

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Test Anxiety Can Be Overcome

from the American Counseling Association

Warmer temperatures, longer days... all sure signs it's time for students to face a barrage of testing. From end-of-year subject exams to standardized national tests, there's more than enough to challenge the average student. Unfortunately, for some students, any testing presents a significantly stressful situation. It's called "test anxiety."

Students who haven't studied or who never grasped the subject matter understandably have reason to feel nervous about tests, but that's not the same as test anxiety.

Some nervousness when facing any test is normal, but test anxiety brings on much stronger feelings. Experts say test anxiety is actually a form of performance anxiety, the feeling someone may experience before appearing in a show, playing a crucial game in sports or walking into an important interview.

For most people, the result is simple nervousness that quickly disappears once the activity begins. With true test anxiety, however, the symptoms can be much stronger. The person might experience a stomachache, a headache, or an elevated heart beat. In severe cases there may be feelings of panic, of having to throw up or even of passing out.

These reactions are caused by the body releasing adrenaline as it prepares you for "danger." And as the person imagines the bad things which might happen, it can become a repeating cycle that leads to even more fears and anxiousness.

How to deal with test anxiety? The simplest step is to be prepared. It's called self-efficacy. The more competent you feel to take a test, the less anxious you'll feel. Being prepared means not cramming the night before, but studying over time, eating healthfully and getting plenty of rest.

Thinking positively and trying to relax also helps. Concentrating on negative thoughts and fears simply increases stress and anxiety. Instead, positive thoughts about how much studying was done and how well the material is known can help build confidence and encourage calm.

It's also important not to expect perfection. When a student stops worrying about his or her inability to be perfect and instead focuses on simply doing his or her best, it helps create a confident attitude and reduce stress.

And if test anxiety is such a problem for your student that he or she finds it almost impossible to successfully take a test, seek professional help. Your school counselor or a local professional counselor has a variety of tools to help address this problem.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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