

# College Students: How to Conquer Exam Anxiety and Avoid a Nervous Breakdown

Is your exam anxiety just nerves or true test anxiety? Here's how to tell

Joanna Nesbit (@joannanesbit)  
Health  
(October 21, 2015)



(Photo: Dmytro Zinkevych/Shutterstock)

If you're a college student, you're probably worrying about your upcoming mid-term or final exams. That's normal. "The principle stressor of college students is whether they'll do well on their work. It's a bigger fear than dating or the social scene," says Richard Driscoll, PhD, a Denver-area psychologist and director of the **American Test Anxieties Association** (AMTAA).

While many students feel nervous — which actually **can help on a test** — some experience true test anxiety. According to the AMTAA, 20 percent of students have high test anxiety and 16 percent experience moderate test anxiety.

It's a form of performance anxiety, like stage fright, and can bring on physical symptoms such as headaches, butterflies, nausea and the jitters. It is caused by a fear of failure, being prone to perfectionism or feeling unprepared. Performing poorly on past tests also can increase anxiety, but students with high test anxiety can perform well and still feel stressed about the next one, Driscoll says.

If you tend to worry about exams or procrastinate on studying because you feel overwhelmed, here's how to tame your anxiety — and stay healthy.

*Related:* [9 \(Almost\) Instant Stress-Busting Strategies](#)

**Study up.** Knowing you've learned the material can help a lot. Good study skills go beyond attending the class lecture. Learn how to take and organize good notes, keep up with required reading and break studying into manageable chunks, advises **KidsHealth.org** and the **Educational Testing Service** (ETS), a nonprofit educational testing organization. Knowing the test format also can help. Will it be essays or multiple choice? And don't put off studying until the night before the exam.

**Keep grades in perspective.** Your exam grade is not a measure of your self-worth. If you're particularly prone to worrying about grades, try to remember that tests are a learning opportunity, and people don't think less of you if you don't do well. Learning to take academic bumps in stride is a valuable skill, notes the **Anxiety and Depression Association of America**.

**Nix negative talk.** It's easy to fall into thoughts like, "I'm not a good test-taker" or "I didn't prepare well enough," but thinking this way can make test anxiety worse. Send yourself realistic, positive messages: "I've done my best, and I'm ready" or "I will pass, but if I fail I can bounce back," ETS says.

*Related:* [The Freshman 15 is a Myth, but Weight Gain in College Isn't](#)

**Cultivate confidence.** To capture that confident feeling, Driscoll recommends envisioning a challenging experience you enjoy — soccer, horseback riding, rock climbing. Focus on the feeling you get during that experience while imagining a test situation in which you know the answer to the first question and feel a positive rush. That feeling can reduce test anxiety. The trick is to access it in a testing situation.

**Ask for help.** If you suffer test anxiety to the degree it interferes with passing exams, ask your college counseling center if they offer test anxiety reduction services. Many do, the AMTAA says. Many test-anxious students are ashamed of their fears and feel anxious about being anxious. But test anxiety can be successfully treated, the AMTAA says.

**Take care of yourself.** Eat well, exercise regularly and **get enough sleep** on a regular basis. Research shows lack of sleep contributes to lack of concentration and memory loss. Take regular study breaks to socialize, and try to surround yourself with positive people.

*Related:* [6 Things You Shouldn't Do When You're Sleep Deprived](#)

Once you've been through your first set of exams, you may feel more confident about your study skills and ability to handle college tests. But if you seem to get more stressed out by exams than your peers do, **check out Driscoll's anxiety scale** to see if you might benefit from some help.

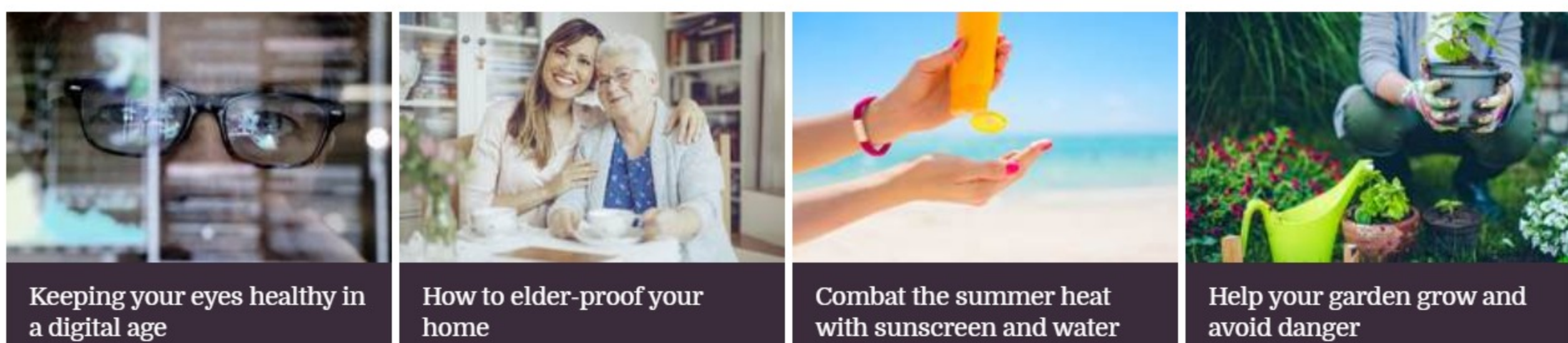
*Joanna Nesbit is a freelance writer specializing in education, parenting, lifestyle and family travel.*



< **PREV**

**Women Should Get Annual Mammograms Starting at Age 45**

YOU MAY ALSO LIKE



Top 10 Stories

1. Guide to Mold Colors and What They Mean
2. The Verification Code Scam: Don't Fall for It
3. How to Tell if Chicken Is Bad
4. 3 Things You Should Never Put in Your Safe-Deposit Box — and 6 Things You Should
5. 13 Health Symptoms Dog Owners Should Never Ignore
6. 8 Signs You May Have a Problem with Your Electrical Wiring
7. The Safe Way to Use a Humidifier
8. How to Tell If an Egg Is Bad
9. Timber! 7 Signs a Tree May Be About to Fall
10. Bedbugs: How to Avoid Bringing Them Home from Your Vacation

Ask the Expert

- [Guide to Power Strips and Surge Protectors](#)
- [Ask UL: Cooking Safety](#)
- [Ask the Expert: LED and CFL Light Bulbs](#)

[MORE ASK THE EXPERT »](#)