

Helping Your Child Manage Test Anxiety

What Is Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety is the uneasiness and tension that a child feels before, during or after a test due to uncertainty or fear of failure. Most children experience some level of anxiety during an exam. A little nervousness can actually motivate a child to study and perform well. However, when anxiety interferes with test taking, causing students to “blank out,” have trouble paying attention, and/or limit their ability to think clearly, absorb, retain or recall information, it has become an issue that requires attention.

Physical Signs of Test Anxiety:

- butterflies in the stomach
- pain or upset stomach
- cold, clammy hands.
- sweaty palms
- feeling hot or cold
- headaches
- nausea
- feeling faint
- sleepless nights
-

Emotional Signs of Test Anxiety:

- frequent tears or excessive crying
- feelings of anger and/or helplessness
- irritability
- becoming easily frustrated
-

Suggestions to Help Students Overcome Test Anxiety:

- Make sure your child attends school regularly so that they are exposed to all the schoolwork that will be covered in the exam, and be part of the regular study review sessions provided by the teacher.
- Doing well on an exam is easier if a student has been consistently completing school assignments, homework, and assigned readings along with participating in regular studying sessions.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle – help your children get enough sleep, eat well, exercise, have some personal “down time” and a reasonable amount of social interaction.
- Create and maintain a routine at home that will help children to be well rested during regular school days as well as during the week of testing.
- Talk with your children and encourage them to do their best.
- Be well prepared for a test - avoid cramming - help your children develop good study habits and good test taking skills.
- Help your child develop a positive attitude towards test taking – help them develop a “can do” attitude.

- Build mental habits that help your child reduce anxiety – by teaching them to take deep breaths to calm themselves when anxiety levels are high.
- Encourage your child to engage in “thought stopping” techniques if you find that they are worrying excessively or comparing themselves to their peers.

What Parents Can Do On Exam Day To Help Reduce Anxiety:

- Help your child to prepare everything that they will need for the exam the night before— pen, pencil, ruler, eraser, calculator, etc.
- Do something fun on the night before the exam to distract them like playing a board game, watching a movie, or participating in a sporting activity.
- Set the alarm so your child can relax and get a good night sleep before the exam.
- Make sure they eat a healthy breakfast on the day of the exam, as the brain needs lots of energy to maintain focus. Foods such as eggs, cereal, fresh fruits and whole wheat toast help to energize the brain. Avoid foods that contain lots of sugar and caffeine like soda pop, cookies, as well as fatty junk foods.

What Students Can Do On Exam Day To Help Reduce Anxiety:

- Wear comfortable clothing.
- Arrive at the exam early, prepared and focus on doing well.
- Be cautious about talking to other students about the exam material before going into the exam – especially those that have the tendency to generate more anxiety.
- Think positive thoughts – “I can do this” “ I have prepared well.”
- Sit in a location in the exam room where you will be least distracted.
- As the papers are being distributed calm yourself by taking some slow, deep, calming breaths.
- Make sure you carefully read any instructions on the exam.
- Focus on only the exam.
- If you feel anxious at any time during the exam, take a few minutes to calm yourself by deep breathing or stretching.
- If the exam is difficult, don’t panic, just focus on completing what you know, putting in your best effort, and not giving up.
- When the exam is over – reward yourself with something special.

Students with severe test anxiety may decline in their academic performance, and are more likely to repeat a grade, and will clearly not be performing at their full potential. Test anxiety may also be related to a variety of issues from low self-esteem to general anxiety. It is normal to have some degree of test anxiety, but if the problems persist or the symptoms interfere with school performance, as well as general day-to-day functioning it is time to seek professional help.

Fletcher and Associates Psychological Services, 2007.