

# TEST ANXIETY & STRESS MANAGEMENT

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## What is Stress?

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Stress is the body's response to demands placed on it, an automatic response to harness energy that helps you cope with CHANGES or CHALLENGES.

## Causes of Stress?

Any change, whether positive or negative can be a cause of stress.

- Positive Stress Examples: new job, marriage, winning an award or promotion
- Negative Stress Examples: illness, accident, loss of a loved one

The common elements of stress are CHANGE and THE NEED TO ADAPT. Some life roles and time of our lives are inherently more stressful than others such as midterm and finals weeks, the demands of a college study schedule and our personal responsibilities at work and home.

## Did you know? We need stress to be successful!

There are two types of stress, positive and negative, often referred to as EUSTRESS and DISTRESS

- Eustress: Good stress that is motivating and helps us focus our energy. This stress is short-term and often feels exciting. Eustress is helpful in your academic endeavors!
- Distress: Bad stress that causes anxiety or concern. This stress can be short-term or long-term. Distress feels unpleasant, can lead to mental and physical difficulties and decreases our ability to be successful in our personal, professional, and academic lives.

## Preventing Distress

Advance planning can help prevent bad stress by giving you better ability to cope with change and more equilibrium in the face of life's inevitable disruptions.

Time management is the GREATEST stress preventer because:

- It improves productivity
- Reduces procrastination
- Protects you from living in "crisis mode"

Organization is another HELPFUL tool that will prevent bad stress because:

- It increases your feeling of control
- Improves your ability to respond to unexpected changes

## Taking Care of YOU

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Because coping is easier with a healthy body

**SLEEP:** Often our sleep schedule is the first thing to go when we are stressed but it is the ONLY thing you cannot catch up on. If you pull an all-nighter on Tuesday night for a test on Wednesday, you will still be tired on Wednesday even if you "catch up" on sleep by sleeping-in on Saturday morning.

Sleep is a time for the brain to rest and recharge. We each need between 7-9 hours of sleep to be productive. Protect your sleep and do your best to stick to a routine, even on the weekends. If you normally need 8 hours to feel your best make sure you're getting ready for bed and winding down 9 hours before you want to wake up.

It's rare that we fall asleep immediately when our heads hit the pillow. Take time to turn off your electronics, prepare for the next day, and get ready for a restful night.

**NUTRITION:** It's important to adequately fuel your body, especially in times of stress. Keep these tips in mind when choosing the foods that are right for you. Find foods that are sensible and substantial, remembering to balance your protein, carbs, and fat to give yourself energy without feeling sluggish

## Brain Food!

- For Alertness: Tyrosine, in eggs, meats, cheeses, & nuts, activates epinephrine
- For Memory & Concentration: Choline, in leafy veggies, beans, and eggs, activates acetylcholine
- For Relaxation & Sleep: Tryptophan, in milk, veal, poultry, and many carbs, triggers serotonin
- For Oxygen Flow: Potassium, in bananas, helps get more oxygen to your brain!

## Daily Recommendations

- For Meals: a protein, veggie, and high fiber carbohydrate will help keep you fueled  
*Consider grilled chicken, sweet potato, & broccoli*
- For Snacks: restore mental energy if you notice yourself slowing down  
*Try almonds and bananas*

## Limit Caffeine, Sugar, & Alcohol

These three are often our go-to substances for coping with stress but they will do more harm than good

- Caffeine: Try to limit yourself to two daily doses of caffeine from coffee, tea, and soda
- Sugar: Highs and lows in blood sugar can leave you cranky, weak, and unable to concentrate
- Alcohol: It might give you a quick high but will always be followed by a slump into lethargy because alcohol is a depressant not a stimulant

**EXERCISE:** Exercise gives you endorphins, endorphins make you HAPPY therefore exercise is an important part of managing stress. Schedule it into your day even if in brief 10 minute walks.

- Try 20-30 minute blocks 2-3 times per week to reduce excessive tension
- Unwind while studying by taking a break to stand, stretch, and breathe deeply. If you need a few more minutes to re-center yourself, take a 5 minute walk.

