**Test Anxiety**

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**DO I HAVE IT?**

It's normal to feel a little nervous before an important test. But if you usually have uncomfortable feelings before a test, then you might have test anxiety. Test anxiety affects people of all ages and intelligence, and its symptoms are based on your natural and biological "fight or flight" response. If you find tests to be anxiety producing, your mind likely perceives an upcoming exam as a threat, and then your body responds with a cascade of hormones that prepare the body for quick action in the face of the “test threat.”

Most people have some kind of test anxiety. Look over this list and see which one symptoms are familiar to you.

* Worrying about the test interferes with my studying; I can’t concentrate because I am nervous.
* I can't sleep well when a big test is coming up.
* I don't feel ready for a test, even if I study a lot.
* I have trouble physically relaxing before a test.
* I "freeze" when taking tests: I can't think and forget things I already know.
* My stomach becomes upset before important tests.
* I have negative thoughts while taking tests.
* My muscles become very tense when I take a test.
* I often have panicky feelings when I have to take a test.

If several or more of these items apply to you, you likely have test anxiety –perhaps a bit more than the normal nervousness associated with test taking. However, there is reason to be hopeful. You don't have to suffer from test anxiety forever.

Here are three ideas will help you cope:

1) embrace the anxiety (rather than fighting against it) by deciding to use it to your advantage

 2) try to work on underlying psychological issues that may be contributing to the anxiety—what has led you to be upset about tests? Is it reasonable to be nervous? What is the worst that can happen? Is the worst really that bad?

 3) set up a study plan for the next test so that you feel better prepared.

**KEEPING THE TEST IN PERSPECTIVE: WHAT IS THE WORST THING THAT CAN HAPPEN?**

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Sometimes test anxiety puts more emphasis on tests than necessary. Sometimes an upcoming test seems like a huge burden as it comes closer, as if everything about your life depends on your performance. While it's true that a big test may determine certain things about your life, dwelling on this makes anxiety worse and may affect how you feel about yourself-- self-esteem or confidence are affected.

To keep big tests in perspective, look at what tests can and can't do:

Tests may determine your career path for a time. There are definitely certain tests that affect the overall course of your life. But what if the "worst" happens and you don't do well? Will the world fall apart? The result may not be exactly what you had hoped for, but if that particular career path is what you were meant to do with your life, then one test score may set you back for a while but will not ultimately keep you from pursuing that dream.

Tests do not reflect your self-worth. You are a valuable person regardless of your performance on this next test. You have the right to be treasured and loved, even if you fail the test miserably! To pull yourself out of testing tunnel vision, remember what has gone right in your life—what you do well and are appreciated for. This will continue whether or not you do well on the test. Tests cannot sum up everything about who you are. If you do well on one particular test, does that mean that you are a great person who can do well on everything? Of course not! But people with test anxiety often think that a test reflects how smart and competent they are in all areas of life, and that if they don't do well on the test then it must mean they are unintelligent and incompetent. But this simply isn't true - you are much more than your performance on one test.

Tests assess what you know on a particular day. From the time we're children in elementary school, tests are often given far more weight than justified. Most achievement tests take place on one day, during a few hours. Anyone who has ever been "off" one day and then "on" the next (as we all have experienced at some time) should know that one day's test results may not be the best indicator of someone's knowledge. That's why some tests have retakes.

**HOW TO USE TEST ANXIETY TO YOUR BENEFIT**

Work with test anxiety. Trying to talk yourself out of test anxiety will only make it worse. When test anxiety happens, welcome it as a sign that your body is ready to focus. Decide to work with the anxiety, not against it.

Even this small change in your thinking can make a huge difference in your ability to manage the symptoms. In addition to working with the symptoms of anxiety, you should also begin to think of the test anxiety itself as a form of alarm system. It may be your body's way of telling you to deal with some issues you haven't yet confronted.

Confront your issues. Test anxiety is often rooted in perfectionism, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, negative self-talk, and previous bad experiences. Spend some time in reflection to locate the root of your anxiety.

**WHERE IT ALL STARTED**

Test anxiety is often rooted in early childhood experiences. Fear of performing badly on an exam can go back far into your childhood. Did one of your parents or a teacher send certain messages to you about tests, as if your very worth as a person depended on your score?

Finding the root of the anxiety can help you to figure out the lies and truths in that experience. Anxiety can distort your view of reality. Fear often causes us to see things differently from reality. For example, it may feel like your whole life depends on the results of that big test coming up. But regardless of how well you do on the exam, the truth is that you are a valuable person with much to contribute simply because you are alive.

**STRATEGIES FOR ANXIETY**

First, assess the remaining time before the exam and jot down a quick study plan, even if it's only for 15 minutes during your lunch break. Planning and studying can reduce test anxiety significantly. Next, decide how to handle anxiety when it happens during the test. The best plan is to accept the anxiety as normal (rather than fight against it), practice deep breathing, and go for a quick walk around the building before sitting down to take the test.

If you tend to procrastinate, you should also work on holding yourself accountable for "baby steps" by studying a little at a time, over a longer period of time, rather than saving all of your studying for the last day. Procrastination will make your anxiety levels skyrocket, and a long-term plan for test-anxiety relief must always include learning how to do things ahead of time.

Try practicing tests that might be like the test you fear taking. Here are some you can do for reading.

**PRACTICE TESTS**

Practice CPT or other academic standardized tests in reading comprehension:

<http://www.testprepreview.com/modules/reading1.htm>

<http://www.testprepreview.com/modules/readingtest2.htm>

Practice CPT or other academic standardized tests in reading vocabulary:

<http://www.testprepreview.com/modules/readingvocabulary.htm>