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Test Anxiety: What is it, How does it affect you, and What should you do about it?

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Article preview:

With exam season approaching shortly, this article will guide the reader to gain a sense of what test anxiety is, why it happens, how it affects them, as well as ways to manage this anxiety moving forward.

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With spring finally here, so is exam season. Many of our students with LD/ADHD experience what is known as test anxiety. It can be debilitating for some, but with appropriate strategies in place, can be overcome. This article provides a brief overview of where someone experiencing test anxiety can get started as it takes the reader through the definition of test anxiety, why it happens, how it impacts students, and finally, some tools for managing test anxiety.

What is test anxiety?

Test (or exam) anxiety can be understood as the combination of physiological, psychological, and behavioural responses that can arise when we have worries about performing poorly on a test. We may:

- feel threatened by having to take a test,
- have concerns about failing,
- feel tension within our body,
- have difficulty studying,
- procrastinating, and
- even avoid anything exam related.

Having some amount of anxiety can actually serve as a motivator; it can even help us do better on a test by encouraging us to try our best. In fact, test anxiety can present in varying degrees and can be based on the level of anxiety we feel, how difficult the task is, and how capable we are. Nevertheless, too much anxiety can have the opposite effect and disrupt our mental processes that are needed to perform well on a test. So, it is important that we better understand what test anxiety is, how it impacts us, and what we can do to manage it.

Why do we experience test anxiety?

There is great research that suggests Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and/or Learning Disabilities (LD) are associated with test anxiety. This means that there is a stronger relationship between having one of these conditions and experiencing test anxiety as opposed to an individual who does not have ADHD and/or LD. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to remember that this research does not depict a causal relationship, meaning, it does not suggest that having ADHD and/or LD is the cause of test anxiety. Hence, it is important for us to think about why test anxiety occurs and where it comes from. Having a better understanding of the root of

test anxiety can better assist us in addressing what goes into the experience of having test anxiety.

Some have suggested that we experience test anxiety because of having high levels of anxiety that increase levels of worrying and focusing negatively on ourselves which then takes our attention away from our test. Thus, a student having a hard time during their exam is thought to be experiencing 'cognitive interference' as they are bombarded with thoughts of negative self-talk. Other explanations of test anxiety involve individual differences that make a student more likely to experience test anxiety on a specific subject (e.g. math vs. english), the amount of studying, the student's studying skills or habits, as well as the emotion- or cognitive- focused strategies students use to relieve test anxiety. Cognitive processes such as memory and retrieval can also impact anxiety levels if the student struggles to access the relevant material in their mind.

How does test anxiety impact students?

The Programme for International Student Assessments 2015 report found that 66% of 15-year-old students across the world were worried that they will get poor grades, 59% of students were worried that it would be difficult to take a test and 55% of students felt anxious about exams even if they were well prepared. Hence, we can see that test anxiety is a common experience. Many students feel that exams have an impact on their well-being.

How should students manage test anxiety?

There are several ways of managing test anxiety that can be used in combination based on the preferences of the student. The following can positively influence test anxiety in students.

Studying efficiently and asking for help

Studying efficiently begins with having a routine. Developing a consistent plan allows students to repeatedly access the knowledge they are going to be tested on over a longer period of time. This helps in consolidating the information they are learning, which means they will better store it in their memory and recall it at a future time.

While having a routine studying schedule is important, the quality of your studying is also an important factor into your ability to retain and recall information. Consider asking your teacher or school about study-skills classes or other resources that can help you learn study techniques and test-taking strategies. Some of these include:

- creating flashcards,
- writing down notes vs. typing or reading notes,
- drawing mindmaps,
- learning mnemonics,
- practice tests,
- taking breaks,
- listening to calming music,
- study groups,
- developing study plans and creating study guides.

Another great strategy is to be a teacher and try to explain the material in your own words, to your friends or younger siblings, and test whether you've gained a complete understanding of the topic. You'll feel more relaxed if you systematically study and practice the material that will be on a test. You may also consider receiving specialist support such as tutoring in the specific area of struggle or academic coaching. Support from teachers has also been shown to lower levels of test anxiety.

Being kind to yourself: mentally and physically

There is great research that shows the relationship between test anxiety and how we perceive ourselves and our abilities. For example, if an individual feels they have the skills to manage an academic task and have higher self-perceived value, this may lower their test anxiety levels. It can in turn further increase academic competence and self-esteem. So, by believing that we have control over our outcomes (e.g., through studying), we can gain a more positive academic self-concept and higher levels of self-esteem. Having a more positive self concept and self esteem can help clear the cognitive space in our mind that can become filled with worries and negative self-talk when we experience test anxiety. Having that cognitive space open creates more room for us to remember the material related to our tests.

This relationship between our perception of ourselves and our ability to recall information raises the importance of being kind to ourselves. Having positive self esteem, self concept, and self-dialogue can help relieve our test anxiety too. Practicing emotion- and cognitive- focused strategies such as [progressive muscle relaxation](#), [guided imagery](#), and self-instruction training can assist in creating a sense of calm and confidence before and during the test. Try various [deep breathing exercises](#), contracting and relaxing your muscles one at a time, or closing your eyes and imagining a positive outcome. Furthermore, talk therapy with a mental health professional can help you work through feelings, thoughts and behaviors that cause or worsen anxiety.

Not only should we take care of our mental state, we should also take steps to ensure our body is ready for the test as well. Ensure your brain is receiving the fuel it needs to function by eating and drinking water before the exam. Sugary drinks (e.g., soda pop) can cause your blood sugar to peak and then drop quickly while caffeinated drinks (energy drinks or coffee) can increase anxiety. It is best to try to avoid those two if you are anticipating an exam. Furthermore, regular aerobic exercise can relieve tension and actually assist in the recall of test information. Incorporating exercise into your routine will positively impact your mental and physical state. Finally, sleep is directly related to academic performance and is crucial for developing young people. When we sleep, the information we learn is better stored in our memory.

Test anxiety is common, not just for those who have ADHD and/or LDs. There are many strategies available to support those who struggle with it. Engaging in regular study routines, relaxation strategies, and healthy lifestyle habits can all help students find success on their tests.

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