

Test Anxiety

Stress, Fear, and Anxiety

Everyone experiences stress, fear, and anxiety:

- **Stress** is your body's response when something causes a change to happen.
- **Anxiety** is the fear or worry of future threats, either real or anticipated, with unpleasant feelings/physical symptoms.
- **Fear** is our emotional response to an imminent threat, real or perceived.

Test Anxiety

Test anxiety is a psychological condition in which people experience extreme distress and anxiety before and during a test. Test anxiety is very common and can interfere with studying. Test anxiety may block performance and make it difficult to recall information that you know.

The causes of test anxiety are different for everyone, but common causes include: fear of disappointing parents, family or friends, fear of not reaching academic goals, connecting test results with how you feel about yourself, and in general having a predisposition for anxiety.

Some youth may experience:

- blanking out
- racing thoughts
- sweating
- difficulty concentrating
- negative thoughts
- inability to recall information during a test but able to recall it after
- nausea
- light-headedness
- headache

Strategies for Students

Test anxiety doesn't just happen; it is connected to our thoughts and feelings. It is part of a cycle where we view the test as a threat, which increases anxiety, which lowers our ability to perform at our best. This can lead to poor results that increase our feeling of threat around tests. We can break this cycle by changing the way we think about tests. It's normal to feel some anxiety but you can deal with it by finding coping tools that work for you.

Deep Breathing

Deep and controlled breathing is a powerful technique for calming anxiety and allowing us to access our higher level thinking. Try box breathing, the same skill the U.S. Navy SEALs use to stay calm and focused:

- **Inhale** for 4... **Hold** for 4... **Exhale** for 4... **Hold** for 4... **Repeat**

Use Positive Self Talk

Our anxiety can cause us to think and speak negatively about ourselves and situations. You can make a conscious effort to acknowledge your negative thoughts and turn to more positive self-talk:

Anxious thought: *"I'm so stupid; I'm sure I'll fail!"*

Helpful thought: *"I studied for this; I'll do the best I can."*

Use Mindfulness

Anxiety makes us worry about the future. Mindfulness helps keep us in the present moment. Try the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding exercise. Focus on:

- 5 things you see,
- 4 things you hear,
- 3 things you feel,
- 2 things you smell,
- 1 thing you taste

Take Care of the Basics

- Get at least 8 hours of sleep in the days before tests
- Eat a healthy breakfast on test day; avoid caffeine
- Get organized. Check out the time/location of the test in advance and organize your supplies ahead of time (pens/pencils/eraser/calculator with enough batteries/watch to keep track of the time.)

Study Effectively

- Create a study space with limited distractions
- Study in smaller chunks, not in long stretches
- Create a weekly study schedule (don't cram!)
- Practice with flash cards and practice tests

Before the Test

- Arrive early and avoid distractions
- Tune out negative chatter and practice positive self-talk
- Take some deep breaths and stretch
- Bring out your supplies

During the Test

- Read instructions slowly and carefully twice
- Do a 'memory dump' writing information you are worried about forgetting on a scrap piece of paper
- Answer easier questions first
- Keep your eye on the time but don't over check
- If your mind goes blank, start writing anything on scrap paper to get the ideas flowing
- Write something for every question
- Don't focus on others.

After the Test

- Acknowledge and reward your hard work, regardless of how well you did
- Try not to dwell on the test; let it go
- Use your marked test as a learning tool
- Remember that you are more than a test!

Considerations for Caregivers

- Ensure your child is rested and fed
- Support your child's homework/study schedule
- Mark down tests on your home calendar
- Communicate with your child's teachers; attend conferences
- Have realistic expectations and a positive attitude
- Listen to your child's worries; coach them through anxious feelings
- Praise your child's efforts more than their outcomes

Resources

- Anxiety Canada:
https://www.anxietycanada.com/sites/default/files/Test_Anxiety_Booklet.pdf
- <https://www.intelligent.com/how-to-study/>
- <https://www.testtakingtips.com/>
- <http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca/>