

Student Mental Health in Action

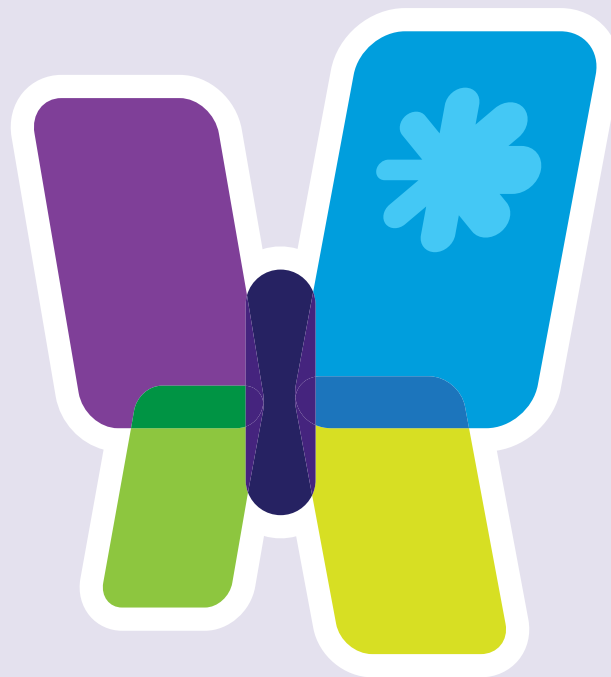
Test and Exam Stress: Strategies to Perform at Your Best

STUDENT JOURNAL

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About this journal

This journal is designed to help you manage that stress and know how to reach out for support, if you need it. As you move through the lesson, consider the ideas and strategies shared and create your personal stress management plan. Then you'll have the plan to use whenever you need it.

Practising the strategies when you're not stressed will help you use them when you are. And remember, you're worth so much more than your marks!

Free space. Make this journal yours!

