



Mental Health Fact Sheet for Parents and Caregivers: Test Anxiety

What is Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety is a type of performance anxiety – a feeling someone might have in a situation where performance is very important or there is a great deal of pressure to do well. Almost everyone feels nervous or experiences some anxiety when faced with a test or an exam and this is perfectly natural. If we didn't, we probably wouldn't take time to prepare! However, too much anxiety about a test, to the point that it interferes with performance, is commonly referred to as test anxiety.

Common Symptoms of Test Anxiety

While each student will experience a different collection of symptoms with differing degrees of intensity, common symptoms of test anxiety may include: 'butterflies in the stomach'; a tension headache; feeling shaky or sweaty; feeling their heart rate beating quickly in anticipation of, or during, the test. A student experiencing severe test anxiety may even feel as though he or she may pass out or throw up. Stressful emotions can inhibit a student's ability to absorb, retain and recall information when needed. It can interfere with one's focus and concentration and the ability to demonstrate what they know in a test situation.

Note that this is not the same thing as poor performance due to being distracted by other life circumstances, as we know that distracting life events, such as a breakup or a loss, can also interfere with concentration and impede performance.

Examples of Physical Symptoms:

- Headache
- Nausea
- Feeling queasy or faint
- Excessive sweating
- Rapid breathing and heart rate

Examples of Cognitive Symptoms:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Distracting thoughts of failure
- Drawing a blank on answers
- Negative self-talk

What Causes Test Anxiety?

Like other anxiety reactions, test anxiety is a reaction to anticipating something stressful. When faced with a stressful situation, the hormones adrenaline and cortisol are released. These hormones prepare our body for danger. This is often called the 'fight, flight or freeze' reaction, and causes the physical symptoms discussed above. These symptoms may be experienced on a continuum from mild to intense.

The severity of a stressful reaction can be worsened by our mindset as well; for example, test anxiety can be fueled by focusing on the bad things that could happen. Negative mental statements, distracting thoughts of failure, or being preoccupied with physical symptoms ("What if I throw up?") can take up mental space and interfere with one's ability to focus on the test questions. This can create a vicious cycle, where the more a person focuses on the negative mental statements and physical reactions, the more intense the anxiety becomes, increasing the possibility of poor test performance.

What Can Parents / Caregivers Do?

- Let your child or teen know that it's natural to experience some stress. Stress is your body's warning mechanism - a signal that helps you prepare for something important that's about to happen. Teach them to take an active approach and to let stress be a reminder to study well in advance of a test.
- Be sure your child gets enough sleep the night before the test. Memory recall will be much better if they are well-rested. Also ensure that your child eats a healthy breakfast the morning before the test.
- Help your child develop good study habits and skills. 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 review and the use of active learning strategies. Many students find that their stress is reduced when they start to study more efficiently and / or more regularly. For additional study tips, visit: www.how-to-study.com
- Encourage your child to ask for help at school if they are unsure how to study or need extra support with study skills or test-taking.
- Listen for negative messages, which can contribute to anxiety. Encourage positive thinking and redirection of negative thoughts, for example thoughts such as, "I'm never good at taking tests" can be replaced with positive messages that are practical and hopefully true such as, "I've studied hard and I'm ready to do the best I can."
- Practice relaxation techniques with your child, for example, "Square Breathing" - breathe in for four seconds, hold for four seconds, breathe out for four seconds, hold for four seconds...repeat as many times as needed. This technique can be used to help them relax before, and during, a test. Slowing down breathing increases oxygen and can help with regaining focus. Practicing breathing exercises regularly, when a person is not feeling stressed, is important.
- Encourage your child to use good test-taking skills, such as reading the questions carefully; skimming through the entire test first to plan their approach; asking clarifying questions; being aware of point values for each question in order to plan their time, and so on. Some people find it helpful to answer the easier questions first, to build confidence and momentum.
- Everything takes time and practice and learning how to beat test anxiety is no different. Helping your child learn how to deal with test anxiety will help them learn stress management, which is a valuable life skill.
- Finally, remind your child that a test measures how accurately they can answer certain questions on a given day. It does NOT measure how smart they are, or their worth as a person.

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Sources: <https://www.anxietybc.com/test-anxiety.php>
<http://kidshealth.org/en/teens/test-anxiety.html>
<https://www.how-to-study.com/>

Note: This fact sheet is intended to be used as a reference for understanding different behaviours and mental health concerns. It is not intended to be used for the purpose of making a diagnosis.