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Survive and Thrive During Testing Season

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Survive and Thrive During Testing Season

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Right now, students across the nation are embarking upon a series of standardized tests following intense days and weeks of test preparation accompanied by anxiety and worry from both parents and educators. Many of these test participants are English as a Second Language (ESL) learners with a wide diversity of learning potential, social and emotional challenges, strengths, cultures and interests. Among these young learners, there are many who put themselves to bed in the evening, get themselves up and ready for school, and do not have breakfast, arranged homework times or adult support to guide their school days.



Researchers from many higher education institutions are sharing the knowledge that "how" we are currently teaching and "testing" is the exact opposite of how the brain is wired to learn. Dr. John Medina, developmental molecular biologist with the University of Washington School Of Medicine speaks of [brain rules](#), principles for how the brain naturally learns, processes and retrieves information. We did not have this research 30 years ago, but we do now. We are discovering that we are not wired to sit for long periods of time learning in sedentary positions, as many traditional schools and classrooms require. Emotion drives attention and learning. As biological beings, we are wired to pay close attention to every stimulus in our environment. The brain always [processes meaning](#) before detail.

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Testing vs. Stressing

To formulate our response to these discoveries, here are some of the questions that we should be asking ourselves during testing season:

- Have we created meaningful associations in our testing environment?
- If a child or adolescent does not perform well on a test, why not?
- Do we know and understand where the errors were?
- Was there anxiety in simply taking the test that immobilized the parts of the brain that think, problem solve and discern with logic and fluidity?

Many of our students are walking through our classroom doors in a chronic survival mode, where everyday stress is a waking part of their lives. We know that stress shuts down learning -- there is a definitive [cognitive collapse](#). Perceived stress is as individual as our thumbprints, and its direct impact on the our brain's limbic system directly affects our ability to learn and [remember](#).

Placing emotional connections into the content being taught helps to alleviate the stress response in children and adults. When we weave emotion into the content standards through stories, our own enthusiasm increases as well as that of our students.

For the very first time in the history of this test-taking movement in education, I am intimately involved. Last week, I found myself rushing through fifth grade instruction, neglecting the personal and emotional comments and questions from 11-year-olds in a way that should have demonstrated a "felt presence." I felt pressured to make sure that we spent every minute re-teaching, reviewing and testing their endurance for academic mastery. Then I remembered that the brain is a social organ, and within the context of relationships and felt connections, we learn through the brain-compatible strategies of questions, discussions, reflection, story-telling and modeling.

6 Brain-Compatible Strategies

Connections and relationships created between students and educators are game changers for academic success. What can we do when reviewing and re-teaching to prepare our students emotionally? How can we stimulate an environment where creative thinking, self-efficacy and problem solving are brought to life? I suggest:

1. We can engage our students by helping them see their own expertise in so many areas within their own cultures and lives. Share with students that these tests are important, but they do not define their personhood or intelligence.
2. We can encourage and notice every small effort or action that is positive, no matter how insignificant. Create a sheet for positive, on-target behaviors that you notice in each student, and send it home every day during the weeks of test prep and testing.
3. Share your concerns and stories that invite empathy, letting students know that "you are not alone in your thinking and feelings." This strategy is extremely effective when the dialogue is respectful and neutral with regard to tone and disposition. For example, you might say, "I know how nervous you must have felt before the first part of the test yesterday, as I remember taking my college entrance test, and my hands were so sweaty I could hardly grip the pencil."
4. We can weave the tested material into stories where we create context and patterns, because our brains are wired for storytelling. For example, if I am teaching persuasive writing passages, I can create my own passage in an area of student interest, and model a story of how I came up with the topic. Or you might compare the topic sentence to the boss of a company like Hershey, while equating the details of the paragraph in the story to the employees in the chocolate factory.
5. We can take brain breaks, pulling up casual and mutually inclusive class discussions for a few minutes on a popular topic, or read a story of interest together. We can get up and move, practice some deep breaths, or listen to music for five minutes.
6. We can encourage our students to write out their sadness or worries on small sheets of paper to be tossed in a basket before an assignment or test. [Research](#) reports that when we write out any worry or concern before a test, we create space and cognitive capacity in the working memory.

Remember, emotions are contagious, and how we feel at any given moment can be subconsciously mirrored by our students. Be aware of your moods and feelings, and of how these directly impact the dispositions and overall enthusiasm of your students. We are wired to model behaviors even subconsciously, and with awareness, we can shift our perspective, our emotions and our behaviors.