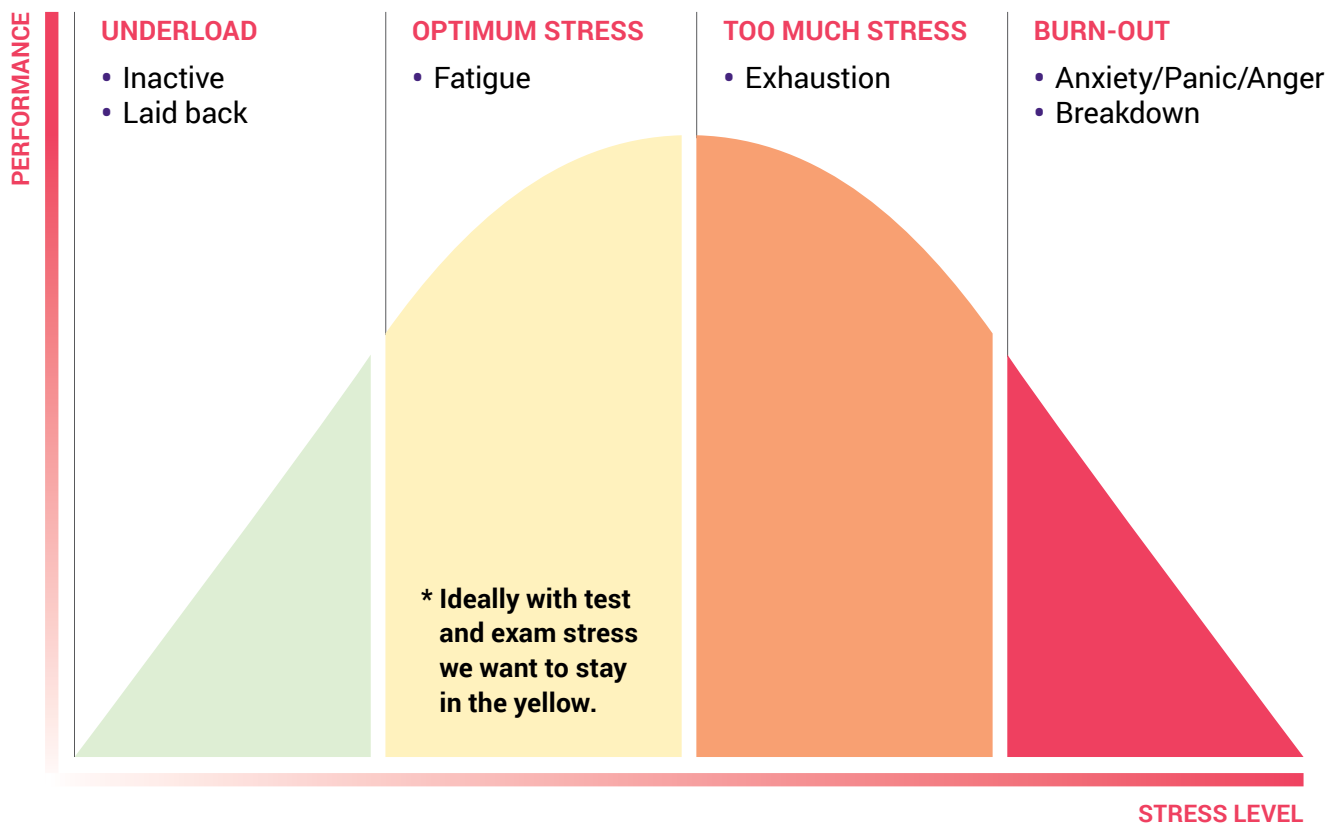




Part 1

What is test and exam stress and where does it come from?

Test and exam stress is the pressure, tension, nervousness, and sometimes worry we feel before or during test-taking situations (and other types of assessments). It can involve thoughts about being evaluated and the consequences if we don't do well. Most people feel some stress when they are about to write a test or exam, or when they are performing in some other way.



Stress can be a good thing! Some nervousness can help motivate us to work hard, focus, and perform our best. But if the stress gets too big, it can get in the way of our ability to study for tests and exams and to show what we know when we are taking them. That's because when worries are too big, they take up space and resources in our brains that we need for the test or exam, like our ability to remember and work with information (our working memory). This tends to affect our ability to solve complex and challenging questions more than simpler ones, like remembering basic facts. It can make the hard stuff even harder.

Test and exam stress can come from many places.

Rank these factors related to test and exam stress from 1 to 6, with 1 being the factor that impacts you the most and 6 being the factor that impacts you the least.

FACTOR	RANK
Routines (e.g., physical activity, substance use, nutrition, sleep)	
Study style (ineffective ways of studying, time-management difficulties)	
Things at school (e.g., timed tests, the scheduling of many tests within a short period, classes that aren't a good fit for you, lack of opportunity to take tests/exams during COVID)	
Things outside of school interfering with studying or concentrating on an exam (e.g., social media, the demands of a job, family situations)	
Pressure (from yourself and from others)	
Thinking style (e.g., over focusing on the outcome of a test or exam and wanting to get a certain mark; self-criticism; over focusing on how classmates, friends, or siblings are doing in school)	





Part 2

How do test and exam stress appear for you?

Before you jump into strategies to manage test and exam stress, think about some of the ways that test and exam stress appear for you. It's different for everyone and knowing what it looks like for you can help you choose strategies that will help.

WHEN I WRITE TESTS AND EXAMS, I NOTICE...	
My body feels (physical)...	Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel hot, tense, and/or get a stomach-ache. • I have trouble sleeping.
I act (behaviour)...	Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I procrastinate. • I'm less social than usual.
I feel (emotions)...	Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I worry a lot. • I lack confidence/doubt myself.
I think...	Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I compare myself negatively to friends/classmates/siblings. • I have negative thoughts about past tests and myself.





Part 3

What can you do about test and exam stress?

STRATEGY 1: BUILD HEALTHY ROUTINES

Here are some strategies to support healthy routines while managing test and exam stress. How are you doing? Using the legend below, identify the strategies you've tried that worked well for you, those that didn't work well for you, and those you haven't tried but might like to.

Legend:

MEANING	SYMBOL
Strategies you've tried that worked well for you	o
Strategies you've tried that didn't work well for you	x
Strategies you haven't tried but might like to	?

