

Test Anxiety and Systematic Desensitization¹

Steps

1. Construct an “anxiety hierarchy” of the types of test-related situations that make you feel anxious, and put it in order, from the situations that make you most anxious (top of hierarchy) to the situations that make you least anxious (bottom of hierarchy). A sample anxiety hierarchy is shown below.
2. Learn to make the relaxation response, e.g., learn to become deeply relaxed at will. A sample progressive relaxation procedure is given below. Practice this progressive relaxation procedure for a few days before moving to step 3.
3. When you can deeply relax at will, try pairing deep relaxation with each of the steps in your anxiety hierarchy, starting at the bottom. In a quiet situation, first relax deeply. Then imagine the lowest item on your anxiety hierarchy. If you can remain relaxed and feel no anxiety, move to the next item. If at any time you begin to feel anxious, you should switch off the mental image and go back to deep relaxation, practicing the progressive relaxation steps again if necessary. A scene should be imagined over and over until you can feel completely relaxed while imagining it.
4. As you encounter the “real thing,” whenever you began to feel anxious, breathe deeply a few times and invoke your relaxation response.

There's no magic bullet here, but following these steps should help you to feel less anxious in a test-taking situation.

Sample Anxiety Hierarchy for Test Anxiety²

High Anxiety Situations

11. You are reading the first test question and cannot remember the correct answer.
10. The class has started and the instructor is handing out exam booklets. The room is noisy as the teacher gives some last minute instructions.
9. You are sitting outside the classroom before the test and overhear two students in your class frantically reviewing. One asks a question and you can't recall the answer.
8. It is 5:00 A.M. and you awaken suddenly with thoughts of the upcoming exam.
7. It is the night before the exam and you are studying as hard as you possibly can; you doubt that you can learn all you need to know.
6. Three days before the exam, an unexpected and distressing family situation arises which prevents you from studying as planned.
5. It is five days before the exam. You wonder if you will have enough time to complete your studying.
4. The teacher reminds the class that the exam is one week away.
3. In class, you overhear two students discussing how difficult the test will be.
2. While completing the first reading assignment, you wonder if you will be able to do well on the exams.
1. The teacher announces on the first day of class that you will have four exams in the course.

Low(er) Anxiety Situations

A Suggested Procedure for Progressive Relaxation³

1. Select a quiet area where you can lie down. Lie in a comfortable position on your back. Place your hands at your sides. Close your eyes and take a deep breath slowly.
2. Clench the fist of your preferred hand. Increase the tension in your arm as much as you can. Think about how this feels. Concentrate on your arm. Now relax your arm and let your fingers straighten out.
3. Repeat the same procedure with your other hand.
4. Take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Make your body feel as limp as you can.
5. Place your hands on the surface you are lying on. Push down as hard as you can. Concentrate on your hands, chest, and back, as these are the areas you will feel tension in. Notice the tension in both arms. Relax your arms so that the tension is released. Repeat this step once.
6. Take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Make your body feel as limp as you can.
7. Frown and close your eyes as tightly as you can. Think about how tight your face feels. Hold this expression for five seconds and then relax. Repeat this step once.
8. Take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Make your body feel as limp as you can.
9. Clench your teeth as hard as you can. Concentrate on the tension in your jaws. Do this for five seconds and then relax. Repeat this procedure once.
10. Take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Make your body feel as limp as you can.
11. Shrug your shoulders until you feel the tension in the top of your shoulders and the back and sides of your neck. Think about the tension you feel and hold this for five seconds. Relax and repeat this procedure once.
12. Take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Make your body feel as limp as you can.
13. Tighten the muscles in your stomach. Hold them in this position for five seconds and then relax them. Repeat this procedure once.
14. Take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Make your body feel as limp as you can.
15. Tighten the muscles in your legs and concentrate on the tight feelings in your leg muscles. Increase the tension and hold it for five seconds. Repeat this procedure once.
16. Take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Make your body feel as limp as you can.
17. Breathe regularly and try to relax each part of your body. Think about your legs, stomach, arms, shoulders, neck, face, and jaws as you do this. Imagine that all the tensions are leaving your body. Try to stay completely inactive for one to two minutes.
18. Begin to think about the first item in the hierarchy.

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1. Systematic Desensitization is a technique used for treating phobias and anxiety, and it is normally discussed along with Chapter 14. This handout may be useful now, however, in reducing stress in preparation for final exams.
 2. Adapted from Eison, J. (1987). Using systematic desensitization and rational emotive therapy to treat test anxiety. In V. P. Makosky et al. (Eds.), **Activities handbook for the teaching of psychology**, 2, p 162. American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.
 3. Adapted from Grasha, A. F. (1987). **Practical applications of psychology**, 3rd ed., p. 459. New York: Addison-Wesley.