

Symptoms and Causes of Test Anxiety



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Test anxiety can show up in many ways—and not just as nervous thoughts. It can affect your body, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Understanding these symptoms can help you recognize what’s happening in your own experience, so you can begin to manage it with helpful strategies.

Physical Symptoms

These are the signals your body sends when it feels stressed or threatened.

- Racing heart
- Sweating
- Shaky hands
- Nausea or upset stomach
- Shortness of breath
- Headache or dizziness



Emotional Symptoms

Your emotions may become more intense or overwhelming.

- Feelings of panic or dread
- Irritability or frustration
- Fear of failure
- Feeling helpless or hopeless

Cognitive Symptoms

These affect how you think before or during a test.

- Negative self-talk (e.g., “I’m going to fail”)
- Difficulty concentrating
- Racing or jumbled thoughts
- Forgetting information you studied
- Overthinking every question



Behavioral Symptoms

These involve what you *do* (or don’t do) in response to the anxiety.

- Avoiding studying or procrastinating
- Cramming the night before
- Overstudying or obsessing
- Withdrawing from others
- Skipping tests or leaving them early

Test Anxiety Symptoms Checklist

Instructions: Check off any symptoms you experience before, during, or after a test. This can help you understand how test anxiety affects you and identify areas to focus on when developing coping strategies.

1. Physical Symptoms (Body Reactions)

- Racing heartbeat or chest tightness
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Sweating (hands, face, or body)
- Nausea, stomach pain, or digestive issues
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Headaches or muscle tension
- Shaking or trembling hands
- Feeling hot or cold suddenly



2. Emotional Symptoms (Feelings & Mood)

- Feeling overwhelmed or panicked
- Intense fear of failing, even if prepared
- Feeling helpless or out of control
- Increased irritability or frustration
- Feeling discouraged or like giving up
- Mood swings before or after the test



3. Cognitive Symptoms (Thinking Patterns)

- Racing thoughts or difficulty concentrating
- Mind going blank during the test
- Overanalyzing questions and second-guessing answers
- Negative self-talk (e.g., "I'm going to fail," "I'm not smart enough")
- Comparing yourself to others and feeling inferior
- Difficulty recalling studied information

4. Behavioral Symptoms (Actions & Habits)

- Procrastinating or avoiding studying
- Overstudying to the point of exhaustion
- Difficulty sleeping the night before a test
- Frequently needing bathroom breaks during a test
- Rushing through the test or freezing up
- Avoiding tests or skipping them entirely