HEALTHY ROUTINE	WHY IT MATTERS	RATING
Sleep	If your brain is rested, it can learn and remember better and think better during tests and exams. Research also shows that sleeping after learning/studying helps memory consolidation and sleep also helps us manage stress.	
Nutrition	Your brain needs vitamins, minerals, and nutrition to work its best. Try to eat well before a test or exam, if you can.	
Hydration	Your brain needs hydration (e.g., water) to focus and be efficient. A hydrated brain performs faster than a dehydrated one.	
Physical activity	Physical activity improves memory and attention. If you can, it's great to get moving during study breaks (or even while studying) and before tests and exams, at a level appropriate for you.	
Stimulant use	Things like energy drinks, caffeine, and nicotine can increase anxiety and interfere with sleep, especially if you have them later in the day. Try to limit them, if you can.	



HEALTHY ROUTINE	WHY IT MATTERS	RATING
Scheduling	Scheduling can help you make the most of your time and see your goals and the steps you are taking toward them. It can also help you stay on track, prioritize healthy routines, and feel in control. Aim for a schedule you can maintain and be sure to include breaks and downtime. They give your brain time to consolidate information and do other things that support your learning (like eating, relaxing, or moving). Blocking time for fun is important, too!	
Prioritizing	Prioritizing can help you ensure the important stuff is covered. Prioritize the hardest tasks during your peak learning/energy times.	
Staying connected	Sometimes when we are stressed, we withdraw. But a healthy social support network is essential to physical and mental well-being. It can positively impact everything from our ability to cope with stress to our self-esteem and our blood pressure.	

STRATEGY 2: BUILD YOUR STUDY AND TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES

Here are some strategies that may support you during tests and exams. As you go through them, think about which fit the way you learn.

Check the ones that suit your learning style! Next time you're studying for a test or exam, come back to this table and try some of the strategies you've checked off.

STRATEGIES	
Study strategies	<p>Before you start studying, organize material into the way you learn and remember best (e.g., use graphic organizers, if you are visual).</p> <p>Focus on learning the content (understanding it); then focus on studying it (remembering it). Aim for understanding material, not just memorizing.</p> <p>Plan your studying. Set up a study schedule that puts the hardest parts of each course as early as possible so if you need more time to learn and practice, you have it.</p> <p>Avoid cramming and take breaks. Multiple short study sessions are better for your brain than one long one.</p> <p>Avoid procrastination (try an easy task or set a timer for five minutes to try to get going).</p> <p>Be active when you study. For example, create flash cards, test yourself, or teach the material to someone else. Reading and re-reading information is usually not enough.</p>



STRATEGIES	
Study strategies (continued)	<p>Prioritize multiple tests/exams by both when they occur and their difficulty level.</p> <p>Ask for help sooner versus later.</p> <p>If you have an individual education/learning plan (IEP) that includes accommodations, work with your teacher to make sure you'll have access to them during the test/exam. Know what you are entitled to.</p>
Right before the test or exam	<p>Try not to study right up until the minute you write a test or exam. Give yourself a few minutes to take a break. Listen to music, take a quick walk, or do something else that helps calm you.</p> <p>Try to avoid friends/classmates who are stressing or cramming—and be mindful of the impact you can have on others, too.</p> <p>Do a brain dump of your worries. Write down your thoughts and feelings about the test or exam on a piece of paper. Then crumple up the paper and throw it away.</p>
Before you begin the test or exam	<p>Take some deep breaths and remind yourself to use relaxation strategies.</p> <p>Do an information dump; jot down any memorized material you're concerned about remembering (e.g., formulas or equations) on any extra space on your test paper.</p>
During the test or exam	<p>Take a quick look at the entire exam to help you decide where to begin and how much time to spend on each question. Plan your time based on the value of each section.</p> <p>Read directions carefully and underline key terms and phrases (e.g., compare, contrast, define, explain, summarize).</p> <p>Do easy questions first. They can help give you clues for more challenging questions and build your confidence.</p> <p>Don't stay on questions that stress you out; mark them so you can go back but move on to the rest of the test first.</p> <p>If you get stuck, put down what you can. Start with anything!</p> <p>If you have time, re-read your exam to catch mistakes and make sure you've answered questions as well as you can.</p>

STRATEGIES

After the test or exam

Avoid searching back through your notes to see what you got wrong or forgot to include.

