

Addressing Test Anxiety

If you experience anxiety during tests, you are not alone. Taking an exam is a stressful event. Some amount of stress is a good thing--it motivates us to prepare and maintain focus. Feeling excessive anxiety, however, can have the opposite effect by causing distraction and distress.

We feel anxious when something important to us seems out of our control. When being evaluated, anxiety often arises from the belief that the demands of the test exceed our capabilities. Here, we provide some insights that can help alleviate these anxieties by addressing beliefs about our intelligence, effective preparation strategies, and relaxation techniques.

Mindset matters

Our beliefs about intelligence can significantly affect how we think and feel. The belief that your own intelligence is an innate attribute is called a **fixed mindset**. The belief that you can grow your intelligence is called a **growth mindset**. The latter belief, the growth mindset, is a more accurate way to think about your mind. People learn new things and gain new skills all the time.

Attributes of the mindsets

Fixed mindset	Growth mindset
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mistakes feel embarrassing• Feeling of being bad at particular subjects• Challenges/effort are avoided	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mistakes provide information/feedback• You are not good at some subject yet• Challenges/effort are the path to mastery



Making mistakes and applying effort in the face of challenges are critical to the learning process. Shifting to a growth mindset will make studying less painful.

Under which mindset have you been operating?

See our Mindset Matters handout to foster a growth mindset.

Prepare appropriately: learning

Being and feeling prepared will boost your confidence about the exam. The two most effective study strategies are distributed practice and retrieval practice.

Distributed practice means spreading out your study time (that is, not cramming). When it comes to retaining knowledge, studying one hour a day for six days will be much more effective than cramming for six hours in one day.

Schedule in time for regular study sessions as your test day approaches.



For more information on preparing for exams see our active studying and Test Preparation worksheets.

Retrieval practice means bringing information to mind after you have learned it—recalling from memory. Taking a practice test, doing practice problems, drawing out a concept map from memory, or explaining concepts to someone else are all examples of retrieval practice. Retrieval practice requires a lot of effort. Keep in mind that if it feels difficult, then it's working! Stick with it.

Why is retrieval practice a better way to study?



- Helps move information into long-term memory
- Reveals information you don't yet know and need to review
- Normalizes feeling of a test

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Prepare appropriately: self-care

When our body gets everything it needs, our minds function best. Build time into your schedule to nourish your body and mind. Budget time for sleep (about 8 hours a night), nutritious meals, and exercise (that is, anything that gets you moving).

More resources are available at [UO Counseling Services self-care](#) strategies.



Relax and focus

When we are anxious about something, worrying thoughts can distract us from important tasks (such as studying or even doing the test itself). Aside from being emotionally distressing, anxiety can have profound effects on our physiology (upset stomach, racing heart, headaches, muscle tension, etc.). Sometimes we are overcome with anxiety and may experience a panic attack.

Breathing exercises lead to relaxation by calming the body. Try this simple one called **4-7-8 breathing**:

- Take a slow, deep breath into your belly as you silently count to 4.
- Hold your breath for a count of 7.
- Exhale completely for a count of 8.
- Repeat 3 to 7 times until you feel a sense of calm.



Tension-relaxation exercise:

- Tense all the muscles in your body starting from your neck and moving down.
- With your muscles tensed, hold your breath for a few seconds.
- Exhale as you begin to relax your muscles starting from your toes and moving up.

Reframe your thoughts

Identify the anxious thoughts you have and create a rational statement that can replace the anxious thought. Consider what someone with a growth mindset would say to themselves.

Anxious Thought

- I can't do this. I'm not prepared for this test
- Once they grade my test, they'll see that I'm really not smart



Reframed Thought

- I have learned a lot from this course, and I will try my best right now.
- If I make an error on the test, I will learn from it.

Next time you feel anxious, first calm yourself with a relaxation exercise, then refocus with your reframed thought.

References and further reading

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