

Test Anxiety

There is no doubt about it, for most people, testing is stressful. Because exam results can determine whether you pass or fail a class, earn a scholarship, get admitted to desired program, or even earn entry into a professional school, graduate program, job or career, it is natural to feel some anxiety when you take a test. In fact, it can be counter-productive not to have an awareness of the importance of the task at hand. But test anxiety is something different than heightened concern.

Test anxiety is stress directly related to testing situations. This stress is so excessive that it hinders a person's ability to prepare properly and test effectively. Symptoms of test anxiety are of two general types, emotional and physical. Emotional indicators can include feelings of panic, shortened temper/anger, crying, excessive frustration, confusion and disorientation, loss of memory, procrastination, negative thoughts, and depression. Physical indicators might consist of some combination of rapid heartbeat, nausea, shakiness, tight muscles, headaches, or excessive sweating. Because test anxiety is a learned behavior, it can be unlearned. The first step is to determine where or why this behavior began and then begin the process of unlearning the response.

Step One: Identifying Sources of Test Anxiety

In the simplest case, test anxiety is caused by a lack of preparation. Knowing that you're under-prepared can cause high levels of stress and anxiety. Fortunately, the solution is readily available - practice and apply proven study strategies as means of alleviating the stress you feel. This method allows you to face the next testing situation knowing that you have done your best to prepare. Test anxiety of this type can be quite common and is often overcome quickly.

However, more complicated forms of test anxiety are also widespread. These forms tend to be more closely linked to one's personal feelings, experiences, and beliefs. Among these more complex forms, the most common causes typically fall into three categories: fear of failure, feelings of helplessness, and threats to self-worth.

Fear of failure can generate anxiety from many different sources. You may be worried that you will not live up to the expectations of family and friends. You might be concerned that you will embarrass yourself by earning poor grades. You might believe that this exam will jeopardize scholarships, financial aid, athletic eligibility, or insurance benefits. You may have exaggerated the impact of an individual test, tying it directly to your career or life success.

Feelings of helplessness can emerge when students miss the connection between their own behavior and their exam outcomes. Instead of blaming their poor showing on their own lack of preparation, they blame their performances on the difficulty of the test, the inadequacy of the instructor, or other circumstances outside their control. This external focus of blame leaves them feeling victimized, helpless, out of control, and anxious. As a

result, they waste valuable time contemplating their own predicament and then don't study because they are convinced "it won't help anyway".

Threats to self-worth and increased test anxiety can also result from putting too much an emphasis on grades. Some students insist on measuring their self-worth against the A-B-C-D-F standard. They tie their self-esteem too closely to their grades and generate negative feelings about their abilities. These negative feelings erode their confidence and contribute to feelings of helplessness.

These feeling of low self esteem, helplessness, and failure will often manifest themselves in "negative self-talk". "Negative self-talk" is when students unknowingly increase their test anxiety by reinforcing negative beliefs about themselves and their circumstances. Negative thoughts such as "I hate this class," "I can't do this," "I'm going to fail this test," "I've never been good at taking tests," "This instructor writes terrible, unfair tests," and the like, set a tone that increases anxiety and sabotages success.

Step Two: Dealing with Test Anxiety

The various physical and emotional symptoms of test anxiety have the common effect of focusing your attention and energy inward on your immediate, personal feelings and circumstance as opposed to focusing on the task at hand. Many of the strategies available to combat test anxiety encourage you to focus your energies outward on exam preparation and performance. Try the following tips as they apply to your symptoms of test anxiety.

- Always be as prepared as you can be. Then be satisfied and give yourself credit for your hard work.
- Set your own goals and expectations. Decide what represents your best effort and then work to achieve it. If others have set expectations for you that are counter-productive, you may need to talk with them and come to a new agreement about how to define your success.
- Work to keep the importance of individual tests in perspective. When you exaggerate the importance of a particular exam, you unnecessarily increase anxiety. This is not to say some tests aren't particularly critical (board and licensure exams, entrance exams, finals), because they are. But, in many classes a single exam is only a part of the grading equation. Working hard across assignments, across classes, and across semesters makes the performance on an individual exam less critical and a smaller piece of a greater plan.
- Develop a sense for your role in your outcomes. Resist the temptation to blame your circumstances and outcomes on situations and people you can't control. It is important to recognize your own contributions and to focus on what you can control - your own behavior. A belief that you can control your outcomes will motivate you to work harder, lead to greater rewards, and in turn will reinforce your sense of control.

- Remember that grades are not a measure of self-worth. For some people decoupling this connection can be hard to do. Especially, when we often define ourselves as students and then define our status as students by our grades. It is important to think more broadly about who we are. Prompt yourself to think about your other roles. Know one is so one-dimensional he is defined only as student. You are sons and daughters, friends, volunteers, employees, partners, parents, artists, athletes, musicians, cooks, and multitudes of other things. Put your role as student in perspective and then work to maximize your performance in that area.

- Fight the urge to become preoccupied and distracted by thoughts and concerns unrelated to exam content. Learn to recognize "negative self-talk" and combat it with positive, self-supportive statements such as "I am well prepared for this test.", "I have done my best.", "I do understand the material.", and "I am learning."

- Learn and use relaxation techniques. Techniques on progressive muscle relaxation, controlled breathing, visualization, and the like can help you fight some of the physical responses to test anxiety as well.

- It can be especially helpful to seek the assistance of a counselor, therapist, or psychologist. These trained professionals can help you deal with the emotional components of test anxiety as well as introduce you to an array of techniques designed to give control of the physical responses as well. Check out the University Counseling Services web site for more information about how to access this free service.