The PSATs, SATs, and ACTs are a rite of passage for college-bound students, since most schools require applicants to submit their test score as part of their admission package. Taking any test is challenging, so it’s perfectly normal to be a little nervous and stressed before taking these standardized tests. Though a little anxiety can keep you focused, for some test takers, this anxiety is more intense and impacts performance.

“Being anxious about taking tests is very common, especially the SATs, because there is so much pressure from teachers, parents, and peers on students to get good scores,” says Ellen Smith, a licensed clinical social worker and certified health coach. “Often, getting into the college of their choice is at stake.”

It’s no secret these are tough tests and a respectable score can be a critical component of your college application. Yet, while you should take these tests seriously, you shouldn’t take them so seriously that you make yourself crazy! “The SAT, while an important part of a student’s application package, is still just one part of that package,” says Ronnie Demler, a professional SAT coach. “We should be careful to not over-emphasize its importance.”

“Keep [standardized tests] in perspective. Find the reality of each admission situation so you can determine how, if at all, your results may be factored into the admission decision. Then, prepare accordingly,” says Peter Van Buskirk, speaker, former admission counselor, and author of *Winning the College Admission Game: Strategies for Parents & Students*. “A strong overall academic record puts the student on the competitive playing field at such places.”

Marty O’Connell, Executive Director of Colleges That Change Lives, agrees. “The most important aspect of the college admission process is the student’s high school record: the kinds of classes taken and the cumulative grade point average,” she says. “For colleges who use standardized tests, each determine the amount of relevance that testing carries among other factors beyond the high school record.”

Then again, not all colleges that use standardized tests require them. According to the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, there are roughly 850 four-year colleges that do not require standardized tests as part of the admission process for a “substantial” number of students—though they may require graded writing samples or other examples of your work in lieu of the tests. “These test-optional schools should be given serious consideration by students who are really worried about the impact of relatively modest scores,” Van Buskirk says.

Test anxiety can be potentially serious when it leads to such high levels of stress that students actually underperform. For some, the nervousness and self-doubt they feel before a test is so intense that it impacts their concentration. “Like other anxiety reactions, test anxiety affects the body and the mind,” Smith says. “There are physical symptoms, such as a pounding pulse, nausea, rapid breathing, sweating, and/or butterflies. The mental symptoms include an inability to organize thoughts, forgetting what you know, careless mistakes, reading without understanding the questions, and blanking out.” These symptoms range from mild to severe and can interfere with your test-taking ability and how well you do on exams.

Not so surprisingly this anxiety is a common barrier to achieving a maximum score on the SAT, ACT, and other standardized tests. But you can break that barrier down in a few simple ways. “Most stress stems from not having enough information about the testing process and fearing what might happen,” O’Connell says. “Taking sample tests in advance to become familiar with test format, to learn how to focus for four hours and discover strengths and weaknesses, will go a long way to reducing test anxiety.”

Even if you have test anxiety, you can improve your scores and perform at your best when the
pressure is on. It starts with being prepared, which will reinforce your confidence and allow some of that anxiety to slip away. Preparing for tests well in advance may sound like a drag, but the results will be worth the effort. Feeling ready to meet the challenge can keep test anxiety from spinning out of control.

If you have a tendency towards test anxiety, developing ways to cope will allow you to do your best. “There are no shortcuts,” Demler says. “It’s not wise to look for a trick that will dramatically raise your score with little effort.” He adds, “Those students who are very well prepared tend to have less anxiety.” In his experience, Demler says true confidence comes from competence, not psychological tricks. Follow these tips to reduce your anxiety so you can make your way calmly through the test.

**It’s about time**

Establish a study plan, make a commitment, and schedule it over time. “Studying in a consistent manner will decrease test anxiety,” Smith says. “Waiting to the last minute to cram is not helpful when managing anxiety.” No amount of cramming can replace the deeper learning that happens over time with regular studying.

**Set a goal**

Know the average score of students admitted to your favorite college; this will be your target score, which may help reduce your stress if you know you scored within that range during practice tests. “Gather testing data for those colleges you are interested in applying to by checking

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### Test Prep Do’s and Don’ts

**Do** expect some anxiety. It’s normal, and sometimes an elevated stress level can drive you to do better!

**Don’t** spend too much time on one question. If it’s confusing or time consuming, move on and return to it later if you can.

**Do** read the directions carefully and read the entire question before answering.

**Don’t** leave answers blank or guess randomly. Eliminate choices you know are incorrect to make an educated guess.

**Do** pace yourself.

**Don’t** change an answer unless you’re certain that you have misread or misinterpreted the question—your first answer is usually right!

