



Test Anxiety

New Perspective Counseling Services
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What is Test Anxiety?

- *Excessive* worry about the test.
- Fear of being evaluated.
- A sick feeling you get when you are about to take a test
- Doubt about a positive outcome.
but...
- Manageable by following a plan of helpful suggestions



Can You Clarify Please...

- Many students experience some pre-exam jitters. Mild nervousness can motivate you to do your best. However, test anxiety is different from typical nervousness:
 - It is more intense.
 - It is more potentially overwhelming.
 - It is more disruptive and disturbing.
 - It is not helpful or motivating.



What Test Anxiety is NOT

Test anxiety is NOT to be confused with the normal, reasonable anxiety that results from being unprepared for a test



Stress Versus Anxiety

- “Stress” is a typical psychological response to a situation in which we feel that we have to work harder than what just comes naturally.
- “Anxiety” is a psychological response to a situation in which we feel that we may not be able to handle it or survive it.



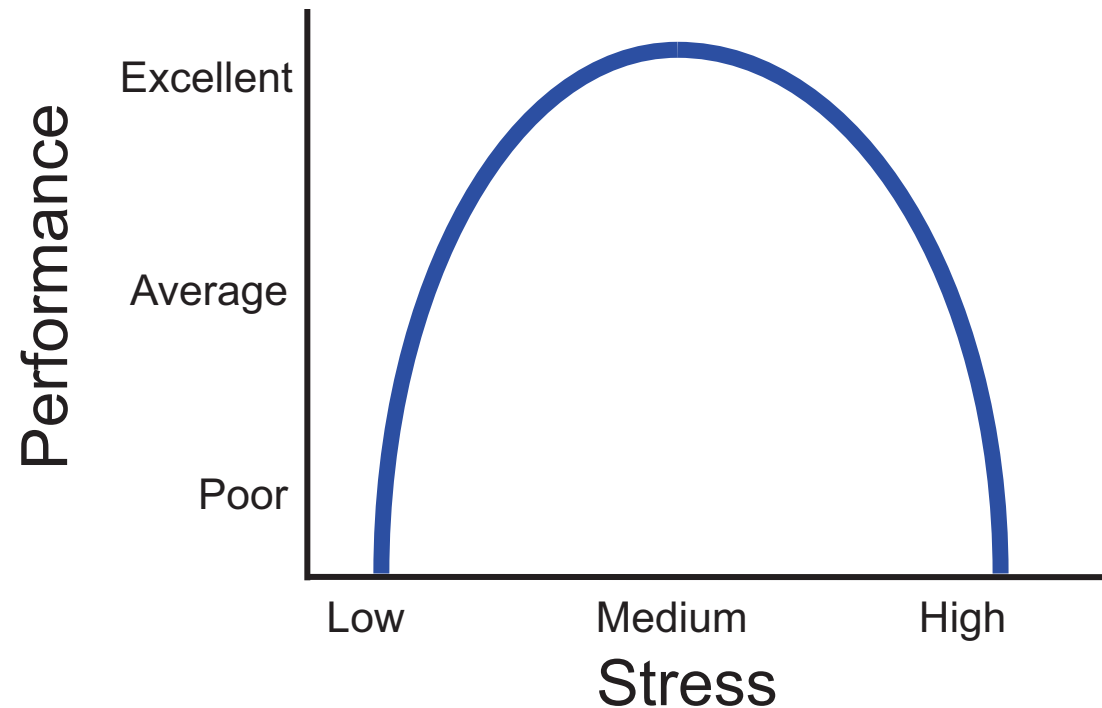
Optimal Stress

- Stress isn't always a bad thing!
- Optimal stress means your stress level is within a moderate range, not too high or low.
- Optimal stress challenges us to grow.
- We all need optimal stress to help us focus on what matters, have energy to accomplish our goals, and stay calm under pressure.





