

# Test Strategies: Barriers to Test Performance

Academic Success Center



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Stress and test performance are related to each other. For most people, test performance falls off because they are over-stimulated by stress in their lives. These life stressed can be divided into physical barriers (body), cognitive barriers (thoughts), and preparation.

## Physical Barriers to Test Performance

Just before you take a test or during the test itself, so you experience: jitters, sweaty palms, stomach or bowel pains, racing pulse, heart pounding, or the inability to focus and concentrate? These are physiological symptoms of stress. Here are some ways to reduce their effects.

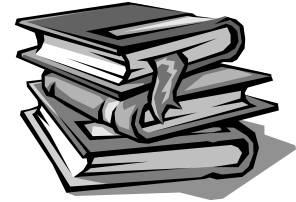
1. **Get plenty of sleep** the night before the test. If you are sleepy, your ability to think clearly and to remember will be affected. Cramming is an ineffective study strategy that inhibits recall.
2. **Avoid stimulus like coffee or sugar** prior to test. Skip your morning coffee and don't eat the sweet roll. These substances add chemical stress. Don't take stimulants or drink coffee to stay awake the night before the test.
3. **Eat a balanced diet.** It is important for optimal functioning that your body has all the nutrients it requires. Eat foods from all four food groups and don't skip meals.
4. **Learn to relax.** Take time to learn about relaxation process and what works for you. The techniques you choose should feel comfortable, be brief and be the type you could do in the testing room in front of other people (hot baths work but are impractical).

Here are some ideas:

- ◆ Breathe deeply but slowly for 30 seconds. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- ◆ Imagine heavy weights on each shoulder and push down and stretch the muscles of your neck and shoulders.
- ◆ Visualize your anxiety as a color concentrated in different parts of your body. Visualize the colors slowly draining out through your hands and feet.
- ◆ Say to yourself, "I am relaxed in my body, I am relaxed in my mind, now I am ready."

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## Cognitive Barriers to Test Performance

Just before you take a test or during the test itself, do you spend a lot of time worrying about your performance? Do you expect to do poorly on the test no matter how much time you spend in preparation? Do you talk to yourself and tell yourself how badly you are doing? These self-statements or “self-talk” are barrier to your test performance. Here are some examples of cognitive errors:

1. **Overgeneralizations:** “I can never get math,” or “I always do poorly on essay tests.”
2. **Catastrophizing:** “Taking a test is a horrible experience,” or “If I do poorly on this test, I’ll ruin my whole life.”
3. **Using an Inappropriate Example:** “My uncle Larry flunked this course when he was in college,” or “This guy in my Spanish class told me that Professor Johnson gives horrible tests.”
4. **Improper Inference:** “I just have to accept that I will never do well on tests.”
5. **Conflicting Goals:** “I want to do well on this test, but I just have to make the party on the night before.”
6. **Personalization:** “If I flunk this test, I’ll consider myself a total failure.”
7. **Using a Single Standard:** “I have to get at least a ‘B’ on this test or it won’t mean a thing.”

Many other examples are possible. “Self-talk” is as individual as the people who take tests. Listen to what you say to others and then listen to what you say to yourself. Learn to ask yourself the questions.

**“What am I telling myself that is making it harder for me to perform well on this test?”**

Begin constructing positive self-statements to replace counter-productive, negative self-talk. Use affirming statements while you study and when taking tests. Remind yourself of past successes, how well you’ve prepared, and your knowledge of the material. Visualize yourself doing well on the exam; most importantly, visualize yourself doing **YOUR BEST!** Remember, an exam grade represents only your performance on the particular test, not your overall knowledge.

## Preparation Barriers to Test Performance

Maybe you aren’t experiencing the kind of symptoms mentioned in the first two sections. No matter how physiologically calm you are, no matter how cognitively clear and confident you are, you aren’t very likely to do well on a test for which you didn’t spend the time to prepare. Remember this old saying:

**“Aim at nothing and you will hit the target every time.”**