

Preparing for tests & exams

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If you have ever looked at a test or exam paper and thought, "I know that I know this but I can't remember anything", if you have stayed awake in the middle of the night worrying about a test the next day, if you have ever felt butterflies in your stomach or a headache whenever you think of an coming test, here are a few ideas for you.

Everybody gets stressed.

Everyone gets stressed during tests and exams, even the people who say that they don't. Look around in a room where people are doing a test or exam. Even those people who are yawning, looking bored or stretching and looking as cool as cucumbers, are stressed.

That means everyone has to learn how to cope with these feelings. It is not just you!

Stress can block your memory, give you a queasy tummy, make you lie awake at night, give you a dry throat or a headache- these aren't nice feelings to have.

Get Stressed

The first strategy to dealing with stress is to get stressed. Huh? Makes no sense? Let me explain.

Stress feels yucky but it is actually your body's way of getting ready to take on a challenge. Stress prepares you to perform at your best. Blood gets pumped to your arms and legs, your heart speeds up, and non-essential services like your digestion slow down- you are ready to take on the world. So stress might feel unpleasant but realising that it is your body's way of revving you up and

helping you to perform at your best, will help you to keep these feelings in perspective.

Write Out Your Worries

The second strategy to deal with the stress of an upcoming test or exam is to grab a piece of paper one or two days before the test and write down all your concerns about it. Write out an answer to the question, "What would happen if I fail this test?" Then write out an answer to the next question, "If I did fail what would happen then?" Read your written answers aloud to yourself.

Even if doing well on this test or exam is really, really important to you, knowing your fears will calm you. Knowing the answer to the question, "If I did fail, what would happen then?" helps you to make a back up plan.

Chew Something.

Ok you've done all of that and you still feel nervy. The third strategy is to eat or chew on something either before or during the test or exam. Check with your teacher that chewing something is allowed in test and exam rooms. If chewing is not allowed, at least chew something just before entering the test. Some jellybeans or fruit would be ideal. Chewing gum is not a good idea.

Stress happens when we feel we are in a dangerous situation. It is an automatic process that we can't completely control. Eating or chewing on something sends a signal to your body that says, "Well, if I'm chewing something I can't be in total danger, so relax a bit."

Focus on now.

Stress can spin your head. It can have you thinking all sorts of weird ideas. Stress can have you remembering that time you failed all those years ago or that time you were so embarrassed by something. Stress can also blow things out of all proportion and have you predicting bad things in your future.

The past is no longer with you and the future hasn't happened yet. Worrying has never changed anything in the past and predictions about the future are usually wrong.

Doing well on a test or exam means you need to focus on the question in front of you now. Keep reminding yourself, "What do I need to do right now?"

Breathe Out - S L O W L Y

When you feel stressed one of the fastest ways to calm down is to breathe out slowly. We all have a calm down system that is controlled by our breathing. If you breathe out and count silently to yourself, "one thousand, two thousand, three thousand", you will start to feel calmer.

Stand tall walk proud

Your brain is incredibly intelligent. In fact, you possess at the top your neck, humanity's latest upgrade- the most intelligent brain in all of history. But! Your brain is also incredibly stupid. It believes what you tell it. This means if you stand-up and maintain a powerful posture your body sends a signal to your brain that tells it you are feeling in charge of things and it can reduce the stress hormones.

Remember the 5 Ps

There is an old saying, "Perfect preparation predicts powerful performance". The best way to prepare for a test or exam is to: study the whole area you have learned;

test yourself;
sort the areas into those that you answered correctly and those you did not;
re-study the areas you answered incorrectly;
re-test yourself;
re-study until you are getting close to 100% right;
test yourself on the entire topic.

Look after yourself

Breakfast- eat "brain food" the morning before a test or exam. Have a higher protein, lower carbohydrate mix at breakfast. That means less toast and more eggs.

Drink water- water lowers your levels of cortisol that causes stressful feelings. Avoid energy drinks as they rev you up and may interfere with your levels of concentration.

Sleep well- try to get a good night's sleep the night before a test or exam. If you are feeling really worried, set an alarm so you can wake up early and do some revision.

Make yourself smarter

The biggest obstacle you face in doing well at a test or exam is not your brain. You have plenty of intelligence. The big issue is your level of anxiety.

If you take the time to prepare for the test or exam and use the strategies suggested in this sheet, you will perform at your best.

Keep Calm and Carry On

You have many, many skills that will NOT be assessed by this test. Tests and exams are important, but they are not the big predictors of life success.

Do your best and prepare as well as you can but don't make the mistake of thinking that your score on a test is a measure of your intelligence or predicts your future.

Andrew's most recent book is "Tricky Teens" (Finch Publishing, 2014)