



2-2016

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Recommended Citation

Oliver, B. (February, 2016). Taming Test Anxiety. *Indianagram, Indiana Association of School Principals Newsletter*, Vol. 18. No. 2.

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Taming Test Anxiety

by Dr. Brandie Oliver, Butler University School Counseling Program

As testing season approaches, it is common for stress and anxiety to surface in students. Most youth experience some level of anxiety during an exam, and low to moderate levels of nervousness can help motivate and increase performance. However, for some students anxiety reaches a point that becomes debilitating and interferes with their ability to perform well on tests, undermining performance. According to the American Test Anxieties Association approximately 16-20% of students have high-test anxiety, making this a widely prevalent scholastic impairment in our schools today. Another 18% are troubled by moderately-high test anxiety levels. Test anxiety is an equal opportunity problem: it affects boys and girls and students from all ethnic/cultural and income groups equally, although students who are learning English or are having reading difficulty are more anxiety-prone than others (Kipps-Vaughan & Ashton Trice, 2013).

Anxiety has four components (cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physiological) that are often interchangeable. Students can present with a combination of these components, and student anxiety responses can vary by situation or over time. The chart below offers examples within each component of anxiety.

Cognitive

- Negative/self-defeating thoughts
- 'Going blank'
- Difficulty concentrating or focusing
- Difficulty organizing thoughts
- Racing thoughts

Emotional

- Fear
- Anger
- Hopelessness
- Embarrassed
- Uncontrollable laughing or crying

Behavioral

- Fidgeting
- Pacing
- Rocking in seat
- Drumming on desk

Physiological

- Nausea
- Headaches
- Muscle/body aches
- Rapid heart rate
- Sweating
- Dry mouth

Cognitive aspects include all of the thoughts that race through the mind before, during, and after the “dreaded” event of taking the test. Common thoughts that sometimes you may hear students say include, “I never do well on tests,” or “I am not smart, why should I even try?” This negative self-talk can impede a student’s ability to focus and be present to recall information required for the test. Anxiety is an emotionally evoking experience because feelings of embarrassment or even anger can surface during bouts of test anxiety. Behavioral aspects can often be observed when students are overly aroused. Behaviors that are different than their normal behavior patterns could be indicators that a student is feeling undue performance pressure. Finally, it is very common for the body to respond to anxiety. Common indicators are upset stomach, headaches, sweaty palms, and an increase in heart rate. When a student begins to experience any or a combination of the above aspects of anxiety, it distracts them from the task at hand and becomes a vicious cycle (or what I call the anxiety hamster wheel) that is hard to interrupt.

Can anxiety be prevented? Probably not, but schools can create learning environments that feel safe, focus on relationships, promote positive self-esteem, and allow students to make mistakes and take risks. Working to ensure all classrooms in your school can be described in this way will lead to lower levels of test anxiety in students.

Prevention is the best approach. Think about this component as both things to avoid and things to do. Our students are keenly aware of the anxiety of the adults around them, and so it is important not to overemphasize high-stakes tests. Studies have shown higher levels of student anxiety in schools that emphasize the “upcoming test” rather than operating as business as usual. For example, in schools where banners are hung urging students to do their best on the upcoming test, principal announcements that always conclude with reference to the upcoming test, or in classrooms where students spend time every day in test-taking sessions, levels of anxiety were higher. Understandably, all of these strategies are motivated by good intentions, but these appeals can help create fear and often backfire.

It might be best to view practice tests and test strategy sessions in moderation. It can be very helpful to allow students some experience with practicing test taking strategies, especially if they have never had experience with timed tests or other aspects within the test. The key word here is some—not every day for a month immediately before the test.

Another part of prevention is to equip teachers with tools to teach their students simple ways to manage anxiety and encourage this practice to be embedded into instruction. Below are a few simple, yet effective, anxiety reducing strategies.

Teach Students to Breathe Better. Help students to learn breathing exercises that can help calm them down. Here’s how to do it: sit in a comfortable position and breathe in and out slowly, taking about 3 seconds for a) breathing in, b) holding the breath, and c) breathing out. Have the entire class do this two to four times before a test. When students become familiar with the practice, they can be encouraged to use this any time they are feeling nervous or worried about working on a task in class, including taking tests.

Focus on Blocking Negative Thoughts. Help students identify the negative thoughts that invade their mind that often spark the onset of anxiety. Teach them to watch out for any negative messages they might be sending themselves about the test (“I’m no good at taking tests” or “I’m going to fail”).

Normalize Mistakes. Assure them that everyone makes mistakes and encourage students to take risks and learn from their mistakes.

Despite prevention and school-wide implementation of anxiety reducing strategies, some students may need extra support. School counselors are well-trained to provide individual interventions and/or small-group counseling to students needing higher levels of assistance.

