

Ways To Address Test Anxiety

Test anxiety involves a combination of physiological over-arousal, worry and dread about test performance, and often interferes with normal learning, concentrating, and lowers test performance. It is a physiological condition in which people experience extreme stress, anxiety, and discomfort during and/or before taking a test. Test anxiety is prevalent amongst the student populations and researchers estimate that 20 to 30 percent of American college students report experiencing test anxiety.

Here are a few questions and conversation starters to cover with your mentee to address test anxiety.

Do You Experience Any of the Following During Tests?

- Does your mind "go blank" during examinations?
- In exams, do you feel like you are "thinking through cobwebs?"
- Do you find it difficult to "recall" information you learned before tests?
- After exams, do you "remember" answers to test questions?
- While taking tests, do you notice your heart pounding, shaking, sweating?
- Do you experience "negative thoughts" during examinations?
- What are you telling yourself about the test?
- Do you feel that your performance on tests reflects what you have learned?
- Do you have any difficulty with concentrating on the exam questions and answers?
- To what extent do your answers to these questions interfere with your performance on examinations?

What Causes Test Anxiety?

- Poor preparation for examinations is the most common cause of test anxiety.
- Lack of interest in a course or dislike of the instructor can result in low motivation to study for examinations.
- The exaggerated importance of an examination can produce increased anxiety and possibly, panic during test taking.
- Individuals with learning disabilities (reading, writing, math, concentration) will probably experience increased anxiety on tests.
- Below average or low average intellectual functioning can result in increased anxiety concerning exams.
- Standardized tests (MCAT, LSAT, DAT, GRE, and GMAT) tend to be associated with increased levels of anxiety due to their importance to test takers.
- Board examinations for professions (medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing, physical therapy, occupational therapy) tend to be associated with increased levels of anxiety due to their importance in certification and licensing.
- Specific life events (death, illness, injuries, divorce) can result in temporary peaks of anxiety during examinations due to the impact upon emotional states.

Diagnosis of Test Anxiety

- Self-ratings of anxiety during examinations indicate the perceptions of severity for cumulative effects of test anxiety.
- Using a scale from 0-100, cumulative anxiety ratios can be taken for the following situations: overall life stress, during study, during preparation for exams, immediately before the exam, during the exam and at the end of the exam. A comparison of these ratings provides an estimate of the relative distress, due to anxiety, experienced in these situations.

- The Test Attitude Inventory (TAI) can also be used as it identifies "worry" and "emotionality" as two major components of test anxiety. The TAI uses measures of both components, compared to college undergraduates, to estimate the severity of test anxiety.

Treatment of Test Anxiety

- Replace worry and negative thinking with thoughts that are positive and relaxing.
- Deep abdominal breathing can be used to reduce anxiety before, during and after examinations. The breathing method can be a distraction from negative thinking and enhance control of the situation. Usually, three breaths in a row are needed to produce a decrease in anxiety and the breathing pattern can be repeated if necessary.
- Test preparation, test-taking skills/strategies, study habits, interest in courses and motivation should be evaluated as possible contributors to anxiety during exams. Start studying early. The night before a test, review the material and get a good night's sleep. Cramming increases test anxiety.
- Good self-care is important-eat right, exercise and get enough rest.
- If a technique for reducing fear has been learned previously and proven successful, use this technique or consider a modification of that technique. Mentally practice going through the testing experience. Close your eyes and see yourself walking confidently into the test, answering the questions correctly, and receiving the grade you want.
- Simple stretching exercises, such as shoulder shrugs, extending the arms, or pulling the arms back can be used to reduce muscle tension during exams.
- Short prayers can be used for calming effects.
- Learning new positive thinking patterns have been used to counter negative thoughts during examinations. These patterns include repeating a specific phrase, countering negative thoughts with positive thoughts, imagining a relaxing place and visualizing a more relaxed test taking experience.
- If test anxiety reaches panic attack levels in severity, consideration of a referral for medication is appropriate.
- Walk into the test with your head up and shoulders back. How you act can affect how you feel. If you act confident, you just may find that you feel more confident.

Tips on Taking Effective Exams

1. Before the test:

- a. Do not cram
- b. Eat properly
- c. Get enough sleep
- d. Think positively
- e. Organize yourself
- f. Set specific goals
- g. Be calm

2. During the test:

- a. Completely read all direction for the exam
- b. Completely read each question
- c. Look for key words
- d. Always go with the first answer (do not second guess yourself)
- e. Pace yourself
- f. Review entire exam before beginning it

3. Before handing in the test

- a. Look over all answers
- b. Make sure you answer all questions

4. After test

- a. Review the questions you missed
- b. Determine the reason you missed those questions
 - i. Test anxiety?
 - ii. Not enough testing experience?
 - iii. Needed more information (more studying)?