

A Student's Perspective on Test Anxiety

by Hilary Phan

[Note from Center Co-directors:* Our Center is fortunate to be able to benefit from the energy and talents of many UCLA students. Because of her interest in this topic, undergraduate Hilary Phan drafted and we edited the following to be shared as part of the Center's resources.]

Test anxiety is a common form of anxiety that many students face, and it can impact their performance in school. I, along with many other students, have experienced test anxiety firsthand, especially as a college student.

As a naturally worrisome person, I have experienced test anxiety on multiple occasions. This has become more of a problem for me since starting college because the academic rigor of the curriculum is far more intense than anything I have ever experienced. Additionally, I plan to attend a professional school after completing my undergraduate degree, and the pressure to get accepted into a good school adds to my anxiety during tests because I must do well enough in my classes to raise my GPA in order to get accepted into a professional school. When I experience test anxiety, I experience many of the common symptoms that come with general anxiety, such as sweatiness, an increased heart rate, headaches, and an inability to concentrate. This makes it difficult for me to perform at my highest potential and causes me to focus on my physiological symptoms rather than the test I am taking.

What is Test Anxiety?

What is being discussed here is a type of performance anxiety characterized by psychological distress, academic failure, and insecurity about succeeding academically. Pressures to do well at school are increasing. Tests determine grades and grades determine college acceptances and future high-level employment. Grades also play a large role in the way a student is viewed by peers and teachers. Additionally, huge expectations may be placed on students by their parents to do well. All of these factors cause many students to become increasingly nervous about performing well on tests and this can negatively affect their performance. And the problem is compounded as previous poor test performance interferes with preparation and performance on subsequent tests.

Research indicates that some students benefit from the rush of adrenaline that comes from the nervousness related to test situations. However, while there is no good data on the matter, it is estimated that 40-60% of students are negatively affected by test anxiety.

Test anxiety causes many stress symptoms (Harris, & Coy, 2003). These include physical reactions such as stomach aches, headaches, increased heart rate and palpitations, shaking, sweating, and panic. Psycho-educational symptoms include a lack of self-confidence, overwhelmingly negative thoughts about academic ability, inefficient studying and test-taking skills, and difficulty interpreting information. Depending on severity, such symptoms can interfere with daily life, making it more difficult for students to perform at their highest academic potential.

Reseachers continue to study the causes and impact of test anxiety. For example, Owens, Stevenson, Hadwin, and Norgate (2012) suggest that the academic performance of a student who has test anxiety is determined by the strength of a student's working memory (defined as the cognitive ability of maintaining task-related focus in complex cognition). That is, for students with high capacity working memory, higher test anxiety motivates them to do better on tests; students with high test anxiety and low working memory capacity do not perform well.

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Test anxiety is a common occurrence in classrooms, affecting the performance of students from kindergarten through college, as well as adults who must take job-related exams. Estimates are that between 40 and 60% of students have significant test anxiety that interferes with their performing up to their capability.

What Interventions are Recommended?

In a 2013 review, von der Embse, Barterian, and Segool (2013) concluded that “there are few studies that have examined test-anxiety interventions with elementary and secondary school students. However, techniques including biofeedback, behavior therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, priming competency, and mixed approaches have demonstrated promising results.” While medication also is discussed, it is not the preferred treatment and, if prescribed, is to be used in conjunction with psychological interventions (Tracy, 2012).

While the research-base is limited, the internet offers many recommendations for teachers, student and learning support staff, and parents. Below are examples from several resources.

Teachers are encouraged to personalize teaching of:

- organizational skills for test taking – for example, helping students learn how to
 - >approach different test formats (multiple choice, essay, etc.)
 - >carefully read/listen to all directions and test content
 - >pace test taking given time limits
 - >avoid taking too much time on any one item
 - >skip especially difficult questions until the others are answered
- study skills to enhance test preparation – for example,
 - >managing time
 - >outlining, synthesizing, and using graphic organizers while taking notes in class
 - >setting goals while studying to increase motivation to stay on task
 - >how best to pace and review readings
 - >using reviews and study group sessions.

Teachers also are advised to

- enable students to ask clarifying questions and for extra support
- have students use study logs to encourage study habits
- provide frequent reviews and in class study sessions
- establish peer buddy study partners
- give practice tests and monitor levels of test anxiety to identify students with test anxiety and encourage them to seek help from school psychologists or counselors.

For students identified as needing special accommodations, schools are expected, as necessary and appropriate, to provide modifications such as untimed or extended time, spaces that are not distracting, small group administration, oral administration, etc,

School psychologists, counselors, as well as teachers, are encouraged to identify students experiencing test anxiety and take steps to counter their negative thinking and comparisons with others. Also recommended is teaching students relaxation techniques.

Parent are reminded to provide a healthy environment for studying. This includes providing guidance and support for homework and test preparation, encouraging students to do their best, but also avoiding excessive pressure for academic performance and enabling relaxation.

At their core, recommendations call for helping students organize, prepare, and practice (Education Testing Service, 2005).

Concluding Comments

Because test anxiety is a barrier to learning and teaching, schools should do more to address the problem. Here are some changes I believe would have helped me earlier.

- Rather than over emphasizing performance on tests, teachers should put more weight on other products of learning that cause less stress for students. (I would abolish testing altogether because tests are not always an accurate representation of a student's mastery of the material. They often stress rote memorization, rather than a demonstration of deep learning. Alternatives to testing include researched papers and portfolios of work.)
- Given that tests remain an institutionalized facet of the education system, I suggest giving students practice tests at appropriate times. (My anxiety stems from a feeling of not being in control of a situation; practice tests ease my anxiety by enhancing my feelings of preparedness and thus of control.)
- Finally, I believe schools should counsel parents of students with test anxiety about ways to avoid exacerbating the problem. (Although I believe that parents are good motivators for students to do well, they should not put so many expectations and pressures on students. Fears of disappointing parents adds stress and the additional pressure heightens anxiety.)

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Our Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on:
 >Anxiety -- <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/anxiety.htm>

Listed there, for example, are links to such Center documents as:
 >Anxiety, Fears, Phobias, and Related Problems: Intervention and Resources for School Aged Youth – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/anxiety/anxiety.pdf>
 >Back-to-School Anxiety – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/backtoschanx.pdf>

Also listed are links to such general internet resources as:
 >Schoolpsychiatry.org –
http://www2.massgeneral.org/schoolpsychiatry/info_anxiety.asp#interventions_school
 >InformED's Why you need to manage student stress and 20 ways to do it.
 By Julie Nedeem (2013). <http://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/why-you-needto-manage-student-stress-and-20-ways-to-do-it/>