

Navigating ADHD/LD and Anxiety: End of Year Tools for Students and Families

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Anxiety is a normal part of being human. It's the brain and body's built-in alarm system, there to keep us safe, help us respond to challenges, and sharpen our focus when something matters. In healthy doses, anxiety can even be helpful: motivating us to prepare, study, and rise to important moments. But when anxiety gets too strong, happens too often, or is triggered by everyday situations, it can start to work against us. Rather than helping, it can interfere with learning, sleep, relationships, confidence, and overall well-being.

As the school year winds down, many students are juggling assignments, deadlines, projects, and final exams. During this time, stress and anxiety often become more noticeable. For some students, anxiety looks like obvious worry. For others, it can appear in ways adults may not immediately recognize: procrastination, irritability, shutting down, perfectionism, refusing school, headaches, stomach aches, trouble sleeping, or repeatedly asking for reassurance. What may look like lack of motivation can often be stress in disguise.

Without the right tools and support in place, the end of year can start to feel like an impossible race. However, when we better understand how anxiety impacts the brain, body, and learning, there are practical strategies that can help students feel more capable, confident, and supported.

Why Anxiety Makes Thinking Harder

When the brain perceives a threat, it activates the stress response. The heart rate increases, breathing changes, muscles tense, and attention narrows. This can be useful in emergencies, but not as helpful when writing a paper or during a math exam.

When anxiety is high, the "thinking brain" can become less efficient, making skills like working memory, flexible thinking, attention, and recall harder to access. This is why a student may know the material while studying at home, but suddenly blank out during a test

Why Students with ADHD and Learning Disabilities May Experience More Anxiety

For students with ADHD and Learning Disabilities, school can already require significantly more energy and effort than others might realize. These students may be working through challenges with attention, distractibility, working memory, organization, planning, note-taking, reading speed, written output, time management, or emotional regulation.

Some research has shown that students with ADHD and Learning Disabilities often report higher levels of test anxiety, lower academic confidence, and lower motivation than their

peers. They may face more obstacles while simultaneously feeling less prepared to manage them.

Over time, those repeated experiences, such as forgetting homework, rushing assignments, underperforming on tests, or receiving frequent corrective feedback can start to shape how a young person sees themselves. Thoughts like “I’m bad at school,” “I always mess up,” or “What’s the point of trying?” can begin to form. When this happens, anxiety and self-doubt can grow into what we call learned helplessness. This is a pattern that develops when a young person starts to believe that their efforts won’t make a difference, and overtime, they become less motivated and less willing to try.

Understanding Test Anxiety

Test anxiety can be more than just being nervous for a test, it can take a toll mentally and physically. Some students may experience racing thoughts, panic sensations, blanking out, freezing on questions, trouble concentrating, impulsively rushing through answers, or second-guessing everything they write. Others may catastrophize, believing that one test will define their future.

Students with anxiety, ADHD, and/or Learning Disabilities tend to already feel less confident in academic settings, which can intensify test stress. The good news is that test anxiety is highly manageable when students have support and a toolbox in place.

What can help:

1. Prepare early by:
 - Breaking studying into shorter sessions
 - Using a visual schedule (e.g., calendar or checklist on the fridge at home)
 - Reviewing material over several days
 - Starting with the hardest subject in small chunks
2. Know the format of the test (e.g., multiple choice or written response)
 - Practice with similar formats ahead of time can reduce stress and improve confidence.
3. Use active study strategies such as:
 - Practice questions
 - Teaching someone else
 - Flashcards
 - Summarizing from memory
 - Organizing ideas into themes (think bigger picture)
4. Regulate the body first using tools like:

- Deep breathing
 - Grounding using the five senses
 - Progressive muscle relaxation
 - Taking movement breaks
5. Have planned strategies during the exam:
- Take your time reading the question
 - Start with easier questions first
 - Skip and return if stuck
 - Cross out clearly wrong answers
 - Move on to the next question when unsure
6. Shift from a fixed mindset (e.g., “If I fail this test, I’m done.”) to a growth mindset (e.g., “This test matters, but it does not define me.”).
7. Prioritize the basics:
- Getting enough sleep (around 8-10 hours for children and youth) plays a big role in memory, attention, and emotional regulation.
 - Food and hydration are important as the brain requires fuel to function. Eating well-balanced meals and drinking enough water helps with our energy, mood, and concentration.
 - Having a consistent routine provides a sense of predictability and control, which helps lower anxiety. Consistent routines also help reduce challenges with getting started on a task or decision-making.

How Parents and Teachers Can Best Support Students with Anxiety

Adults play a powerful role because they are often present where anxiety shows up most. An important concept to remember is that emotions tend to spread whether that is at home or in the classroom. When one person becomes dysregulated, it can influence others around them. This is sometimes referred to as *emotional contagion*. A young person’s frustration may quickly trigger parental stress, which can then feed back into the child’s distress and escalate the cycle. The good news is that calmness and regulation are also contagious.

When adults respond with a grounded presence, they help create safety and co-regulation. Helpful responses include staying calm, validating feelings without removing every challenge, helping break tasks into manageable steps, praising effort and persistence, encouraging gradual independence, maintaining predictable routines, and supporting accommodations when appropriate.

Less helpful responses often come from good intentions, but may unintentionally strengthen anxiety over time. This can look like repeated reassurance, taking over tasks the

young person is capable of doing, applying last-minute pressure, catastrophizing grades, or equating achievement with self-worth.

The goal is not to eliminate all anxiety, but to help young people learn that stress can be managed, emotions can be regulated, and challenges can be handled.

A Note on Accommodations

For some students with ADHD or LD, accommodations such as extra time, reduced-distraction settings, breaks, assistive technology, or alternate formats can help create a fairer opportunity to demonstrate knowledge. These are supports that are typically required for students with LD and/or ADHD as they reduce barriers, while still maintaining expectations. If these accommodations are not already in place, it can be helpful to connect with the school or your teachers to explore what supports are available.

Final Thoughts

The goal is not to live a life free from anxiety, but to recognize when it shows up, understand how it works, and have tools to navigate it, especially as you prepare for the end of the year.

When students learn how their brain and body respond to stress, develop realistic study plans and test-taking strategies, and receive support that builds independence rather than avoidance, test anxiety becomes far more manageable.

Further Resources

Test Anxiety Strategies: <https://childmind.org/article/tips-for-beating-test-anxiety/>

References

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