

Helping Students Overcome Test Anxiety and Study Tips

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Introduction:

With the SAT, ACT, summer TAKS and final exams approaching, sometimes students experience test anxiety. Below are some ideas taken from the Institute of *Heart Math* and its *Test Edge* Programs found on www.heartmath.org. Students and parents are encouraged to discuss test anxiety with their school counselor. The best way for students to decrease test anxiety is to believe in their abilities and have positive expectations on their performance. These beliefs can negate most of test anxiety. A small amount of anxiety is healthy and helpful in performing well.

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Test anxiety is almost universal. It is hard to find a student that has not had some degree of test anxiety, especially when it is a big test. Test anxiety can cause a host of problems in students, such as upset stomach, headaches, and loss of focus, fear, irritability, anger and sometimes depression.

Stressful emotions can inhibit a student's ability to absorb, retain and recall information. Anxiety creates a noise or mental static in the brain that blocks the ability to retrieve what is stored in memory and can impair the ability to comprehend and reason. The key to understanding how anxiety inhibits cognitive and physical performance lies in understanding how emotions affect the activity in the nervous system. Feelings such as frustration, fear, anger and anxiety cause the neural activity in the two branches of the nervous system to get out of sync. This, in turn, affects the synchronized activity in the brain, disrupting the ability to think clearly. On the other hand, uplifting feelings increase harmony and synchronization in the brain and various body systems, which facilitates the ability to think more clearly.

Research has shown that providing students with tools and strategies that build both emotional skills and healthy physical habits when preparing for a test can help them overcome test anxiety and the associated symptoms, while improving their ability to prepare for and perform on critical testing. It is important to help students identify what they are feeling and give them tools that will help them learn to manage emotions such as anxiety, self-doubt, anger or frustration. The proper physical habits enable students to have enough energy and stamina for their brain to do its job of thinking and analyzing for a sustained period of time.

Tips for Students (and their parents):

1. Practice the neutral tool: Breathing is important. Breathe quietly and naturally, four-five seconds on the in-breath and four-five seconds on the out-breath. Do this in the days leading up to the test, right before the test and during the test.
2. Address "what-if" questions: Writing a "what-if" question in a positive way can help you take the big deal out of the situation and begin to see things in a different way. Try to turn the "what-if" negative questions into "what-if" positive questions.
3. Get enough sleep: Teenagers should allow 8-10 hours of sleep the night before each exam. Try to do something fun the night before or participate in something physical to take your mind off the test.
4. Eat a hearty breakfast: The brain needs a lot of energy to maintain focus for several hours of testing. Steer away from sugar. Eggs, cereal, whole-wheat toast help energize your brain. For snack food, protein foods like peanut butter and crackers sustain energy.
5. Try to do the easiest questions first, then go back and spend time on the harder ones. Don't go back and change your answers on the easier questions. Your first response is usually the best one.
6. Take your time and try not to guess, but find the best answer or closest answer. Do not be rattled by those who finish early.

7. Avoid as much conflict the night or morning before as possible: Students should get up early, have their clothes ready, eat and leave early, etc. so there will be as little tension as possible. If riding the bus increases tension, make arrangements for your child to be taken and picked up from school.
8. Final exam “study groups” are helpful. Arrange small group study sessions at someone’s home in a relaxed, but focused environment. Notes, possible questions, syllabi should be reviewed and discussed.
9. Visit with the teacher(s) prior to the exam to ensure you have all the notes and possible questions that could appear on the exam.
10. Do not cram! Start studying a week before each exam and allot time for each every night.
11. Know the best ways and places for you to study. Do you study best in a well-lit area or low-lighting or freedom from noise or distractions or quiet background music or sitting up or lying down or munching food or turning off or on the cell phone and MP-e off ,etc? Know what works for you and don’t change the routine too close to the exam.
12. Organize your study materials before you begin. Know where all your notes, examples, books, notebooks, cell phone numbers for questions, etc. before you start studying so you don’t have to stop and find items. This can be a distraction.
13. Think good thoughts. Science shows that good feelings can actually help your brain work better. Try this just before the test.
14. Believe in your abilities to perform well! This positive thought and belief will negate most of test anxiety.