

Battling Test Anxiety

By Naomi Howard | December 2019

Test anxiety can show in ways from headaches and shortness of breath to crying or lack of concentration. It can affect students physically, emotionally, behaviorally and mentally. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America names failure as the leading cause of test anxiety: fear of failing the test, failing to prepare for the test and feelings of failure from failing previous tests.

In his book “Brain Rules,” John Medina defines stress as “a measurable physiological response, a desire to avoid the situation and a loss of control.” He explains how it can affect a person’s cardiovascular system, immune system and memory.

Prepare the Battle Plan

Preparation for testing builds confidence in students. Create an environment of intentional and frequent conversation regarding good test-taking strategies. I recently learned the 5-4-3-2-1 coping technique: focus on five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste. Students can easily use this coping strategy in a classroom during an exam to reduce symptoms of test anxiety.

Here are a few resources and techniques I’ve found to be successful with test anxiety.

Controlled breathing exercises: Have students inhale for a four count, hold for five, exhale for another four count, and, if needed, do it again and exhale with puckered lips (do it as many times needed until breathing is regulated). Other breathing techniques are blowing bubbles or using musical instruments (e.g., deep breaths when playing a clarinet).

Feeling thermometers: Create feeling thermometers in the classrooms, giving students the chance to indicate how anxious they are feeling at that time, and then teachers can lead a discussion about handling it in a healthy way.

Laughter: Telling a corny joke or getting students to laugh some other way can help relieve some of the test anxiety.

Exercise: Incorporate modest exercise techniques such as walking, stretching, etc.

Action plans: Teach students how to develop an action plan when feeling test anxiety.

Also, be aware of attendance issues, which may be a symptom of avoidance or “planned forgetfulness” when confronting a test

Apps: Another tool is literally at our fingertips. Here are a few apps to consider:

- Breathe2Relax: Contains videos demonstrating relaxation breathing to reduce stress
- Calm: Contains tools to reduce anxiety and induce quality sleep

- Happify: Contains games and activities to reduce stress, strategies to build resiliency and ways to encourage positive self-talk

De-Stress Fest: This activity takes a little organization and planning, but it's relatively inexpensive and helped my students de-stress before the standardized testing cycle. We created rotation stations with one station per sense.

1. Smell: cotton balls with aromatherapy oils on them (keep them in plastic bags)
2. Touch: stress balls made from balloons and play sand or flour
3. See: glitter water bottles, coloring pages with positive quotes and/or encouraging poetry or short stories
4. Taste: chocolates, gum or peppermints
5. Hear: rain sticks made from paper towel rolls and rice/beans or playing classical music while doing coloring pages

Positive self-talk: Use these creative ideas with any age group.

- Crush the can'ts: Students write down a negative thought on a slip of paper and tape it to an empty soda can and stomp on it to literally "crush" their can'ts.
- Positive world wall: You can use positive quotes, list test-taking strategies and include can-do attitude posters or sticky notes to let students add their own positivity to the wall.
- Personal positive story: Ask students what makes them anxious about the test, what do they think will happen, what can they tell themselves to face the anxiety, what can they do to overcome the anxiety, what's the conclusion?
- Test anxiety argument: Why is it OK/not OK? Is it silly? What can you do instead?
- Daily positive quotes: Suggest students write positive quotes in their agenda or on their phone.
- Positive self-talk cards: Find ideas galore on Pinterest.
- Journaling: Have students express the anxiety in writing and evaluate their feelings.

Gather the Troops

Parental/family support plays an integral part in reducing testing anxiety. Encourage parents/families to cultivate meaningful conversations with their students to reduce test anxiety.

Support strategies include:

- Encouraging a good night's rest and eating a healthy breakfast (with protein) at home or school
- Giving positive affirmation (e.g., positive notes on snacks or lunches, bathroom mirrors, etc.)
- Talking openly and honestly about the test and their student's feelings, to lead into discussions of ways to handle test anxiety in a healthy way
- Ensuring the students are prepared – arriving at school early, being organized, etc.

It's also important to help the parents recognize that avoidance is not an option – their child will need to face the test anxiety head on and work through it, not around it. Ignoring the anxiety isn't the answer; students need to be aware that stress affects everyone, in different ways, and the key is developing tools and strategies to reduce it.

As students learn to implement strategies to overcome test-taking anxiety, they grow and become more confident from one "battle" to the next. After a while, tests may not seem so stressful after all, and the tests can become a game or a challenge – no battle at all. Students can then see every test as a chance to succeed, rather than a chance to fail.

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