



## Test your best: Tips for managing test and exam stress

Here is a resource that School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO) put together recently around tests and managing stress.

<https://smho-smso.ca/blog/test-your-best-tips-for-managing-test-and-exam-stress/>

**Before a test or an exam, most people feel some level of stress. A little bit of stress before an exam or test can be a good thing. It can help to motivate you to work hard and focus. However, too much stress can get in the way of your ability to study and perform on tests and exams.**

Too much stress tends to affect the ability to solve complex and challenging questions more than simpler questions. That's why it's important to learn strategies to manage test and exam stress. Before you go through the tips, think about how you learn best. You might learn best while moving, hearing, seeing, or reading and writing. When finding new strategies to try, pick the ones that best match your learning style.



### Study strategies

- Gather the information you need about your course (e.g., the course requirements; what your teacher expects; the dates and times of tests, assignments, and exams).
- First, focus on learning the content (understanding it); then focus on studying it (remembering it). Aim to understand the material, not just have it memorized.
- Be prepared by spending time studying and reviewing.
- Study in a distraction-free environment, if possible.
- Plan your studying and set up a study schedule that puts the most difficult aspects of each course as early as possible.
- Use time-management tools like an agenda and calendar (put in important dates; plot out your study time and breaks, too!).
- Use efficient study habits (space out your studying, check to ensure you understand as you study, and make study/review notes).
- Avoid procrastination (try an easy task to get going or set a timer for five minutes and see if you can get in gear – it's easier to keep studying than to start).

- Avoid cramming (study in short spurts of less than an hour) and take breaks. One long study session is less effective than multiple short sessions. It's like training for a marathon. You can't do it all in one day!
- Review material often (e.g., 5-10 minutes per course per day – repetition, even just a little, helps memory).
- Before you study, organize material in the way you best learn and remember information (e.g., make an infographic)
- Be active in your learning (e.g., create a short, personalized study guide or tools like flashcards, test yourself along the way, or teach the material to someone else). Only re-reading texts is usually not enough.
- Connect new ideas to things you already know and understand (this can help you remember information).
- Prioritize multiple tests/exams by the day that they occur and also by their difficulty level.
- Review past tests or exams if they are available (they can help you know what to expect and what to study).
  - Use stress busters during your studying (e.g., [12 instant stress busters – Kids Help Phone](#))
- Ask for help sooner versus later.
- Request teacher-student conferences to prepare, if they are available and would be helpful.
- If you have an individual education/learning plan (IEP) that includes accommodations, work with your teacher to make sure you will have access to them during the test or exam. Know what you are entitled to.

## Before the test or exam

- Try not to study right up until the minute you write the test or exam. Give yourself at least a few minutes to take a break. Put on headphones, find a quiet space, or do something else that helps calm you.
- Don't engage with friends/classmates who are stressing or cramming—and remember the impact you can have on those around you, too.
- Do a brain dump of your worries. Write them all out and leave your worries at the door when you go to write the test. Or take five minutes right before the test to write down your thoughts and feelings about it on a piece of paper. Then crumple up the paper and throw it away.

## Specific tips based on the type of exam

### Multiple choice tests and exams

- Read directions carefully.
- Read each question thoroughly and try to generate your own answer before reading the options; they are designed to be close to the answer and can distract you.
- Read every word of each choice. Don't stop when you get to one that you think is the right answer.
- Underline keywords and phrases.
- Pay attention to qualifiers (e.g., "only" or "except") and negative words (e.g., "not"), which can confuse your understanding of what is being said.
- Eliminate answers you know are incorrect.
- Look for patterns that may help with the answer.
- Mark up the test. Highlight, underline, cross things out, make notes, and make the test your own.

### Matching tests and exams

- Read directions carefully.
- Start with the column that has the longest statements and match those with shorter statements or terms.
- Do easy matches first.

### Short answer tests and exams

- Keep sentences short and to the point to help you stay on topic and respond directly to the question.
- Focus on including key information, such as facts, figures, examples, quotations, etc.
- Look for clues (e.g., the sentence structure or number of blank lines).
- Don't spend a lot of time looking for hidden meaning (short answer questions tend to test recall/memory).
- Over-answer. If you can't decide between two answers, list them both (but try to be concise). You might get partial marks.

