

Test & Exam Anxiety: A Guide for Students



Introduction

Feeling anxious about tests in school is an experience many of us can relate to. This can happen in anticipation of an upcoming exam or even when waiting to receive a grade following an exam. Both tests and anxiety are a natural part of school life and each of them have the potential to lead to personal growth.

In proper doses, anxiety can help you focus and can lead to increased motivation to learn content at greater depth. Trouble can arise when anxiety starts to interfere with your ability to function. The fear of potential failure may lead you to struggle with focusing while in class or when preparing for an exam.

Keep in mind everyone experiences test anxiety differently, both in appearance and intensity.

Several things may trigger this type of anxiety, including:

LEARNED BEHAVIOR. Test or exam anxiety happens over time due to external forces, such as pressures from your parents or your desire to further your academic or personal goals. Ultimately you may internalize these feelings, which results in a prolonged anxiety response.



ASSOCIATING GOOD GRADES WITH PERSONAL WORTH.

Grades represent just one aspect of success. However, you or your friends may start directly connecting your grades to your self-worth. Often this can be tied to your upbringing or conversations that you have had with mentors or peers about what success means, and in some cases, it can stem from culture.



BEING PLACED INTO A COURSE ABOVE YOUR CURRENT LEVEL OF ABILITY.

Challenging yourself can have benefits when taking a harder course, however it can also impact your grades and confidence. This can impact your mental well-being if it is beyond your current level of understanding, skill or language level.



FEAR OF ALIENATION FROM FAMILY OR PEERS DUE TO POOR GRADES.

Sometimes pressure from your family or your peers may create feelings of anxiety and thoughts that poor grades will result in disappointment and rejection. If you are an international student, these feelings may be heightened, due to the sacrifices your family has made for you to study or because you are comparing yourself to your peers.



TIMED TESTS AND THE FEAR OF NOT FINISHING, EVEN IF YOU ARE CAPABLE OF ANSWERING ALL THE QUESTIONS.

Time can create more pressure both while you are writing the test and even before you sit down in the exam room, especially if it has a high impact on your overall grade. There can be additional pressure if you are dealing with special circumstances like language barriers or learning disabilities.



Offsetting Test Anxiety

Now that you understand what may cause your anxiety, here are several steps you can take to offset it.

Fostering a Growth Mindset

Thinking about every experience as an opportunity to grow and learn will allow you to focus on what skills you will acquire as opposed to basing your progress or success on test performance. This will allow you to deal with the pressure you put on yourself to reach perfection, as well as help you balance your expectations.

Reaching Out to Faculty

Reaching out to faculty may be daunting but it can be beneficial to talk to your instructors if you have questions regarding the course material or concerns about the exam itself. This can also be an opportunity for you to discuss your feelings of anxiety and the reasons for it if you are comfortable doing so.

Creating good study habits

Finding effective ways to study is another way to help relieve anxiety. Effective study habits are based on personal preference but consider activities that include active engagement with the material, like flashcards, study groups, or practice tests. Many campuses also provide courses on test preparation.

Pre-Test Routine

Create a standard pre-test routine that includes reviewing your study material, as well as mental and physical activities that will nourish your mind and body. Consider proper sleep routines, physical exercise, relaxation techniques and time to engage with friends or family. These things can help you feel rested, improve memory and attention, and have a positive effect on feelings of anxiety.

Reach out to a counsellor

Wellness services on campus are a great resource to seek out if your test anxiety, or your anxiety in general, feels debilitating or unmanageable. If possible, seek them out as early as possible, so you're prepared with the tools you need during this stressful period of schooling. Another option is to connect with [Good2Talk](#), a free support line for post-secondary students.

Consider Accessible Learning

Everyone learns in different ways. Reach out to your student accessibility services to gain insight and tips on which learning strategies may work for you or for support if you need alternative testing formats. You can also explore other services that may be offered by student accessibility services depending on eligibility.