

ADHD and Exams: Test Taking Strategies for ADHD Students



ADHD and exams don't always go well together because ADHD makes test taking hard. Improve your exams with test taking strategies for ADHD students. ADHD and exams are two things that shouldn't exist together. However, they do exist together, and quite likely they always will. You don't have to love taking tests if you have ADHD, but you also don't have to be stuck cursing tests, either. There are ways you can deal with tests, and take them well, despite ADHD.

Just how does ADHD affect test taking? ADHD often causes test anxiety because of the things it does to your brain during a test. If you have ADHD, you might have experienced some of these problems when trying to take an exam:

1. Identifying key information
2. Organising thoughts into linear arguments (for essays)
3. Poor time awareness so that you don't pace yourself right
4. Rushing and making careless mistakes
5. Memory recall issues (that mind-going-blank experience)
6. Distractibility
7. Following directions

Anxiety and poor testing performance come from a lack of confidence in your own ability to do well on a test. People with ADHD often have a history of negative or disappointing test taking experiences, and this carries over into current situations.

Know this: ADHD doesn't have to do with intelligence. Poor testing performance is a reflection of ADHD, not of inability. Know this, too: you can learn strategies to improve your performance on exams.

Test Taking Strategies for ADHD Students

The following strategies are a sampling of things people with ADHD do to improve their performance on exams. There are things you can do before the day of the test to improve your performance on your exam, such as

1. Study well in advance, for short bursts several consecutive nights before the test rather than cramming for hours the night before (How to Study When You Have ADHD: 5 ADHD Studying Tips)
2. Exercise, ideally right before the test if that's at all possible
3. Eat well, putting nutrients into your body and keeping junk out
4. Drink plenty of water
5. Visualize yourself staying calm and doing well on the test
6. Talk to your teacher to discover what material will be on the test and to ask questions you may have
7. Ask for accommodations such as extra time, a different testing environment, the ability to take breaks, and more. (You might be required to have a EAA plan to receive accommodations.)

You can also do things during the test to help you manage the task of taking an exam

1. Look at the entire text before beginning. Use a highlighter (or multiple highlighters of different colours) to emphasize directions, different sections, and keywords. Exactly what you highlight will depend on the actual test.
2. Carefully read the directions as you highlight them.
3. Divide your test into equal segments (with your highlighter), and quickly estimate the amount of time you can spend on each section. Use a timer if it's allowed, otherwise, pace yourself using the segments of colour, making sure you're progressing through.
4. Wear earplugs if allowed to block out noises.
5. Have a focus object to look at as you think and to turn your attention to when you catch yourself wandering. This can be a small object you place on your desk, your pencil, your shoe—anything to draw your attention and help you concentrate.
6. Double check your answers when you finish to catch any careless mistakes.

Successful test taking with ADHD is largely about knowing what makes exams challenging for you and then developing strategies to compensate. Play around with the ideas above to see what works for you, and experiment with other strategies, too (Ten Steps for Student Success for College and Adult Students with ADHD). You'll build a repertoire of test-taking strategies for ADHD that work.

A final thought: Keep your perspective. To avoid panicking when that test is placed in front of you, remind yourself that this is just one test. While important, it doesn't have the power to make or break the grand scheme of your life.