

Test Anxiety

By Jody Cook, Ph.D., Simi Valley Unified School District, School Psychologist

Have you ever sat down to take a test and felt paralyzed? Have you ever looked at an exam sheet passed out and suddenly you drew a big blank, unable to remember anything? Have you ever found yourself laying awake the night before a test, unable to sleep, or saying to yourself, “I know I’m going to fail,” or “I’m no good at taking tests,” or “There’s no way I could ever do well, no matter what I do.” If so, you’re not alone. Most students will experience test anxiety at some point during their educational years. Tests by their very nature are used to evaluate our skills, knowledge, or ability, and it’s not unusual for people to feel anxious or uncomfortable at the thought of being evaluated. Annie Paul (2013) wrote that “new research in cognitive science and psychology is giving us a clearer understanding of the link between stress and performance,” and for most students, test anxiety can be easily relieved.

How do I recognize it?

Symptoms of test anxiety range from mild to severe, and include cognitive, behavioral, and physiological characteristics. Most students who experience test anxiety make mental negative self-statements, but other cognitive symptoms of anxiety include: worry, concentration problems, memory problems, or distortions in thinking or reasons (attributions) for the problems. Possible behavioral manifestations of test anxiety may include perfectionism, lack of participation, task avoidance, or motor restlessness; while physiological symptoms of anxiety may include sleep problems, headaches, muscle tension, perspiration, nausea, or a rapid heart rate

What causes it?

The less a student is prepared for a test, and the higher the stakes, the more likely a student is to experience test anxiety. Additional causes of test anxiety include: a) expectations or pressure from oneself or others; b) past experiences with tests; and c) fear of failure. Not putting enough time and effort into studying, and trying to “cram” at the last minute, increases anxiety. Fearing you may disappoint your parents, or be viewed by others as “dumb,” not being able to live up to your own expectations, or linking your academic performance to self-worth increases anxiety. Previous failures or disappointing test experiences in the past may cause anxiety, and increase negative self-talk, such as “I never do well on tests,” and “I don’t think I can get this,” which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

What can be done about it?

To tackle test anxiety you have to approach the problem on two levels. First, you have to address the test preparation aspect. Second, you have to address the testing situation or the anxiety itself. Being well prepared for a test is the best defense in reducing test taking anxiety. According to Kelly Bray (2012), “The thing about anxiety is that it thrives on the unknown,” and therefore, a strategy for success is to take concrete or deliberate steps to reduce your fears by preparing for an exam well in advance. Instead of having the test be “unknown,” know what will be on the test, how you will be tested, and study the

material. Be prepared so that you can approach the test with confidence. The following test preparation tips may help get you started:

- Find a good place to study and begin studying 5 to 7 days before the test to avoid “cramming,” as your brain needs time to absorb information.
- Manage your time. Create a study schedule (which is different than homework), and study in small increments.
- Pay attention to what your teacher says will be on the test and what type of test you will have (i.e. multiple choice, essay, fill in the blank), and use material from practice tests, homework, sample problems, review material, class notes, or the textbook. If your teacher gives you a study guide, use it!
- Pull out main ideas or key concepts from your studying and make a quick study sheet or flash cards to be reviewed quickly, many times over, to make it easier to retain key points that will be on the test. Continually review material, setting aside what you know to continue to focus on what you still do not
- Take practice tests to get comfortable with the material and the circumstances you’ll face during the test.
- Try explaining the material that is going to be on the test to a parent or friend because you really know something if you can explain it in your own words.
- Ask questions or seek clarification from your teacher anything that you do not understand in advance of the test. Studying well ahead of time gives you an opportunity to clarify with your teacher things you missed or did not clearly understand.

When the day of the test arrives, to reduce anxiety you will need to make sure that you do not inadvertently add to your stress by showing up in a less than optimal state. In order to maximize your performance, get some exercise, get a good night sleep, eat well, and allow yourself plenty of time to get to school. To reduce anxiety during the test the following suggestions are recommended:

- Carefully read the directions. Read the directions again. If you do not understand the directions, raise your hand and ask the teacher to explain.
- Scan the test, if possible, so that you can budget your time.
- Quickly write down facts, dates/timelines, or formulas, keywords, on the back or margins of the test, to unload and you can relax and refer to this information during the test as a personal reference sheet
- If anxious feelings arise, stop and calmly take 5-10 deep breaths; followed by positive mental self-talk, such as “I know I can do this,” or “I’m okay now.” Repeat as needed throughout the testing session.
- If you go blank, or come to a question you do not know, skip it for the time being and move on to the next question. You can always come back later. Sometimes other problems or test items will trigger your recall.

- Focus on the item or test question you are working on. Don't let your mind wander. Focus on answering the questions, not on how you think others are doing or on your grade.
- Expect some anxiety, but don't let it control you – manage it with relaxed deep breathing.
- If you begin to tell yourself negative things about yourself or your performance, mentally yell 'STOP' and return to a positive self-statement, such as "I can do this."
- Ignore people who finish and turn in their tests before you.

What else do you have?

Using the strategies above should put you well on your way, but if more detail is needed to elaborate on study skills, there are many resources available that can help. Start by asking your teacher about study skills, or conduct an Internet search. Tools to assist with test taking are readily available in books, online, and I'm sure that your teacher also has some suggestions. However, if you are still experiencing significant test anxiety after following these tips, you might want to seek assistance from your school counselor or school psychologist.

References

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