

## Managing Academic Anxiety

If you suffer from academic anxiety, there are a few helpful strategies you can use to ensure your anxiety doesn't overwhelm you. First, know yourself. Once you learn that you are responsible for managing your anxiety, you will feel great about yourself. It may sound stressful to think about being responsible for your own education, but being responsible in this case really means that you can quickly recognize and cut down on the things that are making you most anxious.

Understanding that part of responsibility means you have the power to reduce stress dramatically. When possible, think about your own learning style, the way you process information. Do you like it when you read first, and then experiment with numbers or ideas? Do you like deadlines of a week or two? Do you do well on untimed tasks? Do you prefer working in a group to brainstorm ideas, or do you prefer working alone to think about various solutions you'll later present to the group? Make a mental note of what works best for you, and carry this with you into each learning situation.



Second, know your school and teacher. Teachers are your allies, but not all teachers have the time and resources to help you manage the anxiety you feel when completing their assignments. Talk to a teacher who does have the time to listen to your needs. Let him or her know you feel stressed out and what causes your stress, and he or she will refer you to someone like the school psychologist, social worker, or guidance counselor who can help you come up with strategies to work on each area of your studies that feel overwhelming. If you are a gifted student or student who has a learning disability who feels you are in the wrong environment, this doesn't mean this can't change with the help of the right teacher. The right teacher will help you come up with a plan that best meets your needs, and if necessary, recommend a separate class or program that might provide a more suitable learning environment. In the right environment it's still your responsibility to be self-aware about your progress and to discuss with your teacher the best type of learning for your abilities.

Third, know your options. Health centers at many colleges provide their students with information on noticing and managing academic anxiety at orientation, and your middle or high school might also have some wellness strategies listed in your student handbook. Usually available in the nurse's office or your guidance counselor's office, your student handbook might recommend ways for you to stay healthy in, and out of, school.

While you're reading, let's look at some recommended stress and anxiety-busting strategies together.

## Dealing With General Worries About Academics

The Cornell University Center for Learning and Teaching recommends using positive mental imagery to push worries about school away. Positive mental imagery is a technique where you think of a beautiful scene in nature or a positive image of yourself winning a game or having a great moment to replace negative thoughts. The great part is, all you need is a quiet room in which to sit still and maybe a picture of yourself in a winning moment or at a time when you felt really good about yourself.

**Try it out:** Sit in your quiet place and think of a scene or look at the picture and relive the moment when it was taken. Then, close your eyes. Focus only on the event or image for as long as you can. Breathe deeply and evenly, and when distracted thoughts start trying to crowd their way in, push them gently away by thinking of that moment or image again. If using a photo, what sounds were happening at the time this picture was taken? Who was there? What made you feel so great at that time? Try to put yourself there and imagine that you will always be as successful as you were in that moment.

If thinking of nature, what about this scene makes you feel so relaxed? Think that you will always feel as peaceful as you do now.

## **Dealing With Symptoms of Anxiety**

We've all experienced it—the sweaty palms, the racing heart and dry mouth, and maybe even trouble breathing that come with being anxious. If you experience this a lot, you might want to try doing yoga or muscle relaxation and breathing relaxation exercises.

**Try it out:** Taking yoga, an ancient Indian practice, will immediately teach you to focus on centering yourself and focusing specifically on certain parts of the body. Your teacher will take you through asanas, movements that honor the natural state of the body's energy. These movements are performed slowly, and they are guaranteed to make you slow down, stretch, breathe, become aware of your body, and improve your flexibility.

Before your next big presentation in class or college interview, take a deep breath or two. Try the following deep breathing technique: take a deep breath through your nose, and think about it as it travels through your body. Let your belly expand naturally, and then slowly exhale through your mouth. You may want to count as you do this to make sure you're slowing down, or imagine your breath as one long colored string that is moving in and out of your body.

Then try relaxing the muscles where tension is usually stored—in the neck, arms, and face. First inhale and make fists and then clench every muscle on the way from your hands to your head—your forearms, shoulders, neck, jaw, and facial and eyelid muscles. Hold for the count of two, and then let go, exhaling deeply. This is

guaranteed to let go of stored tension in these areas and will make you aware of where you were holding your emotions.

## Dealing With Task-Related Worries

Sometimes when we are anxious about performing well academically, especially on tests and quizzes, we form bad habits that sap our energy and make us more nervous. If you tend to read and reread a hard question, check the clock every few minutes, peel your nail polish off, or sharpen and resharpen your pencil during tests, you're doing things that are what the Cornell University Center for Learning and Teaching calls "task-generated interference." These are behaviors that actually make it harder for you to focus on the questions and eat away at any time you might use to answer questions and be successful in the situation.

**Try it out:** To fight these habits you've formed, work with an expert. Find a study skills instructor whose job it is to help students plan an order and a pattern of answering harder test questions. This study skills counselor might be in your school's resource room or at an after-school program, and he or she can help you identify specific behaviors that are tripping you up and create a plan to change or reduce these behaviors.

## Dealing With Study Skills Problems

Sometimes it's not your test-taking habits, but your study habits that are problematic. You might have some study skills deficits. Study skills deficits are defined by the Cornell University Center for Learning and Teaching as "problems with your current study methods which create anxiety." This means that your anxiety might come from some less-than-great study habits that aren't allowing you to take in the information you need to do well. You might be reading the wrong parts of descriptions in your textbooks, or focusing on too many details or not enough details about new information. You might be missing key vocabulary in your reading. You might be studying at the last minute and trying to take in too much information, resulting in you not knowing answers to test questions, or you might be taking poor notes during class that lead to you being confused about what the assignment is.



**Try it out:** Work with a study skills counselor to figure out which study habits aren't working, and learn about ones that will work for you. Another strategy you could try is keeping a calendar of your deadlines and test dates. You could also make a daily list to keep track of your obligations. Both these methods are ways to help you manage time but also ways to free up your memory and, thus, reduce stress.

Last, think about your emotions. If the emotional difficulties of feeling academic anxiety are getting to you, it's best to talk to someone else even before you reach

out to a study skills counselor. Again, a study skills counselor is a person in your resource room or at an after-school program whose job it is to help students work on managing their time and finding the best methods of studying for tests. If the pressure to do well is coming at you from all sides, it can make you feel as if there is no one to talk to about your thoughts and fears about performing well in school. In addition to the strategies you can try, there are places to go to find help when the pressure mounts. Two great Web sites that can help with any feelings of inadequacy and depression you might have as a result of school pressures are <http://www.depressedteens.com> and <http://www.sengifted.org>.

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