



MANAGING TEST ANXIETY



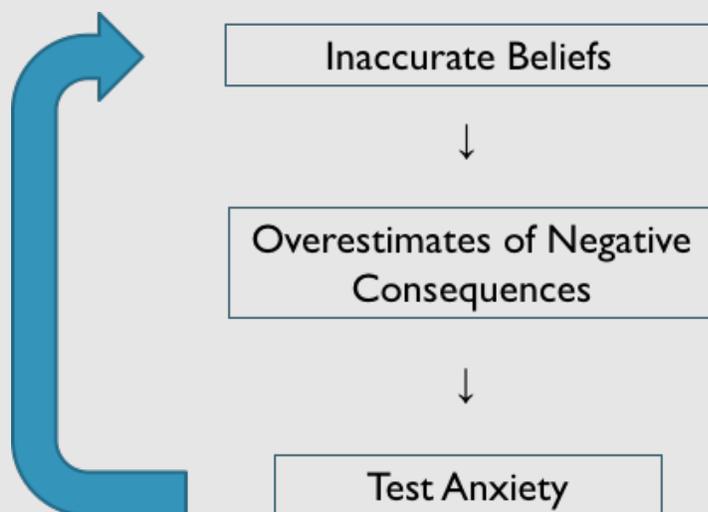
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WHAT IS TEST ANXIETY?

A little bit of anxiety before exams is common and even helpful—it motivates you to study hard and try your best. Too much anxiety, however, can interfere with performance. Students with impairing test anxiety typically have inaccurate and unhelpful beliefs about themselves and the significance of exams. You may label yourself a “bad test taker,” or believe your performance on exams reflects your self-worth. Students will often overestimate the negative consequences of test taking and fall into a catastrophic thinking trap. For example, you might think, “if I miss a question on my biology test, I’ll never be a doctor” or “if I don’t improve my ACT score, I won’t be accepted to any colleges.”

These thought patterns understandably lead to anxiety, which can be experienced in a variety of ways before and during exams. Before exams, you may have trouble sleeping, stomach aches, or panic attacks. When you sit down with an exam, you may notice your mind going blank, heart racing, or body temperature changing.

Anxiety symptoms can interfere with performance—this is why we often meet students who receive low scores on standardized tests after acing several practice tests. Poor test performance can reinforce inaccurate beliefs, which creates a vicious cycle. Fortunately, there are several ways to break this cycle to both reduce anxiety and improve performance.



MANAGING TEST ANXIETY

You can manage test anxiety by changing your beliefs about testing and addressing your physiological symptoms. To change your mistaken beliefs, you can challenge yourself to think more rationally. This technique is called *cognitive restructuring*, and there are several questions you can practice asking yourself to lessen the intensity of negative thoughts, like:

1. What is the evidence for and against this thought?
2. If a friend were having this negative thought, what would I tell them?
3. If the worst-case scenario were to happen, would I be okay?

When we feel anxious, our bodies initiate a *fight-or-flight* response. This response is adaptive for humans—it keeps us safe when we are in danger by reminding us to back up when a car speeds by and keep our hands out of a snake’s cage. Sometimes, however, your fight-or-flight response turns on when you are not really in danger, like when you sit down for a tough math test. You can calm these physical symptoms of anxiety with relaxation techniques like *paced breathing* and *progressive muscle relaxation* before and during exams.

Paced Breathing

Inhale for a count of 2-4 seconds and exhale for a count of 4-6 seconds, making sure to exhale longer than you inhale. Focus your attention on your breath. Breathe in slowly through your nose, letting your chest expand. Breathe out slowly through your mouth. When your mind wanders, gently redirect your focus back to counting and breathing.

You may try using a breathing app for additional structure, like Breathe Easy or Breath Ball.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Tense up muscle groups one at a time on an inhale, and then relax them on an exhale. Start at the top of your head and move through to your toes. Check out [this worksheet](#) for more guidance.

WHAT CAUSES TEST ANXIETY?

Psychologists and physicians don't fully understand the causes of anxiety. Most experts agree that it is a combination of biological vulnerabilities and environmental factors. You may have been born with an extra-strong response to perceived danger, and events in your life and things that you've learned may have led you to have a strong reaction to test-taking in particular. Although we may not be able to identify the exact cause, we do know that many factors contribute to anxiety:

Lack of sleep: Plenty of evidence has linked sleep disruption or a lack of sleep (e.g., insomnia) with increased anxiety. Lack of sleep reduces your brain's ability to regulate your emotions, so you feel anxiety more intensely and it takes longer to settle down. If you are having trouble sleeping, try the following "sleep hygiene" tips:

- Go to bed at the same time each night and get up at the same time each morning, even on weekends.
- Make sure your bedroom is quiet, dark, relaxing, and at a comfortable temperature. Your bedroom should be used only for sleeping. That means no more homework in bed!
- Remove cell phones and laptops from your bedroom. The blue light in these devices sends the message to your brain that you should stay awake.
- Avoid large meals and caffeine before bedtime.
- Get some exercise during the day, but not too close to bedtime. An added bonus is that exercise has direct anxiety-reduction effects.