### Essay questions

- Survey the exam. Read all the questions and decide how much time you are going to spend on each.
- Analyze each question carefully. Understand what it is asking. Underline key terms and phrases.
- Plan before you begin writing. Write down the main ideas and examples and create an outline.
- Write your full answer (use your outline and fill in the details).
- Include one main idea per paragraph. Offer evidence and explanation.
- Review and ensure you answered all parts of the question.
- Check the details (e.g., capitalization, spelling, and punctuation).
- When a test includes a long reading passage, read the questions first. They will help you focus on what you are looking for.

## Take-home and online tests and exams – general strategies

These exams still require studying and careful preparation. Being familiar with the material will help save you time looking for it because you likely won't have time to learn as you go. Remote exams often focus on the quality of your thinking or the depth of your knowledge; consider this as you study.

- Organize your materials and notes so you'll be able to find information quickly and effectively.
- Be sure to know how the exam will run before you begin (e.g., are you allowed to go back to previous questions and change your answers or not?).
- Choose your space carefully; try to find one without unwanted interruptions and distractions and with reliable internet.
- Let those around you know that you will be writing an exam and need to concentrate.
- If you are distracted by phone notifications, put your phone on silent or turn it off.
- Have all your materials ready (e.g., computer and power cable, textbooks, notes, paper, and pencil).
- Check and recheck that both your computer and your Wi-Fi connection are working. Have a backup plan if one or the other is not behaving as expected.
- Make sure you know what tools are and are not allowed, if any.
- Follow the honour system in place for these types of exams (e.g., don't contact friends writing the same exam, share answers, or copy or share the questions when the exam is finished).
- Stay on the exam website; use another browser window to search for any information you need.
- Check your work for mistakes.
- Save backups of information in case of glitches.
- If you have technical problems, contact your teacher right away.
- Take short breaks as time allows.



## Specific tips based on the type of take-home and online test

### Take-home and online tests and exams – essays and long answers

- Create your own study and reference notes by using charts, graphic organizers, concept maps or reference guides to organize main topics, themes and information (e.g., an index of topics and page references will help you work more quickly).
- Brainstorm likely subjects and think about questions that might be asked (e.g., some compare-and-contrast examples that fit the themes of the course).
- Essays involve various stages of work: developing an idea, planning an outline, finding required information and references, writing and editing. Plan time for all the stages.
- Take breaks when you need them. It can be more effective to write in short bursts than in one long rushed period.

### Take-home and online tests and exams – Timed short answers

- Create a short and focused tip sheet (e.g., a list of formulas, equations, and keywords).
- Design your tip sheet to help you find information quickly.
- Practice with a timer, and make sure you can use your keyboard effectively.
- Your preparation should be as similar as possible to the real thing.
- If possible, have plenty of paper on hand to jot down ideas.
- Keep your rough work in order if you are allowed to go back and check your answers before submitting them.
- A notebook or numbered pages can help you find the “scratch” work that you’ve done.



## 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.
- Keep practicing positive self-talk “I did my best” “I’m proud of the studying I did.”
- Once your test or exam has been marked, look at it and reflect. What went well and what didn’t?
  - What type of question did you find easy? Why?
  - What study strategies were most effective?
  - Identify why you might have missed a question. Did you not read it correctly? Did you not prepare for it?
  - Did you run out of time?
  - Were there any stress management strategies you used that helped you before or during the test?
- Make and implement a plan to help you do even better next time.
- **Reward yourself. Do something you enjoy!**

These tips are adapted from [Student MH LIT: Mental Health in Action](#), a series of lesson plans and supportive resources that educators can use to support the development of basic mental health knowledge and help-seeking skills in their classroom. We encourage you to share these lesson plans with the staff in your school community.

## References:

Test and exam study tips. UofT Student Life. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://studentlife.utoronto.ca/task/test-and-exam-study-tips/>. VanIngen, B., & Concordia University of Edmonton. (2011). Exam Anxiety Workshop. YouTube. Retrieved from

