

How can you reduce your test anxiety? That depends on the individual - I even heard someone tell me that the potassium in bananas can be helpful. Here are some ideas:

PREPARING FOR THE TEST

1) Print out my sample problems on my web site (or pick some tricky homework problems, maybe), and try to answer those questions under timed "test-like" conditions - i.e., while sitting in a chair in a quiet room with no other distractions. This kind of "test simulation" may psychologically prepare you for the real thing. You may even want to do this in our classroom, for a few minutes before the exam. Intentionally put time pressure on yourself during these practice/trial runs! The time pressure that you slam onto yourself during the actual exam may be a key source of your stress.

2) Identify particular problems that cause you trouble and common mistakes that you make (sign errors? calculator mistakes?). Mark them in your homework. You may want to design a sample test using these problems. Actually, the harder your sample test, the better. It will make the real thing look better by comparison. Prepare for the worst, but hope for the best!

3) Study smart, not just long. When I was in college, I put in my fair number of hours studying, but, looking back, I could have studied a lot smarter and more efficiently. Although rote repetition can be helpful, make an active effort to identify problem types that tend to stump you.

4) Even if you're not allowed notes during the test, you may want to design a sheet of notes for your own reference and study (work on this every day up to the test) - the sheet can contain formulas, key/common mistakes, interesting homework problems, tricky maneuvers, etc. Wouldn't you rather study one sheet of notes on the day of an exam as opposed to piles of homework - or the book?

5) Make flash cards! Index cards will do. Put a variety of problems on the front of these cards (the test will require you to think across sections, unlike on the homework). On the back, you can write down the key hint(s), general methods, or common mistakes. It may not be necessary to write out the entire solution. You may be better off with many flash cards with short "answers" than fewer flash cards with elaborate mechanical solutions.

6) Get lots of sleep during the preceding 48 hours!

ON THE DAY OF THE TEST

7) Study groups are great, but avoid discussing the test with other people right before you take it - stress tends to be contagious.

8) Try deep breathing for 30 minutes before the test, but make sure you are breathing regularly during the test.

9) Don't procrastinate to the point where you're learning new material on the day of the test.

10) Food can make a difference. Fish, chicken, and lowfat yogurt are good "brain food"; fatty foods and large meals are bad. Calming foods include cereal, crackers, pasta, rice, potatoes, bread, and corn. Avoid excessive caffeine.

DURING THE TEST

11) Do a "mind dump" as soon as you get the test. What's a mind dump? It's when you immediately write down all the formulas and key theorems and ideas on the corner of a test page or on the back of the test. This is NOT cheating, as long as you don't use other materials while doing this. This mind dump can serve as a "legal" crib sheet that you can lean on during the test.

12) Circle or underline key words in the problem.

13) Do the easiest problems first - these are not necessarily the first problems on the test! This will warm you up mathematically, and it will increase your confidence as you succeed through this "pyramid" of questions. You don't have to do the questions on the test in order! Just remember to star and go back to the more difficult problems.

14) Don't spend too much time on any one problem. If you get stuck, you're more likely to come up with new ideas if you come back to it later than if you keep staring at it.

15) Keep positive statements in your mind; push away negative thoughts - they become self-fulfilling prophecies - think "STOP!" and "CALM!" when they arise.

16) Write down what you know; there may be partial credit! Anything's better than a blank sheet.

17) Use the entire test period to finish the test. Don't be distracted by students who leave the room - some of them leave early because they're too stressed and they've quit. Some of the best students in a class stay and utilize all the time - it is NOT a sign of weakness, and teachers respect your conscientiousness! I was a good college student, and I was often the last person in the room during a test.

18) If you have time, check and proofread at the end. Try to redo problems from scratch; staring at a solution you've worked out tends not to be effective, as it is easy to overlook your own mistakes, especially so soon after you make them. Compare your second solution with your first; inconsistencies will point you to possible errors. I find that this approach works really well for me when I check solutions for your exams.

19) Remember that it's OK to have SOME anxiety - in fact, people tend to perform best when they feel SOMEWHAT anxious, but not too anxious!

Most of all, don't take setbacks personally - instead, look for ways to solve the problem. I never make personal judgments regarding exam results, and you shouldn't, either.