

TEST ANXIETY

David Lowenstein, Ph.D.

You've participated in class, done all of your homework, studied hard, and you think you have a grip on the material. But then the day of the test comes. Suddenly, you blank out, freeze up, zone out, or feel so nervous that you can't get it together to respond to those questions you knew the answers to just last night.

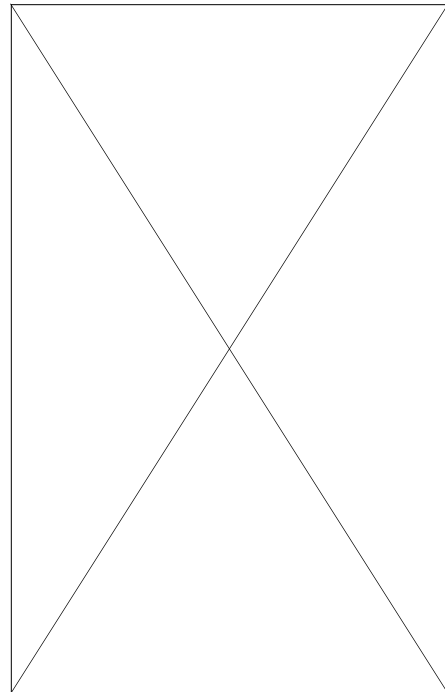
If this sounds like you, you may have a case of test anxiety - that nervous feeling that people sometimes get when they're about to take a test.

It's pretty normal to feel a little nervous and stressed before a test. Just about everyone does. And a touch of nervous anticipation can actually help you get revved and keep you at peak performance while you're taking the test. But for some people, this normal anxiety is more intense. The nervousness they feel before a test can be so strong that it interferes with their concentration or performance.

What Is Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety is actually a type of **performance anxiety** is a feeling someone might have in a situation where performance really counts or when the pressure's on to do well. For example, a person might experience performance anxiety when he or she is about to try out for the school play, sing a solo on stage, get into position at the pitcher's mound, step onto the platform in a diving meet, or go into an important interview.

Like other situations in which a person might feel performance anxiety, test anxiety can bring on "butterflies," a stomachache, or a tension headache. Some people might feel shaky, sweaty, or feel their heart beating quickly as they wait for the test to be given out. A student with really strong test anxiety



may even feel like he or she might pass out or throw up.

Test anxiety is not the same as doing poorly on a certain test because your mind is on something else. Most people know that having other things on their minds - such as a breakup or the death of someone close - can also interfere with their concentration and prevent them from doing their best on a test.

What Causes It?

All anxiety is a reaction to anticipating something stressful. Like other anxiety reactions, test anxiety affects the body and the mind. When you're under stress, your body releases the hormone **adrenaline**, which prepares it for danger (you may hear this referred to as the "fight or flight" reaction). That's what causes the physical symptoms, such as sweating, a pounding heart, and rapid breathing. These sensations might be mild or intense.

Focusing on the bad things that could happen also fuels test anxiety. For example, someone worrying about doing poorly might think thoughts like, "What if I forget everything I know?" or "What if the test is too hard?" Too many thoughts like these leave no mental space for thinking about the test questions. People with test anxiety can also feel stressed out by their physical reaction and think things like "What if I throw up?" or "Oh no, my hands are shaking."

Just like other types of anxiety, test anxiety can create a vicious circle: The more a person focuses on the bad things that could happen, the stronger the feeling of anxiety becomes. This makes the person feel worse and, because his or her head is full of distracting thoughts and fears, it can increase the possibility that the person will do worse on the test.

Who's Likely to Have Test Anxiety?

People who worry a lot or who are perfectionists are more likely to have trouble with test anxiety. People with these traits sometimes find it hard to accept mistakes they might make or to get anything less than a perfect score. In this way, even without meaning to, they might really pressure themselves. Test anxiety is bound to thrive in a situation like this.

Students who aren't prepared for tests but who care about doing well are also likely to experience test anxiety. If you know you're not prepared, it's a no-brainer to realize that you'll be worried about doing poorly. People can feel unprepared for tests for several

reasons: They may not have studied enough, they may find the material difficult, or perhaps they feel tired because didn't get enough sleep the night before.

What Can You Do?

Test anxiety can be a real problem when someone is so stressed out over a test that he or she can't get past the nervousness to focus on the test questions and do his or her best work. Feeling ready to meet the challenge, though, can keep test anxiety at a manageable level.

Use a little stress to your advantage. Stress is your body's warning mechanism - it's a signal that helps you prepare for something important that's about to happen. So use it to your advantage. Instead of reacting to the stress by dreading, complaining, or fretting about the test with friends, take an active approach. Let stress remind you to study well in advance of a test. Chances are, you'll keep your stress from spinning out of control. After all, nobody ever feels stressed out by thoughts that they might do **well** on a test.

Ask for help. Although a little test anxiety can be a good thing, an overdose of it is another story entirely. If sitting for a test gets you so stressed out that your mind goes blank and causes you to miss answers that you know, then your level of test anxiety probably needs some attention. Your teacher, your school guidance counselor, or a tutor can be useful resources to talk to if you always get extreme test anxiety.

