

Test Anxiety: How to Beat it!

Test anxiety refers to feelings of nervousness, worry, and fear that people experience before, during, or after taking a test or an exam. It is a common condition that affects many students, and it can have negative effects on academic performance, self-esteem, and overall well-being. Test anxiety is a type of performance anxiety that arises when a person is faced with an upcoming test or exam. APA defines test anxiety as “tension and apprehensiveness associated with taking a test, frequently resulting in a decrease in test performance”. The mechanism proposed to explain the deleterious effect is that anxious thoughts occupy space in working memory, thus diminishing cognitive capacity (Doherty & Wenderoth, 2017). Though some level of anxiety is productive, high levels negatively impact academic performance. As a result, test performance does not accurately measure the abilities of those students who experience high levels of test anxiety. This type of anxiety can be particularly common among young adults who are attending school or university. Research suggests that 25-40% students suffer from test anxiety, of which about 10-35% of college students experience functionally impairing levels of test anxiety which are negatively associated with their academic performance (Szafranski et al., 2012). Test anxiety can drastically hinder an individual’s ability to perform well, and negatively affects their social, emotional, and behavioral development and feelings about themselves and school (Hanfesa et al., 2020)

Test anxiety refers to a negative reaction to an exam situation, which can cause physical symptoms like increased heart rate and nausea, as well as cognitive symptoms like worrying about the consequences of failure, comparing oneself to peers, feeling unprepared or lacking confidence (Cassady & Johnson, 2002). The reason why test anxiety can negatively impact performance is that anxious thoughts use up cognitive resources in working memory, which reduces cognitive capacity (Moran, 2016). This decrease in cognitive capacity may not affect a student's ability to answer questions that only require memorization of facts and definitions, but it can significantly reduce their ability to solve more difficult and intellectually demanding questions (Ramirez & Beilock, 2011).

Physical symptoms associated with test anxiety may include sweating, shaking, rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, fainting, nausea, and even vomiting or diarrhea in severe cases. Mild cases of test anxiety can cause a feeling of butterflies in the stomach, while more severe cases can make students physically ill.

Emotional symptoms of test anxiety may manifest as depression, low self-esteem, anger, hopelessness, distress, and feelings of inadequacy. Students may feel helpless to change their situation and criticize themselves for their symptoms and poor test performance.

Cognitive and behavioral symptoms can include fidgeting, avoidance of testing situations, forgetfulness, self-doubt, negative self-talk, and even substance abuse as students may turn to drugs or alcohol to self-treat their anxiety.

Test anxiety can significantly impair concentration during exams, and people with this condition may experience blanking out on answers despite having studied the material. Negative self-talk, difficulty concentrating, and racing thoughts are also common cognitive symptoms of test anxiety. In severe cases, test anxiety may cause students to drop out of school to avoid the source of their fear (Cherry, 2020).

Conquering Test Anxiety

Conquering test anxiety can be a challenge, but there are several effective strategies that can help alleviate test anxiety. Here are some tips for overcoming test anxiety:

Preparation: One of the most effective ways to overcome test anxiety is to prepare thoroughly for the exam. This can involve creating a study schedule, reviewing notes, practicing sample questions, and seeking help from teachers or tutors if needed.

Positive self-talk: Students can use positive self-talk to counteract negative thoughts and emotions that can contribute to test anxiety. Examples of positive self-talk include "I am well-prepared for this test," "I have studied hard and know the material," and "I can handle this challenge."

Relaxation techniques: Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and visualization can help to calm the mind and reduce anxiety. Try practicing these techniques before the exam to help you feel more relaxed and focused (Brunyé et al., 2013).

Time management: Poor time management can contribute to test anxiety, so it's important to plan ahead and manage your time effectively. Make sure to allocate enough time for studying, completing assignments, and reviewing notes, so you feel prepared and confident going into the exam.

Test-taking strategies: There are several test-taking strategies that can help to reduce anxiety and improve performance. These may include reading instructions carefully, pacing yourself, eliminating obviously incorrect answers, and focusing on the questions you know before moving on to more difficult ones. (Damer & Melendres, 2011)

Seek support: If you are struggling with test anxiety, don't hesitate to seek support from teachers, counselors, or a mental health professional. They can provide helpful tips and strategies, as well as offer emotional support and encouragement.

Cognitive restructuring: Students can learn to challenge and reframe negative thoughts that contribute to test anxiety. For example, they can ask themselves whether their fears are realistic or based on irrational beliefs, whether they are catastrophizing or overgeneralizing, and whether they are focusing on the worst-case scenario instead of a more realistic outcome or training students to reappraise physiological symptoms as something positive (e.g., a faster heart rate delivers more oxygen to your brain (Jamieson et al., 2016)

In an interesting study by Jennifer and Wenderoth, conducted in 2017, college students were given a cover sheet for 'Expressive Writing' before the start of every exam. They were given five minutes to write how they felt, and at the end of the five minutes, students were asked to crumple and throw the cover sheet on which they had just written. Interestingly, crumpling and throwing papers seemed to dissipate tension and created a more relaxed atmosphere in the classroom.

In conclusion, test anxiety is a common experience among students that can have negative effects on academic performance, psychological well-being, and physical health. However, there are several strategies that students can use to cope with test anxiety, including preparation, relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, and cognitive restructuring. By using these strategies, students can overcome their fears and perform at their best on tests and exams. See a professional counselor, if necessary. Talk therapy (psychotherapy) with a psychologist or other mental health professional can help you work through feelings, thoughts and behaviors that cause or worsen anxiety.

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