

## **And I blanked out!**

Amit has been studying for his final examination which is scheduled for next morning. He has been a regular student throughout the year and has been studying diligently. He studies till 1 am in the night. Unable to concentrate any more, he sets the alarm for 6am and dozes off to bed. As he is tense, he is unable to sleep properly, and keeps on tossing and turning in the bed, thinking about the exam with a constant fear of failing. In the morning, he wakes up with a heavy head, much later than the scheduled time, misses breakfast, and barely makes it in time for the examination. He opens up the question paper, his heart is racing, hands are moist with sweat and then he realizes his mind has become completely blank. He is not able to remember anything that he learnt. He tried his best to recall the lessons but couldn't.

Some of us may have lived through a similar experience as Amit's. Feeling stressed and nervous before an exam is a common feeling amongst students. In fact, a little nervousness is essential as it can help us perform well. However, when this distress becomes so severe that it actually interferes with our performance in an exam, it is known as test/examination anxiety.

How does it feel to have Exam anxiety? You paid attention in class, have been regular throughout, made detailed notes, read all chapters thoroughly and prepared well. So, you should do great in the exam, right? But when the question paper is presented, you find yourself so nervous and anxious that your mind blanks out and you're not able to remember answers even for the simplest of questions. If this sounds familiar, then there are chances that you might be experiencing test anxiety.

Test anxiety is a psychological condition in which people experience extreme distress and anxiety in testing situations. While many people experience some degree of stress and anxiety before and during exams, test anxiety can actually impair learning and hurt test performance.

### **Symptoms of test anxiety**

Test anxiety symptoms might vary from student to student, but the following is a list of possible symptoms one might experience:

#### **1. Physical symptoms**

Physical symptoms might include frequent headaches, nausea, excessive sweating, shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, light-headedness, fainting etc. Test anxiety can also cause panic attacks, which are the abrupt onset of intense fear or discomfort in which you may feel like you are unable to breathe or like you are having a heart attack.

#### **2. Emotional symptoms**

Emotional symptoms range from feelings of stress, fear, helplessness, and disappointment, negative thoughts (rumination about past poor performances, consequences of failure, feeling inadequate, helpless) to mind going blank, and racing thoughts.

#### **3. Behavioural and cognitive symptoms**

Few of the behavioural symptoms could be avoiding situations that involve testing, skipping classes or even dropping out of school, difficulty concentrating or focussing your attention, overthinking or thinking negatively, constantly comparing oneself with others, and procrastination.

## **Causes of Test anxiety**

### **1. Fear of failure.**

While the pressure of doing well in an exam can be motivating, it can be detrimental to your self-worth too if you associate the grade of the test with your value.

### **2. Lack of preparation.**

Waiting until the last minute or not studying at all can leave you feeling anxious and overwhelmed.

### **3. Poor test history.**

Not doing well in the previous set of examinations can make you anxious for the current exam. It is important to remember to stay in the present moment when taking an exam so you remain focused. Don't dwell on the past.

### **4. High pressure.**

If you need a certain grade to pass the class, it could increase your test anxiety.

### **5. Perfectionism.**

Perfectionism is having extremely high-performance expectations for yourself. Research studies show that students who have high perfectionism and high self-criticism tend to have high test anxiety and perform poorly in exams. If you struggle with perfectionism, try to let it go. Make sure to take the time to recognize when you have worked hard and allow yourself to make mistakes.

## **How to reduce Test anxiety**

### ***Well before the exam***

1. Be well prepared. Start studying a few weeks well in advance so that you have enough time to prepare for your exam. Organize your study material into smaller chunks over time. Try to make a schedule for yourself.
2. Study effectively. Use effective study strategies that adequately prepare you for your exams and help you learn, understand, and remember study material.
3. Engage in self-care. Take care of your overall health by eating well, getting enough restful sleep, incorporating exercise or movement into your day, and participating in relaxing and fun activities that you enjoy.
4. Create a calming worksheet. This is a small paper exercise that you can carry with you all the time and especially before your exam. On this paper you can put motivational quotes, why you are likely to succeed, breathing techniques, pictures of your supporters, and anything else that will keep you motivated without making you anxious. Create this several days in advance, when you are not stressed and anxious, so that you can turn to it if you do become anxious.

### ***Immediately before the exam***

1. Sleep Well: It is very important to get a good night's sleep (7-8 hours) the night before the exam. Your ability to think clearly and to deal with anxiety improves with sleep.

2. **Eat Well:** Eat well before the exam. This keeps you full and helps with focus and attention. Always carry a bottle of water to stay hydrated.
3. **Avoid too much caffeine:** If you've been hitting the caffeine hard to stay awake and study or to stay focused, know that it can also have a negative impact on your nerves.
4. **Gather all of the materials you need for the exam well in advance,** including a pencil, eraser, or calculator, so that you are not rushing around before the exam.
5. **Arrive to the examination venue early enough to find a seat that will help, not hinder your focus.**
6. **Give yourself a pep talk to reframe your anxiety as excitement.** Actually, telling yourself you're excited will help you see the exam more positively and experience more positive emotions.

### ***During the exam***

1. **Calm your body and sit comfortably.** Take deep breaths if you feel anxious.
2. **Sitting up, relaxing your shoulders, and being mindful of your posture can help you feel more powerful, confident, and assertive.** It makes you less stressed, sluggish, and anxious.
3. **Focus only on present moment to help you stay grounded.**  
Example: "I am sitting at a desk in my college exam hall. It is 2:00 pm on Tuesday."
4. **Avoid thoughts about the future or past.**  
Example: "I need a minimum of 80 percent in this exam in order to improve my overall score."  
Example: "I should have done more practice problems."
5. **Replace negative thoughts with positive ones.**  
Example: "It's okay if I can't answer this question—I can answer another question instead."
6. **Stay focused on the current task, which is to complete the test, not on how you believe it relates to your self-value.**
7. **Keep realistic expectations.** It is not realistic to expect a 100% on an exam. Be okay with doing well, not perfectly.
8. **Focus on yourself and what you are doing.** Ignore other people around you and don't compare yourself to others.

**And most importantly, don't let the exam define you. Remember that your self-worth and intelligence does not depend on your performance on this one exam. All the best!**

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### **Sources**

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