**Do** review your answers if you finish early, and make sure you have answered all the questions.

**Don’t** panic if your classmates finish before you. Stay focused, concentrate on your test, and keep working.

**Do** remember to do the simple things: get a good night’s sleep, eat breakfast, and pack the things you need for the test (like a calculator and extra pencils) the night before.
most recent profiles of the class admitted and enrolled,” O’Connell says. “Once you are aware of the test scores for the 25th/50th/75th percentile of students, you will know where you stand and how you need to score to be a competitive applicant for admission.”

Focus on learning
Be prepared to dedicate 100% of your energy into studying. In fact, 20–50 minute chunks of highly focused studying are more valuable than two hours of ineffective work. Texting your friends, updating your Facebook status, or listening to music while studying is not helpful—it’s distracting.

Practice makes perfect
“Take many practice tests, under realistic conditions,” Demler says. “Make sure to time yourself and go over every single question you get wrong or skip.” Everyone makes mistakes, so go easy on yourself and look at them as learning opportunities, not failures. With time and practice come a familiarity with the test that should make you much more comfortable when you take the real thing!

Practice relaxing too!
Integrate relaxation techniques into your routine to call upon right before your test and during the test to help you stay calm, confident, and focused. This might include things like deep breathing, imagining a positive outcome, or repeating positive mantras. “These techniques will help reduce anxiety, make testing less stressful, and help you focus,” Smith says. “Watch for negative messages you might be sending yourself about the test, which can contribute to anxiety.” If you find yourself thinking negatively, replace those thoughts with positive thinking: I am well prepared, I can do this. (Followed by a nice deep breath!)

Establish a consistent pre-test routine
Learn what works to reduce your anxiety and follow those steps every time you get ready to take a test!

Read, read, and read some more
“My students who enjoy reading and spend many hours a week reading for pleasure usually do extremely well on the Critical Reading and Writing sections of the SAT,” Demler says. “Again, there is no shortcut here; spend at least an extra hour reading every single day. Read the classics of English literature. Read newspapers. Read magazine articles. Doing so will improve your grammar, your vocabulary, your reading comprehension skills, your reading speed, and even your writing skills.”

Seek support
Your school guidance counselor can be a terrific resource to help you work through thoughts that worsen your test anxiety. You should also try speaking with your parents who might then pay for tutoring so you can do your best on test day! Your school or local library may offer free SAT prep, study skill workshops, or other resources that can help you learn more efficient test-taking strategies.

Do You Have Test Anxiety?
Think you might have test anxiety? Take our quiz to find out. Of course, another test might be the last thing you want to see, but this quiz is short, simple, and there are no wrong answers!

I worry that I am not well prepared for tests even though I have studied diligently.
Always Sometimes Rarely

When I get in the classroom on a test day, I am so nervous that I start to forget what I learned.
Always Sometimes Rarely

During a test all I can think about is potentially failing.
Always Sometimes Rarely

My grades don’t reflect the effort I put into studying.
Always Sometimes Rarely

Before a test, I doubt my knowledge of the material.
Always Sometimes Rarely

When my teacher hands out tests, I feel panicked and overwhelmed.
Always Sometimes Rarely

During a test I sweat, feel nauseous, my hands shake, and my pulse races.
Always Sometimes Rarely

During a test I tend to make careless mistakes.
Always Sometimes Rarely

Before a test I am so worried about worst-case scenarios that I procrastinate in studying.
Always Sometimes Rarely

Mostly A’s: Sounds like you’re experiencing some pretty intense test anxiety. But that’s okay! Plenty of people do. Try talking to your academic/guidance counselor and even your friends and family about coping with stress and gaining additional support.

Mostly B’s: You seem to have a common level of test anxiety. Remember not to let those anxious moments get the best of you, and if you ever feel your stress levels getting out of whack, talk to trusted advisors and friends about keeping your cool.

Mostly C’s: Test anxiety? What test anxiety?! You have confidence to spare, and as long as you’re doing well on those tests, that’s great. Just don’t let your breezy attitude carry you away if you notice your grades slipping!

Catch some ZZZ’s
Forget about all-nighters. Researchers say getting a good night’s sleep before your exam is the key to doing well. Not to mention sleep deprivation can negatively impact performance, energy level, ability to focus, and concentration.

Have great expectations
Remember to think positively but realistically, to avoid perfectionism but still aim for excellence. Standardized tests are important, but they will not decide your future—that lies in your hands.

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