WHAT IS TEST ANXIETY?
Test anxiety is a type of performance anxiety characterized by an extreme or irrational level of physical and/or psychological distress before, during, and even after an exam. Although many people feel a little anxious about an upcoming exam, test anxiety can dramatically hinder learning and lower performance.

WHAT CAUSES TEST ANXIETY?
Anxiety is a normal part of life. A little anxiety (arousal) is necessary to keep us awake and alert and a moderate amount actually enhances motivation and performance. Beyond a point, however, anxiety is harmful.

True test anxiety should be distinguished from other causes of anxiety about an upcoming exam, such as not studying enough, not studying effectively, or generally not being prepared. If you’re anxious about an upcoming exam because you know you have not adequately prepared, then you’re probably justifiably nervous, but that isn’t the same thing as test anxiety.

The physical manifestations of test anxiety (see below) are triggered by the body’s “fight or flight” response, and experiencing these symptoms can actually make the sufferer more anxious. However, it is generally not the physical symptoms that lower performance, but rather the emotionality, worrying, and negative self-talk, which distract from the task at hand and impact negatively on cognition. Non-task related thought processes come to dominate both the test-taker’s time and short-term memory storage space, decreasing their ability to focus, reason, and problem solve.

Test anxiety can have a number of underlying psychological causes, including low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, fear of failure, etc., and can be very difficult to “self-treat.” Professional assistance is strongly recommended.

WHAT ARE THE MANIFESTATIONS OF TEST ANXIETY?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical</th>
<th>Behavioral</th>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Sweating</td>
<td>✓ Pacing / fidgeting</td>
<td>✓ Anger / frustration / fear</td>
<td>✓ Inability to recall previously known</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Cold, clammy skin</td>
<td>✓ Avoidance / procrastination</td>
<td>✓ Nervousness</td>
<td>information, e.g., “Blanking”</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Dry mouth</td>
<td>✓ Giving up</td>
<td>✓ Hopelessness / helplessness</td>
<td>✓ Inability to focus / concentrate</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Trembling / shaking</td>
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<td>✓ Depression</td>
<td>✓ Racing thoughts</td>
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<td>✓ Rapid heart rate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>✓ Negative self-talk / worry / distracting</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Chest tightness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>thoughts of failure / “what if” thoughts</td>
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<td>✓ Difficulty catching breath / rapid breathing</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Nausea / vomiting / diarrhea or constipation / stomach cramps</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Frequent urination</td>
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<td>✓ Headaches</td>
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<td>✓ Muscle tension</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Lightheadedness / fainting</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Insomnia</td>
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</table>
WHAT ARE SOME “SELF HELP” STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH TEST ANXIETY?

Prior to Test Day

 ✓ Develop good study and test-taking skills / habits to build confidence in ability to perform
 ✓ Ensure adequate preparation for the test – this should include learning about the exam (topics covered, # of questions, question format, time allotted), developing a comprehensive review schedule, studying effectively, and self-testing frequently to guide your content review
 ✓ Practice stress reduction and relaxation techniques (exercise, deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation)
 ✓ Have a positive mental attitude, practice positive self-talk, and visualize success
 ✓ Get plenty of sleep each night, especially the night before the exam

On Test Day

 ✓ Eat a light meal/snack before the exam to settle your stomach and stave off distracting hunger pangs
 ✓ Avoid drinking caffeinated beverages (coffee, tea, energy drinks) prior to or during the exam – these can trigger and exacerbate anxiety
 ✓ Arrive early to the test location
 ✓ Avoid discussing the exam with classmates who are anxious or who make you feel anxious
 ✓ Avoid cramming right before the test
 ✓ Try not to misinterpret physical symptoms of anxiety as meaning that you will fail – anxiety is a normal physiological response to stressful situations – try to calm down and go with the flow
 ✓ Spend 10 minutes prior to exam focusing on relaxing (e.g., practice deep breathing)
 ✓ Take 10 minutes before the exam to write specifically about your anxiety – how you feel, what you’re worried about, etc. – this pre-exam “venting” has been demonstrated to help
 ✓ During the exam:
   o Remain calm
   o Focus on one question at a time
   o Focus on answering the questions, not on your grade
   o Remind yourself to stay on task
   o Challenge negative self-talk, “I’m going to fail,” with positive messages, “I studied for this and I will do my best”
   o If you feel yourself beginning to panic, take three slow, deep breaths
   o Practice good time management strategies, e.g., moving on when a question has you stumped

WHEN SHOULD YOU SEEK PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE?

Test anxiety can be extremely debilitating. You should seek help as soon as possible, and especially if/when you feel that you cannot cope on your own. Do not feel ashamed! Test anxiety is very common and is not a sign of weakness.

For a counseling appointment, contact the MSUCOM Office of Personal Counseling and Health Promotion representative at your site: http://www.com.msu.edu/Students/Personal%20Counseling%20and%20Health%20Promotion.htm

Additional resources:
Test anxiety – Minnesota State University: http://www.mnsu.edu/counseling/students/tanxiety.html