise students gain points just because they have confidence.

So, do everything you can to bolster your confidence. Study the coursework so that you’re 125 percent sure of it. Get a tutor to quiz you if you need someone else’s judgment that you know your stuff. Forget about the brightest student in the class; he’s surely not losing confidence worrying about you. Keep your mind on showing how much *you* know.

Just don’t become so overconfident that you become careless. Remember, a little worry is good for you.

STRATEGY 2: MINIMIZE DISCOMFORT

Visit the test room beforehand so that it will be familiar to you by test time. Sit in a seat you like. Actually do some homework there. Students really do perform better when they take a test in the room in which they studied for it.

Notice whether the room is cold or warm so you can dress comfortably for the test. Notice the distractions in the room and eliminate as many of them as you can. For example, if there’s an interesting wall chart, study it now so that you won’t be tempted to do so during the test.

If you know who your proctor will be, it might also help to meet that individual beforehand so that you’ll feel there’s a friend in the exam room, not an enemy.

STRATEGY 3: GET HAPPY

Many students roll through college in a constant manic-depressive cycle, up some days and down some days. A lot

of this emotional volleying can't be prevented. Still, the happier you can feel when you're entering the exam room, the better you'll score.

For a week or so beforehand, avoid depressing situations and seek out enjoyable ones. Postpone asking that someone for a date unless you're sure the answer will be yes. Treat yourself to a ticket to the rock concert you're dying to see. Buy the sweater that you've had your eye on for weeks. Get happy.

STRATEGY 4: SHAKE YOUR ANGER

Whether you are angry at your roommate for throwing a party the night you were planning to study or at an instructor for switching test formats at the last minute, convince yourself that it's not worth losing points over. Shake your anger before you go into the test room, or it will end up lowering your grades.

If your anger is caused by a feeling that tests are unfair and test questions are badly written, it may be because you lack test-taking skills. This book should help you eliminate that problem.

STRATEGY 5: WORRY ONLY ABOUT WHAT'S REAL

If you haven't studied at all for the course, you ought to be frightened of the test. There is no magic formula to eliminate valid fear.

But if you have gone to past tests prepared and still haven't done well on them, it's probably because you haven't learned the test-taking strategies other students use. You may not be aware of how many points you lose against competitors who are testwise. Read on, and we'll help you reap those extra points. Then you will have nothing to worry about.

STRATEGY 6: KNOW WHEN TO POSTPONE

Sometimes it's a good idea to postpone a test if you can. If your body is fighting physical illness, it will lower your grade.

It has also been demonstrated that some women don't do as well on tests just before menstruation, and if you know that you're among them, postponement is sometimes sensible.

But you should never postpone a test because of fear or anxiety, unless it's because you don't know the work and you're sure you can learn it thoroughly between now and postponement day. What you put off now due to anxiety only leads to even greater anxiety—and even poorer performance—when you finally do have to take the test.

STRATEGY 7: GET HELP FOR TERROR

Some people are the victims not just of fear but of irrational test terror. If you have nightmares about taking tests, go blank or actually black out when you walk into an exam room, become physically sick before every test, or miss most tests through oversleeping, it's important to get professional help from a school psychologist.

Just as special allowances are made for people with other types of handicaps, people who are emotionally incapable of handling large-group test situations should be given alternative kinds of exams. Why don't you offer a convincing alternative yourself? You might offer to write an extra paper or make a special presentation. Or you might do a take-home exam that is more difficult than the original test would have been. Perhaps the teacher would permit you to take the test in his or her office or with a Teacher's Assistant.

One way of dispelling irrational fears has met with some success. First, imagine the test situation that you fear and

then imagine yourself in it, taking the test with no fear, no worry, no racing heart. Imagine yourself sailing through it, knowing all the answers. Imagine yourself getting the best mark in the entire test group. Try to remember a situation in which you did well on an exam and keep remembering that experience over and over, reliving it as closely as your imagination allows. Now connect these good thoughts with thoughts of the upcoming test. Do this over and over in your mind. That's called *positive reinforcement*.

Practice this technique, and some of the good feelings really will carry over into the actual exam. If you do find anxiety creeping up on you, take a deep breath and refocus on that good feeling. Then go on with the test.