Stress: Stressors like medical problems, conflicts with friends and family, and school responsibilities can exacerbate test anxiety. Stressors reduce your capacity to problem solve and relax, which can make test anxiety feel even more intolerable.

Sugar: Sugar intake can worsen anxiety symptoms and impair your body's ability to cope. Sugar can cause blurry vision, difficulty thinking, and fatigue, and a "sugar crash" can cause shaking and tension. All of these physiological sensations send messages to the brain that you are in danger, which can make anxiety worse.

Caffeine: You may think you need a large latte to focus on studying, but the "jitters" caused by caffeine feel very similar to the fight-or-flight response and can worsen anxiety. Stick to herbal teas and healthy snacks to keep you going.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

It is challenging to help teenagers with test anxiety. You may try to talk them out of it or reassure them that everything will be okay. You may also become frustrated and punish them or demand that they “get over it.” Many parents are inclined to allow anxious teenagers to reduce their course load, take fewer standardized tests, or even skip school when they are feeling anxious. Although all of these strategies are well-intentioned, they tend to make anxiety worse in the long term. Teenagers will likely feel invalidated and misunderstood if they are scolded for struggling with anxiety. Reassurance can backfire if the student begins to depend on others to manage even low levels of anxiety. And if a student gets into the habit of avoiding tasks that are anxiety-provoking with the help of their parents, they never get to learn that they can manage feelings of anxiety themselves. We want them to learn that they can succeed, even when they are feeling anxious.

The best way to help your teenager with anxiety is to offer structure and support. Uncertainty fuels anxiety, so whenever possible, help your teenager create consistency and helpful routines, like studying at the same time every day and working with a tutor on a regular schedule. The best way to be supportive is to express understanding of your teenager’s anxiety and educate them on the nature of anxiety and how it works. Help them conceptualize anxiety as a way of thinking, feeling, and behaving, rather than as a character flaw. You can encourage them to identify the thoughts and behaviors that are getting in the way of their performance and brainstorm ways to overcome them. Humans respond better to reinforcement than punishment, so rather than punishing their avoidance, reward their bravery. Instead of helping them get out of exams, cheer them on as they confront their fears and tackle academic challenges.

Teenagers benefit greatly from support from trusted adults outside their families, so consider finding an anxiety specialist to meet with your child. An added benefit of treatment is that many therapists will meet with parents as well to offer guidance on parenting children with anxiety.

FIND A THERAPIST

Test anxiety is treatable! If your anxiety is too intense and distressing to manage on your own, and if anxiety is getting in the way of your life and your education, we recommend cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT is an evidence-based treatment for anxiety. CBT therapists will typically teach you cognitive restructuring, paced breathing, and progressive muscle relaxation, and encourage you to face your fears rather than avoid them.

Here are some websites that can help you find a CBT therapist in your area:

<http://www.findcbt.org/FAT/>

<https://members.adaa.org/page/FATMain>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/cognitive-behavioral-cbt>

<https://www.academyofct.org/search/custom.asp?id=4410>

Before you schedule an appointment, ask for a complimentary phone consultation with the therapist. Ask about their expertise with test anxiety and find out how much training they have received in anxiety treatment. Make sure their approach is skills-based and that they plan to offer tools to help you manage anxiety.

SCHOOL ACCOMODATIONS

Consider speaking with your teachers, principal, or counselor about your anxiety. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), you have the right to request appropriate accommodations. These accommodations may require a diagnosis from a licensed professional, so you may want to consult a therapist or doctor to find out if you are eligible.

Here are some accommodations your school might be able to implement:

- Extended time on tests to ease the pressure.
- Testing in an alternate, quiet location.
- Regular appointments with a school counselor.
- Use of word banks and equation sheets to cue your memory if your anxiety leads you to "blank out" during testing.
- Oral presentations and examinations alone with the teacher rather than in front of the class.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Books

Test Anxiety & What You Can Do About It Paperback by Joseph Casbarro, PhD

Feeling Better: CBT Workbook for Teens: Essential Skills and Activities to Help You Manage Moods, Boost Self-Esteem, and Conquer Anxiety by Rachel Hutt, PhD

The Worry Workbook for Teens: Effective CBT Strategies to Break the Cycle of Chronic Worry and Anxiety by Jamie A. Micco, PhD

Websites

<https://adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children/test-anxiety>

<https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/test-anxiety.html>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/teen-angst/201605/test-anxiety>