Avoid comparing your answers with those of your classmates.

Reward yourself. Do something you enjoy!

Keep practicing positive self-talk.

Once your test or exam has been marked, look at it and reflect. What went well and what didn't? Why? Create a plan to help you do even better next time.

Sources:

- ▶ [Exam Anxiety Workshop \(Barbara VanIngen, Counselling Psychologist, Concordia University\)](#)
- ▶ [Test and exam study tips - UofT Student Life \(utoronto.ca\)](#)

For more test and exam tips (including tips specifically for multiple choice, matching, short answer, essay, take home, and online test and exams), check out smhs-smso.ca

**STRATEGY 3: CHALLENGE YOUR THOUGHTS**

Here are some strategies that may support you during tests and exams. As you go through them, think about which fit the way you learn.

Identifying unhelpful thoughts

This activity is designed to help you challenge messages you may give yourself that aren't helpful and replace them with more balanced thoughts. Sometimes our thoughts are so automatic, we don't even notice them, even though they are having a big impact on us. As you try to identify your unhelpful thoughts, try to notice shifts in your stress level. When they happen, they're a signal to ask yourself:

- *What am I thinking right now?*
- *What is making me feel stressed?*
- *What am I worried will happen?*
- *What negative thing do I expect?*



Challenging them

As you try to identify more balanced thoughts, ask yourself...

- *How likely is this?*
- *Does my entire future really depend on _____ ?*
- *What can I control?*
- *What will I do if this happens?*
- *How have I handled challenges in the past?*
- *What would I say to a friend?*

Most of us offer our friends far more compassion and support than we offer ourselves. In fact, most of us would never be friends with someone who spoke to us the way we sometimes speak to ourselves. **We deserve the same kind of compassion and support we show others!**

UNHELPFUL THOUGHT	CHALLENGE IT!
<p><i>Example:</i> "I'm not smart enough."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I can't know everything. No one does. But I've passed tests before and there are things that I'm good at.</i> • <i>There are many reasons why people don't do well on a test that have nothing to do with how smart they are.</i>
<p><i>Example:</i> "I have to pass, or I'll never get a good job."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>One test isn't going to determine my entire future or happiness in life.</i> • <i>Many things that make me happy have nothing to do with school.</i>
<p><i>Example:</i> "Everyone else is going to do better than me."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I'm going to focus on myself. Comparing myself to others doesn't help me.</i>

Sources:





- ▶ [Test Anxiety Workbook \(Anxiety Canada\)](#)



STRATEGY 4: PRACTISE RELAXATION

You can practise interrupting unhelpful thoughts, and you can practise interrupting the anxious feelings that can come along with them, too. There are many ways to relax ourselves, our minds, and our bodies. Remember, relaxing takes practise (yes, that’s right – relaxing takes practise). The more you practise when you’re calm, the more you’ll be able to use the strategies when you’re stressed. Practise during your study sessions and use the strategies just before a test or exam starts, during the test or exam, and when the test or exam is over. You can use the strategies before you go to sleep, too, especially the night before an exam.

Here are some strategies that can help, and there are many other strategies, too—like going for a walk, listening to music, or spending time with a pet. Everyone finds different things relaxing, so it’s important to find what works for you and ensure you have some strategies that are flexible enough to be used during a test or exam.