## Warning Signs of Too Much Stress

*Check off the following statements that apply to you*

- Feeling out of control or never caught up on work
- Constant fatigue despite adequate sleep
- Stomach problems or other tummy troubles
- Feeling as though you have no free time, or feeling guilty if you take time for yourself
- Neck and back problems, especially headaches
- Sleep disturbances such as insomnia or excessive need for sleep
- Appetite disturbances including lack of appetite or cravings for junk food
- Need for alcohol or drugs to relax
- Inability to concentrate
- Irritability or mood swings
- Frequent minor illness or constantly feeling run down

*Four or more checks may signal stress overload!*

## Coping with Stress: Sixteen Suggestions

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1. Talk it out with someone your trust – an RA, friend, relative or counselor. Contact SMU Counseling Services at 214-768-2277 or [smu.edu/counseling](http://smu.edu/counseling) for free and confidential counseling.
2. Escape for a while:
  - a. To somewhere real (movie, park) or just away from campus
  - b. Take a “one-minute vacation” an imaginary escape, by envisioning your favorite place on earth, your dream vacation, or a special day
  - c. decide to escape by delaying dealing with a problem until a specific time  
*ex. Monday morning I'll schedule an appointment with the professor to talk about the test grade*
3. Schedule time for recreation; you'll accomplish more if you plan for rest and relaxation
  - a. set specific, measurable, positive, and reasonable goals
  - b. realize your own limits and others' and go easy on criticism; accept imperfections
  - c. ask for help when you need it (tutor, professor, classmate)
  - d. learn to say “no” sometimes; the stress of many unfinished jobs is worse than stress of saying “no”
  - e. expect and accept change in class and in relationships
  - f. be flexible and ready to adapt your personal and academic goals
4. Take pride in your accomplishments, past and present; dwell on the positive, not the negative. Remind yourself that you've done difficult things before, and, armed with that experience, you CAN do it again. Positive emotions fight stress that negative emotions will intensify.
5. Be good to yourself; treat yourself to a special reward when you've accomplished a difficult task.
6. Express your feelings, let them out -- tears, screaming, a punching bag, jogging, writing a letter you'll never mail -- to work out anger.
7. Take one thing at a time when you're overloaded. Establish priorities, then begin. Finishing one task gives a feeling of accomplishment that helps you tackle the next one.
8. Use music to reduce tension. Study classical or café music to set a calm and peaceful mood.
9. Make your room a home for relaxing. Separate “work” from “home” by studying elsewhere, perhaps at the library; then return to your room, free of work, to unwind.
10. Volunteer or do something for others. To keep your perspective and build a support system, make yourself available for friendship and support.
11. Pray or meditate; don't overlook the spiritual side of life.
12. Keep your sense of humor even if you have to search for it! Be able to laugh at yourself and life; laughter is good medicine. Watch a sitcom, rent a funny movie or video clips, or read comic strips!
13. Treat yourself to a massage.
14. Look for reminders to help keep life in perspective. Post them where you can see them easily & often.
15. Try a Progressive Muscle Relaxation exercise. There are lots of options from a quick YouTube search!
16. Download a stress management app or listen to a stress management podcast. Some recommendations:
  - a. *Calm, Headspace, Smiling Mind, Stop Breathe Think, Untangle, Ten Percent Happier*



## What is Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety is the inability to think clearly in spite of adequate preparation. It is triggered by unrealistic pressures and beliefs—fear of failure, expectation of failure, perfectionism, a need for approval, blocking, anxiety about anxiety. Armed with information, determination and a willingness to work at it, you can reduce test anxiety and perform better on exams.

### Manage your Test Anxiety with these suggestions:

**STUDY:** The self confidence that comes with adequate preparation is an extremely important element in test taking. It is not enough to study “hard” or to study “a lot.” You must study in ways that match the course content and type of test. There is security in knowing that you are studying more effectively. Visit [smu.edu/studyskills](http://smu.edu/studyskills) for resources on studying effectively.

**ADJUST NEGATIVE ATTITUDES:** Even if you have always been anxious about taking tests, it doesn’t mean that you always will be. Human beings are not creatures of blind fate; you do have control over your own behavior. Success hinges upon learning new responses to tests.

#### **Convince yourself that a test score is no measure of your value as a human being**

A test score is not you; if you fail a test, you are not a failure. A test can only try to assess your learning; you may know much more than a test score indicates.

**GOALS, NOT DEMANDS:** The demand “I must pass” or “I must make an ‘A,’” sets up a cycle of negative feelings and poor performance which ends in test anxiety. Instead of “I must ...” try “I would like to...” or “my goal is to ...”

**THOUGHT STOPPING:** Whenever negative thoughts about tests disrupt your studying or your taking of a test, simply say “STOP!” You can then substitute positive thoughts for negative ones. “I know I’m going to fail” can be replaced by the more productive “I’m working hard in order to succeed.” Intensive rehearsals of thought stopping before a test help to minimize the build-up of excessive anxiety. You need to act as your own best friend, not as your own worst enemy. Are you tearing yourself down because of anxiety? Build yourself up by thinking positively.

**VISUALIZE SUCCESS:** . . . at studying the right things and thus succeeding on the test. If you envision failure, you will get it! And visualize yourself succeeding on the test. Imagine yourself remaining calm and in total control of the test you are facing. Close your eyes and see yourself in the classroom. What do you see? hear? smell? Vividly imagine yourself sitting in your desk, holding your pen, and calmly, successfully working through the test questions. Imagine yourself finishing on time, turning in the test with a smile on your face, and actually looking forward to getting your grade back. If you can’t see it, you can’t do it! Work on seeing it and you are more likely to achieve it. A few minutes of daily visualization can be a powerful way to rehearse your response to the test.