Be prepared. Some students think that going to class is all it should take to learn and do well on tests. But there's much more to learning than just hoping to soak everything up in class. That's why good [study habits](#) and skills are so important - and why no amount of cramming or studying the night before a test can take the place of the deeper level of learning that happens over time with regular study.

Many students find that their test anxiety is reduced when they start to study better or more regularly. It makes sense - the more you know the material, the more confident you'll feel. Having confidence going into a test means you expect to do well. When you expect to do well, you'll be able to relax into a test after the normal first-moment jitters pass.

Watch what you're thinking. If expecting to do well on a test can help you relax, what about when people expect they **won't** do well? Watch out for any negative messages you might be sending yourself about the test. They can contribute to your anxiety.

If you find yourself thinking negative thoughts ("I'm never any good at taking tests," or "It's going to be terrible if I do badly on this test"), replace them with positive messages. Not unrealistic positive messages, of course, but ones that are practical and true, such as "I've studied hard and I know the material, so I'm ready to do the best I can." (Of course, if you haven't studied, this message won't help!)

Accept mistakes. Another thing you can do is to learn to keep mistakes in perspective - especially if you're a perfectionist or you tend to be hard on yourself. Everyone makes mistakes, and you may have even heard teachers or coaches refer to mistakes as "learning opportunities." Learning to tolerate small failures and mistakes - like that one problem you got wrong in the math pop quiz - is a valuable skill.

Take care of yourself. It can help to learn ways to calm yourself down and get centered when you're tense or anxious. For some people, this might mean learning a simple breathing exercise. Practicing breathing exercises regularly (when you're not stressed out) helps your body see these exercises as a signal to relax.

And, of course, taking care of your health - such as getting enough sleep, exercise, and healthy eats before a test - can help keep your mind working at its best.

Everything takes time and practice, and learning to beat test anxiety is no different. Although it won't go away overnight, facing and dealing with test anxiety will help you learn stress management, which can prove to be a valuable skill in many situations besides taking tests.

What Parents Can Do To Help Their Child Avoid Test Anxiety

It's good to be concerned about taking a test. It's not good to get "test anxiety." This is excessive worry about doing well on a test and it can mean disaster for a student.

Students who suffer from test anxiety tend to worry about success in school, especially doing well on tests. They worry about the future, and are extremely self-critical. Instead of feeling challenged by the prospect of success, they become afraid of failure. This makes them anxious about tests and their own abilities. Ultimately, they become so worked up that they feel incompetent about the subject matter or the test.

It does not help to tell the child to relax, to think about something else, or stop worrying. But there are ways to reduce test anxiety. Encourage your child to do these things:

- Space studying over days or weeks. (Real learning occurs through studying that takes place over a period of time.) Understand the information and relate it to what is already known. Review it more than once. (By doing this, the student should feel prepared at exam time.)
- Don't "cram" the night before--cramming increases anxiety which interferes with clear thinking. Get a good night's sleep. Rest, exercise, and eating well are as important to test-taking as they are to other schoolwork.
- Read the directions carefully when the teacher hands out the test. If you don't understand them, ask the teacher to explain.
- Look quickly at the entire examination to see what types of questions are included (multiple choice, matching, true/ false, essay) and, if possible, the number of points for each. This will help you pace yourself.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, skip it and go on. Don't waste time worrying about it. Mark it so you can identify it as unanswered. If you have time at the end of the exam, return to the unanswered question(s).

Do's and Don't's

You can be a great help to your children if you will observe these do's and don't's about tests and testing:

- Don't be too anxious about a child's test scores. If you put too much emphasis on test scores, this can upset a child.
- Do encourage children. Praise them for the things they do well. If they feel good about themselves, they will do their best. Children who are afraid of failing are more likely to become anxious when taking tests and more likely to make mistakes.
- Don't judge a child on the basis of a single test score. Test scores are not perfect measures of what a child can do. There are many other things that might influence a test score. For example, a child can be affected by the way he or she is feeling, the setting in the classroom, and the attitude of the teacher. Remember, also, that one test is simply one test.
- Meet with your child's teacher as often as possible to discuss his/her progress. Ask the teacher to suggest activities for you and your child to do at home to help prepare for tests and improve your child's understanding of schoolwork. Parents and teachers should work together to benefit students.
- Make sure your child attends school regularly. Remember, tests do reflect children's overall achievement. The more effort and energy a child puts into learning, the more likely he/she will do well on tests.
- Provide a quiet, comfortable place for studying at home.
- Make sure that your child is well rested on school days and especially the day of a test. Children who are tired are less able to pay attention in class or to handle the demands of a test.
- Give your child a well rounded diet. A healthy body leads to a healthy, active mind. Most schools provide free breakfast and lunch for economically

disadvantaged students. If you believe your child qualifies, talk to the school principal.

- Provide books and magazines for your youngster to read at home. By reading new materials, a child will learn new words that might appear on a test. Ask your child's school about a suggested outside reading list or get suggestions from the public library.