



Overcoming Test Anxiety



For students with test anxiety, standardized tests are a form of legal torture. If you've ever experienced test anxiety, then you understand this debilitating fear. Anxious test-takers often have difficulty concentrating on the question. The test booklet is opened, the first question read, and then nothing—a total blank. This lack of concentration begins the cycle of nervousness and distraction that continues viciously until students overcome their anxiety or succumb to the temptation to simply mark any answer just to get it over with. How can we help students overcome test anxiety? Below are a few tips.

1. Talk openly about test anxiety. Knowledge and understanding shed light on dark situations, making them seem more manageable. When students with test anxiety understand what is happening, they are in a better position to overcome it.

- If you have experienced test anxiety, tell your stories. Students will relate and feel more relaxed.
- Journaling works. Have students write down their experiences and feelings about testing. Verbalizing the fear helps them explore the issue.

2. Familiarize students with the test format. With knowledge of style and expectations, students will feel prepared and comfortable with the test.

- Give students strategies for understanding questions and locating the best answer.
- Create a few classroom assessments in a format similar to the standardized test. This introduction demonstrates the format and reduces the number of papers you must grade. Rather than one practice test and one class assessment, you establish one class assessment that is also a practice test.

3. Discuss brain function. Explain to students the difference between the “thinking” and the “emotional” part of the brain and how they relate to test taking.

- Tell how anger, excitement, and anxiety will take control of the brain, inhibiting their “thinking.”
- Discuss ways students can keep their emotions from overpowering them. Recognizing this correlation and offering strategies will help them take control and keep the “thinking” brain active.

4. Provide relaxation strategies.

Create “before- and during-test strategies” to help students remain calm. A relaxed state of mind allows students to retrieve information from the brain and apply it to the test. Practice breathing and stretching exercises to send oxygen to brain cells. You may want to conduct guided visualizations of a relaxing scenario to help students get in the right frame of mind. Discuss with students what they can do during tests to refocus and stay calm. If they begin to feel unfocused or distracted, suggest they may try these ideas:

- Cross your right arm over your left arm and then your left arm over your right arm. This exercise stimulates synaptic impulses to jump from one side of the brain to the other, creating a need for the brain to focus.
- Close your eyes and take 5–10 deep breaths, breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. Open your eyes and begin again. Deep breathing is like a reset button to your brain.

With proactive measures, as well as encouragement and understanding, you can help your students overcome their anxiety about testing—and maybe ease your stress as well! I encourage you to talk with your students and implement strategies that will help them show us what they really know. 🍏

Brain Bites

Can't think? Move!

About 20 percent of the blood flowing from the heart is pumped to the brain, which needs constant blood flow to meet the heavy metabolic demands of its neurons. Exercise fuels the brain with oxygen and nutrients that connect neurons and increase cognition. It also reduces stress and enhances memory.

Feeling tired? Breathe, Drink!

Breathe deeply to keep your brain awake. It may only comprise 2 percent of the body's mass, but the brain uses 20 percent of the oxygen we breathe. When you're done with your deep-breathing exercises, drink a glass or two of water. Dehydration induces lethargy and, uh . . . oh yes, decreases attentiveness. Time for a water break!

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Emma McDonald, a veteran teacher from Dallas, Texas, is the co-founder of Inspiring Teachers, a company dedicated to serving and empowering new teachers. A professional member of KDP, Emma will be a regular columnist for *New Teacher Advocate*. Learn more about her and Inspiring Teachers at www.inspiringteachers.com.