**REWARDS:** Reward yourself for practicing new and beneficial behaviors. If you make major changes in the way you study, reward yourself with something you can look forward to with anticipation.

**DON’T BLOCK:** Blocking is a matter of panic, frustration, and anger which results in the impulse to give up. Prepare for the normal, temporary memory lapses that happen to everyone. Instead of giving in to feelings of panic, plan your coping strategy: when you encounter a question whose answer you cannot immediately recall, spend a moment or two relaxing and rehearsing positive statements. Once you have calmed yourself, you can detour around that question, complete some easier ones, and then return to the difficult one.

#### **Accept a little anxiety as a part of the human condition**

*A moderate amount of anxiety is probably beneficial; it increases alertness and helps you function at a higher level than when totally relaxed.*



# YOUR SELF SCRIPT

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To overcome the negative comments we often make to ourselves during a test, we need to pre-package some positive, realistic statements to focus on when negative self-talk intrudes. If you have positive messages ready to use, you can interrupt the pattern of negative thinking.

*Below are some examples of “self scripts” written by other students. Read them over carefully, marking any sentences that would work well for you.*

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## **Script Example 1:**

Relax, get as comfortable as you can. Settle back and breathe deeply. Keep breathing deeply, exhale slowly. You studied for this test and you know the material. You passed the last one and did just fine. You knew it all when you studied last night. Relax, loosen up those neck muscles. Breathe deeply and exhale slowly. This test will go well when you get calm. You can do it.

## **Script Example 2:**

I'll calm down, breathe from my stomach and relax. I've studied hard to prepare for this exam and I know the material. I will focus on one item at a time, not on the whole test. I will read each question carefully and calmly to be sure I understand it. I won't let myself get bogged down on one item. I remember the great feeling of accomplishment from getting an “A” on other exams. Now is my opportunity to get that feeling back.

## **Script Example 3:**

Relax and take three deep breaths. Don't panic. I've studied, I know this material, and I'll stay relaxed. I'll think clearly and remember all the test-taking tips. I'll underline key words in each question to help myself concentrate and comprehend. I'll focus on one item at a time, the easy questions first. It's OK if one answer doesn't come to me right now -- it will. I'll just go on to another and remember it in a little while.

## **Script Example 4:**

Relax, breathe from the stomach. Go through the exam and answer the easy ones first. Then go through a second time and use test-taking tips. If I forget something, I'll think about when the professor talked about that topic. What class day was it? What else was she talking about? What examples did she give? If I have to guess, I'll choose “c” or “true” and not worry about it. Stay relaxed; if my muscles are relaxed, so is my mind.

## **Script Example 5:**

Oh well, I might as well go on and get this thing over with. I'll just blow it anyway because I didn't study enough. And even if I had studied more, it wouldn't have helped because everyone else in class is smarter than I am. The professor just tries to trick us on the test. I should never have taken this class or come to this university. Here goes, dummy. Let's get this over with fast.

***(Sound familiar? It's a real script, but it produces anxiety and failure. Cross it out!)***

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## Developing Positive Self Talk

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What we say about ourselves is what we tend to believe, therefore, if you use positive self talk you are more likely to believe positive things about yourself. When preparing for a test be sure to utilize positive self-talk and develop a pattern of thinking that supports your success.

1. First, be certain that your skills in test preparation and in test taking are top notch. Feeling confident that you have prepared thoroughly for a test and that you are adept in test taking techniques can go a long way towards reducing anxiety. Evaluate your past test preparation with the Test Preparation Checklist. Then use “How to be Really Prepared for Tests” and the Five-Day Study Program to design a Test Preparation Plan for your next major exam. To earn the most possible points on any exam, review specific techniques for taking tests.
2. Second, deal positively with the negative thoughts that are one component of anxiety. Try this simple two-step process:

**STEP 1:** Realize that your thoughts are racing off, that your mind is cluttered with worries and fears, mentally yell “STOP!” Becoming *aware* of those worries is the first stage in preventing them. “STOP!” helps you to *break the cycle* of worry.