EXERCISE	EXAMPLES & LINKS
<p>Breathing</p> <p>We sometimes don’t breathe as deeply as we should. These short breaths can impact our bodies and brains and make us feel more anxious. Practising deep breathing can help to still your mind, calm your body, and control feelings of anxiety.</p>	<p>Breathing Exercises Bundle (smho-smso.ca)</p> 
<p>Muscle Relaxation and Stretching</p> <p>Muscle relaxation exercises can help us decompress and feel better in our bodies, which can in turn help us feel better in our brains. All bodies work in different ways. You know your body best. You can adjust these activities however you need to make them work for you.</p>	<p>Muscle Relaxation Exercises Bundle (smho-smso.ca)</p> 
<p>Visualization</p> <p>Sometimes when we are anxious, our minds tend to focus on the worry, making it bigger. Visualization exercises offer us an opportunity to focus on something else. In doing so, the exercises can also help us use our imaginations to create feelings of calm.</p>	<p>Finding Calm – Forest Visualization Video (youtube.com)</p> 
<p>Grounding Techniques</p> <p>Grounding exercises can help you manage overwhelming emotions. Grounding can help you centre, and/or create a relaxing place for yourself. These exercises offer momentary outlets that can help you gain control over an emotional moment.</p>	<p>Grounding Techniques Bundle (smho-smso.ca)</p> 
<p>Other relaxation strategies that work for me or that I’d like to try:</p>	



Track your practise!

Choose a strategy to try out for a week. Check the days you practise and take a moment to reflect on how you feel afterward. Is the strategy becoming more familiar? Does it work well for you? Or did it not work out as you planned?

The relaxation strategy I'm practising: _____

DAYS I PRACTISED	HOW I FELT AFTER PRACTISING
Day 1	
Day 2	
Day 3	
Day 4	
Day 5	
Day 6	
Day 7	





Part 4

Put it all together

It's time to put everything you've learned together and make a personalized plan. Have a look back through the journal to find the following:

The things that make the biggest impact on my test and exam stress (Part 1 and Part 2):

The strategies that might be the most helpful for me (e.g., because they have worked in the past or seem like a good fit – Part 3):



Have a look at your plan. Does your experience of test and exam stress fit your strategies? For example, if most of your test and exam stress comes worrying about disappointing others, have you included some thought-changing strategies? Or if your test and exam stress involves an upset stomach, are you planning to practise relaxation? Don't worry about finding the perfect fit! The strategies you've learned have lots of overlap and can help with many different experiences. If you have a better sense of what impacts your stress and some ideas to help, THAT'S AMAZING! And it can also help with any test or exam to remind yourself you are worthwhile, no matter what mark you get.

TEST AND EXAM STRESS LOG

The next time you have a test or exam coming that you are stressed about, try filling out the diary below to help you perform your best.

TIME	MY BODY FEELS	MY FEELINGS ARE	MY THOUGHTS ARE	HOW I'M ACTING/ BEHAVING	STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT ME
Week before the test or exam					
Day before the test or exam					
Day of the test or exam					
After the test or exam					





Part 5

Know your supports

While there are many things you can do to help during tests and exams, sometimes things get in the way of our ability to do well. If you try the strategies in this journal and they aren't helping, you don't have to do it on your own. There are people who can help, and remember, you deserve support. Talk to an adult you trust or check out the resources below. If you aren't sure how to start the conversation, you could use words like...

- ▶ *Something has been bothering me. Can you help me find someone to talk to about it?*
- ▶ *I've been feeling stressed a lot lately. Can I talk to you about it?*
- ▶ *Do you have some time to meet with me? There's something I need help with."*

- ▶ **Kids Help Phone**
Call: 1-800-668-6868
Text: CONNECT to 686868
- ▶ **First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line**
Call: 1-855-242-3310
- ▶ **Black Youth Helpline**
Call: 416-285-9944 or toll-free 1-833-294-8650
- ▶ **LGBT YouthLine**
Text: 647-694-4275
- ▶ **Trans Lifeline**
Call: 877-330-6366

Check it out!

[My Circle of Support
Pocketbook – Student
Help-Seeking Resource](#)

(smho-smso.ca) for a tool to help you map out the people, places and things that support you when you need it.



Remember...

- ▶ Most students feel stress when taking tests and exams.
- ▶ Some stress is a good thing! It can help you perform your best.
- ▶ Stress that is too big can get in the way of studying and showing what you know during tests and exams.
- ▶ Doing well on tests and exams is a skill you can practise and get better at. There are strategies that can help.
- ▶ If strategies aren't enough, it's probably time to talk to an adult who can help you find more support.

Most of all, you are so much more than your marks!

