



Fast Facts

Anchorage School District

Test Anxiety Can be Tamed

University Learning Centers at Penn State University

Symptoms of Test Anxiety

Feeling nervous about a test is normal. In fact, there are advantages to being moderately stressed right before an exam. A little tension can provide just the right amount of adrenaline needed for optimum performance. That quick jolt of adrenaline can also help students recall information they may not have otherwise remembered.

However, if stress levels rise too high, it can result in insomnia, loss of appetite, and a loss of self-confidence. An anxious student can question his or her ability to understand the words on the test. This can obviously affect performance.

Here is a little quiz - how appropriate - to see if students may be a little too frazzled. Please have them answer true or false. Please feel free to edit per grade level:

- I have trouble sleeping at night and spend those last few minutes before sleep worrying about upcoming exams or projects.
- The day of an exam, I experience drastic appetite changes and either overeat, or skip breakfast and lunch.
- While studying for or taking an exam, I often feel a sense of hopelessness or dread.
- While studying or taking an exam, I have problems concentrating and I sometimes feel bored or tired.
- I often yawn during an exam or while studying.
- During a test, I often feel confused or panic.
- During a test, I experience sweaty palms, mental blocks.
- While taking a test, I sometimes experience headaches, vomiting, or fainting.
- After the test, I pretend it meant nothing to me, and consider the result meaningless.
- When I am finished with a test, I sometimes feel guilt and blame myself for not studying enough.

- I sometimes get angry or depressed after a test.
- As a general rule, I view test-taking as a stressful situation and dread it.

If any of these statements were true for the students, they may suffer from test anxiety. The first thing to do is remind them that it is not a lost cause. People can manage test anxiety and can make it work for them rather than against them.

Is anxiety bad? The simple answer is normal anxiety or general stress is not “bad,” but can actually help motivate us to succeed. For example, if football players did not feel somewhat anxious about the outcome of their game, they may not work to their full potential.

Stress only becomes our enemy when it becomes an end in itself. When the focus of our energy turns to anxiety rather than the task at hand, then it becomes detrimental.

Dealing with thoughts: If students begin to brew a storm of anxiety, stop what they are doing and have them shut their eyes and escape. Whether they count to 10 or concentrate on even breaths, or visualize pink unicorns on fluffy clouds, it doesn't matter. They need to have a safety mechanism to use when anxiety gets too high. Even if it cuts into the time for answering the test, it is well spent if it reduces their stress.

Visualize success: Anyone who has been involved in the performing arts or athletics knows the value of visualization. Basketball players who visualize their shots have a higher scoring ratio. Musicians and dancers who visually perform their pieces before going on stage can transcend the mechanics of technique and focus on interpretation.

The same applies for academics. Most people contemplate what failure will feel like. Doing this only sets them up for the fall. Instead, have students spend time visualizing success. Rehearse what it will feel like to get that “Proficient” or “A.” Positive thinking results in a higher level of energy and stress levels drop.

Praise always works: Students should learn to talk to themselves using positive language. Teachers can tell them to talk to themselves like they would to a friend. Rather than saying, “Way to go dummy, you don't even know the answer to the first question,” try, “Get back to that question, maybe it will come to you as you work through the rest of the test.”

Students should encourage themselves and make a personal promise to treat themselves after the test no matter how they feel about their performance. It is an accomplishment, nonetheless. Ask the students what they plan to treat themselves to, and if they would share that with the class. This helps by focusing on a positive outcome that will happen after the all-important testing. No one exam is going to completely devastate a student's career.

Dealing with Physical Tension

Here are a few exercises designed to relieve body tension and help boost energy levels.

Focal Breathing - Often, stress is a result of a lack of oxygen. This exercise focuses on breathing and optimizing oxygen intake.

- Start by having students exhale all the air in their lungs. Students should exhale slowly for 10 seconds. They should keep exhaling until their lungs feel completely empty. Next, have them breathe in through their noses to a count of eight. Tell them to keep their shoulders down as they inhale. They should focus on filling the rib cage.
- Students should then exhale slowly, focusing their breath by shaping their lips into an “O.” They can pretend there is a candle in front of their mouths that they are trying to blow out. Focusing on this type of breathing will help focus and to re-oxygenate and reenergize their bodies.

Body Check

- Have the students sit down someplace comfortable and close their eyes. Have them focus on the muscles in their feet and release any tension. Have them do the same with their ankles, calves, thighs and then move to the upper body, doing the same by releasing all the tension all the way through their jaws and scalps.
- When scanning their bodies, students will find tense muscles. They might clench their teeth or curl their toes. Have them focus on those muscle areas and increase the tension as hard as they can, holding it for five counts, and then relaxing those muscles completely. Tell them that is one way of purging stress. If they start feeling their jaws clench or their toes curl, they can tighten and then release.