**STEP 2:** Once you’ve stopped the cycle for a moment, try any one of the following techniques to move from a negative to a positive emotional state

- DAYDREAM - Substitute thoughts of a favorite person or place
  - VISUALIZE SUCCESS - Take time to rehearse success; visualize yourself successfully taking the upcoming test. The key to using this tip is detail: think of yourself in the classroom; notice your surroundings; see yourself receiving the test, previewing it, and knowing every single answer. See yourself writing confidently and quickly, handing the paper in with pleasure, and finally celebrating the A you receive. If you can’t imagine it, you can’t live it!
  - FOCUS - Concentrate all of your attention on a single object--a tree outside the window, the surface of your desk, the hands of your watch. Occupy your mind fully to push out anxiety-related thoughts, again breaking the cycle of worry.
  - PRAISE YOURSELF - Talk to yourself in a positive way; try “I’m very relaxed,” “I’ve prepared really well,” “I’m remembering what I studied,” or “I’m using my time effectively.” A positive self-script will help you take this step.
3. The final step is to deal with the physical feelings that accompany anxiety. Try these simple techniques to gain control:
    - BREATHE - You can calm physical sensations by focusing your attention on your breathing. For two to five minutes, concentrate on taking long, slow, deep breaths. Deep, slow breathing also re-oxygenates your brain cells, giving you a mental boost.
    - SCAN YOUR BODY - The key: deep muscle relaxation and anxiety cannot coexist! If you can relax your muscles, you can calm your mind. Become aware of tension in your body as the first step in reducing it. Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Focus your attention on your feet; are they relaxed? Let go of any muscular tension and feel your feet relax. Move to your ankles, calves, thighs, and lower back, relaxing each group of muscles. Do the same for your diaphragm, chest, upper back, neck, shoulders, face, arms, and hands.

- **TENSE & RELAX** - If one part of your body is particularly tense, “unwind” it with this method. Focus on the tight muscle and make it even more tense. For instance, if your shoulders are tense, pull them back, arch your back, and make the area as tense as you can. Now let go, and you’ll find that you can relax those muscles to a greater degree.
- **USE GUIDED IMAGERY** - Relax completely and take a quick imaginary trip. Close your eyes, relax your body, and see yourself in a favorite place. Create as much of the scene as you can, using all your senses. Imagine yourself at the beach; hear the surf and the seagulls; feel the sun and breeze on your face, the sand between your toes. See the rolling dunes, the ships on the horizon. Find a place that works for you and practice “getting there” mentally.
- **DESCRIBE WHAT YOU FEEL** - Focus on your anxiety. Describe to yourself how it feels. If you have a headache, nausea, or abdominal pain, tell yourself where it is located, how it feels. Don’t resist it; experience it. If you can focus on a physical symptom completely, it will often disappear or at least begin to fade.
- **EXERCISE AEROBICALLY** - This won’t work in the classroom during a test, but it’s an excellent way to reduce body tension. Do some rapid walking, jogging, swimming; play some tennis or basketball--anything to get your heart beating fast for 15 to 20 minutes. During a high-stress period such as midterm week or finals week, plan time for exercise. You’ll work off some stress, concentrate more effectively on your studying, and thus learn more and perform better on your tests.

*If these techniques for dealing with anxiety don’t work, it’s time to get additional help. If you stay depressed, feel hopeless, or begin to feel overwhelmed, talk to someone; don’t keep it to yourself.*

**Counseling Services is an excellent and free resource for completely confidential counseling.**

Phone: 214-768-2277 | Website: [smu.edu/counseling](http://smu.edu/counseling)

## Writing Your Own Script

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Write your script in a place you will see it often. Try an index card taped to your mirror or kept in your wallet. Type a note on your phone and save it as the background. Create a desktop background to see it every time you open your computer.

Compose your own version of a positive self script for studying and test taking. What encouraging words would you want your best friend to say to you? You can borrow from the scripts above or just use them to get started.

For maximum effectiveness, be sure to include the four key elements of scripts 1-4, listed below:

1. instructions to relax  
*Example: muscles, breathing techniques*
2. suggestions for recalling materials, to deal with NORMAL and TEMPORARY memory lapses  
*Example: skip and come back to that item, brainstorm, recall related ideas*
3. reminders to be test-wise  
*Example: easy questions first, guessing strategies, careful reading*
4. positive, supportive messages to yourself  
*Example: how hard you've worked, how well you knew this yesterday, past successes*

## Learn and Use Your Script

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First, post it in a place where you will see it daily --maybe on your mirror or door. Once each day, read your script carefully; by the time you do this for a week, you will have memorized it --- and given yourself a daily dose of encouragement. That encouragement is an important daily step in moving from being your own worst enemy to being your own best friend.

Second, memorize your script or look at it before entering the classroom.

During the test, the first time that you begin to panic or to hear those negative thoughts in your mind, take a deep breath, remember your card, and notice how much calmer you feel. There is real power in your own positive, encouraging words.

The negative thoughts may still be in your mind, but in your hand you will have a visible, tangible antidote to panic, blocking, and poor performance. You may want to add new phrases to your card from time to time, relating to a particular course or type of test.

The more you use this technique, the better it tends to work.