



MANAGING TEST ANXIETY

By Melanie Reader, Registered Psychologist

Nerves and butterflies are fine - they're a physical sign that you're mentally ready and eager. You have to get the butterflies to fly in formation, that's the trick.

~Steve Bull

As we enter the second half of the school year, many students are likely preparing to write tests and exams. As part of this preparation, a number of them will probably encounter challenges with test anxiety. Although a common problem (with 20-25% of students experiencing it to some degree), test anxiety can impact students' achievement as well as their academic motivation. Students with learning challenges are especially likely to experience some level of test anxiety. Therefore, it is an important factor to consider in supporting students in their education.

As the above quote indicates, an optimal level of anxiety can actually aid performance – it gets the adrenaline flowing. In fact, an absence of anxiety can hinder performance just as an excess of anxiety can. Stress and anxiety have overlapping symptoms, with stress being one of the biggest causes of anxiety. It is the lack of stress control that is the problem, whereby the level of anxiety/stress can take over and the student is left unable to perform. Test anxiety is specifically associated with excessive concerns about one's performance in a testing situation and can include a combination of emotional (e.g., unreasonable fear, apprehension, feelings of helplessness), behavioural (e.g., fidgeting, sleep disturbance, pacing), somatic (e.g., increased

heart rate, difficulty breathing, perspiration, upset stomach, tense muscles), and cognitive (e.g., racing thoughts, 'going blank', difficulty concentrating, negative self-talk) symptoms. These symptoms may occur before, during, or after a test/exam. Anxiety can vary in intensity from normal (which is experienced by most people but does not significantly impair performance) to a debilitating anxiety disorder.

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Test anxiety can be caused by a lack of preparation (e.g., cramming, poor study habits), low self-confidence, negative attitudes about school, and/or worries about:

- **performance** (including on past tests: "This always happens to me...I never do well on anything"; "Only 10 minutes left; I'll never get through everything");
- **bodily reactions** ("Here it comes, I'm getting tense again);
- **how others are doing** ("I know everyone's doing better than I am"; "I'm going to be the last one again...I must be really stupid"); and/or
- **possible negative consequences** ("I'll flunk the course"; "I'll never graduate...get into university...get a good job"; "It means I am dumb and stupid").

Focusing on these worries fuels test anxiety and can cause a vicious cycle. That is, the more the student focuses on what could happen, the stronger the test anxiety becomes. This in turn makes the student feel worse and fills his/her head with distracting thoughts and fears. Subsequently, the possibility that the student will do worse on the test increases. Test anxiety can lead to difficulties in reading and understanding the exam questions; difficulties in organizing and retrieving thoughts; doing poorly despite knowing the material; and going blank on questions but remembering the correct answers after the exam is over.

The first step in helping a student handle anxiety is to acknowledge that the anxiety is there and to accept it. Some students, especially younger ones, may require assistance in identifying their physical, behavioural, and cognitive symptoms as anxiety. The next step is to do something

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about it. Parents and teachers can support students in putting into place positive coping strategies to assist them in managing their test anxiety to an optimal level.

PARENTS & TEACHERS

- Teach and encourage positive self-talk (e.g., “I’m prepared. I will do well.” “I did it!”).
- Teach “thought stopping”, cue words that set up a roadblock to negative obsessive thinking, to use when they encounter worry thoughts (e.g., “Stop.” “Move On.” “Think Again.” “Don’t go there.”).
- Assist the students in debunking their “all-or-nothing thinking.” Many students can catastrophize about the consequences of their test performance. They may need assistance in re-evaluating their perception of risk and reassurance about how realistic the consequences are (e.g., after the student has identified what they feel is the worst thing that

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- could happen (e.g., failing the test → not being successful in life), ask “And what is the likelihood of that happening?”).
- Model stress management yourself and reinforce the positive coping skills used by students.
- Do not criticize the student for having test anxiety, but rather provide a safe place to share his/her concerns to help relieve stress. However, it is important to put limits on the amount of time focused on the stress as this can give it more “power” and increase the student’s anxiety response.
- For those students with learning challenges, ensure appropriate accommodations are put into place for exams to assist in alleviating worries (e.g., extra time will likely eliminate some worries regarding time pressure).
- Teachers can help to normalize test anxiety even further by having a relaxation time before the test with the WHOLE class. Relaxation activities can involve progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery and visualization, deep breathing, or even yoga.



STUDENT

- Preparation is the best way to minimize stress and anxiety, so engage in appropriate study strategies including practicing good time management so to avoid cramming the night before the test.
- Have a positive attitude – what you think is what you get! Eliminate negative messages and images you give yourself about how you will do on the test and replace them with more positive thoughts and images.
- Continue the habits of good nutrition and exercise as these contribute to your emotional and physical well-being. This includes getting plenty of sleep the night before the test and beginning your day with a

healthy breakfast. Avoid caffeine, which can make you jittery.

- Try to do something relaxing the hour before the test - last minute cramming may increase your anxiety or cloud your memory for what you know.
- Arrive at class early and get yourself situated at your desk. Avoid classmates who generate anxiety. If waiting for the test to begin causes anxiety, distract yourself by reading a book, drawing, or listening to music.
- While the test is being distributed, take deep breaths to help calm yourself. Alternatively, engage in relaxation activities.
- During the exam, as needed, take time to calm yourself. If necessary, stretch your arms and legs to help yourself physically relax. Take deep breaths and use positive self-talk (e.g., “I can do this!”).

Experiencing some test anxiety before an exam is natural for all students, not just those with learning challenges. However, it is important to ensure that the anxiety is at a level that does not impact a student’s performance. If the above-mentioned strategies do not help in managing a student’s anxiety levels, it may be necessary to seek professional help. This may include counseling to develop more strategies for dealing with anxious symptoms or possibly tutoring/coaching to develop a wider repertoire of study and test-taking strategies.

Melanie Reader is a Registered Psychologist and Manager of Assessment and Intervention Services with Estelle Siebens Community Services – Foothills Academy. Foothills Academy Society offers a fulltime School Program for students with learning disabilities and provides to the greater community through a Community Services component. Please call 403.270.9400 or visit www.foothillsacademy.org for more information.

Helpful Resources:

- http://kidshealth.org/teen/school_jobs/school/test_anxiety.html
- http://www.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/Test_Anxiety_Booklet.pdf
- Freeing Your Child From Anxiety by Tamar E. Chansky, Ph.D.
- The Worried Child: Recognizing anxiety in children and helping them heal by Paul Foxman, Ph.D.
- The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook for Kids: Help for children to cope with stress, anxiety, & transitions by Lawrence E. Shaprio, Ph.D. and Robin K. Sprague, LCP