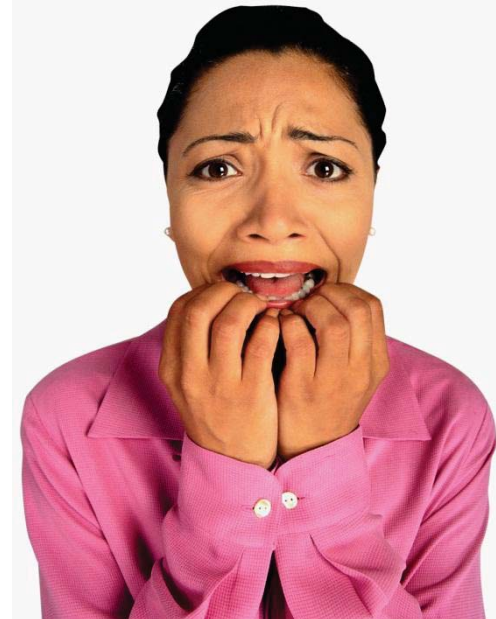
Optimal Stress



This graph demonstrates how too little or too much stress can impede performance, such as on a test. We need to have enough stress to focus on what matters, have energy to accomplish our goals and stay motivated, but not too much stress that we cannot stay calm under pressure.



How do I prevent my stress from becoming a case of anxiety??!





What Does Test Anxiety Cause?

- “Blanking out” even though you know the material well
- Not understanding words you know/trouble with reading comprehension
- Difficulty concentrating
- Physical discomfort
- As soon as you leave the test, you remember everything

Okay, I Might Have Test Anxiety... Now What?

1. Understand what causes it
2. Explore ways to avoid experiencing test anxiety in the first place
3. Explore ways to cope with test anxiety if it occurs (despite our best efforts to avoid it).



Four Main Areas Which Can Contribute to Your Test Anxiety:

- Lifestyle Issues
- Information Needs
- Studying Styles
- Psychological Factors
(my area of expertise)



What Are Psychological Factors?

- It's like you are splitting your brain, one half is focused on taking the test and the other half is focused on your grade or passing the test.



- Sometimes, test anxiety or information access difficulties occur because we are focusing on the wrong task during the testing situation.



What are those thoughts creeping in my brain?

- feeling no control over the exam situation (rather than knowing and applying exam strategies),
- negative thinking and self-criticism (rather than being one's own best friend),
- irrational thinking about exams and outcomes



It's All About Your Brain!

- Test anxiety is a feeling that comes from interpreting tests as threats to your safety. This is based in extreme patterns of thinking, or cognitive distortions/irrational beliefs.





Does This Happen to You?

- Increased heart rate
- Fast breathing or hyperventilating
- Sweating
- Dizziness
- Tingling in extremities
- Sense of that the experience is not real or you are outside of your body
- Feeling of doom or danger

Psychological Meets Physiological (Mind/Body)

■ Fight or Flight Response

- This is your body's way of protecting you in times of perceived danger.
- This process diverts energy from unnecessary processes (e.g., digestion, immune system functioning, cell maintenance) and puts it to use in necessary ways to protect your safety.
- This involves beefing up essential functions and turning off non-essential functions during times of high anxiety or stress.
- The result is increased heart rate, breathing faster, hypervigilance, and other symptoms that can turn to panic when we are not in any physical danger.
- When a test is perceived as a threat, the fight or flight response is activated, and interferes with optimal test performance.



The Good News

- What we believe/think determines how we feel and how we behave.
 - For example, if a fire alarm went off right now, you would probably feel a jolt of anxiety, which would mobilize you to act.
 - But, if you knew it was just a normal test of the system, you would respond to the same alarm in a calm, relaxed way.



Change Your Mind

- Cognitive distortions/irrational beliefs cause anxiety.
- The solution is to have different thoughts, but first you need to identify your most common irrational belief patterns.





Common Irrational Beliefs

Which Of These Do You Do?

1. **All-or-nothing thinking:** You see things in black and white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.
2. **Overgeneralization:** You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
3. **Mental filter:** You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors the entire beaker of water.
4. **Disqualifying the positive:** You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count" for some reason or other. You maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.
5. **Jumping to conclusions:** You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion. This includes:
 - Mind reading:** You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you and don't bother to check it out.
 - The Fortune Teller Error:** You anticipate that things will turn out badly and feel convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact.

Common Irrational Beliefs, cont.

Which Of These Do You Do?

6. **Magnification (catastrophizing) or minimization:** You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your goof-up or someone else's achievement), or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other fellow's imperfections). This is also called the "binocular trick."
7. **Emotional reasoning:** You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true."
8. **Should statements:** You try to motivate yourself with shoulds and shouldn'ts, as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. "Musts" and "oughts" are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.
9. **Labeling and mislabeling:** This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm a loser." When someone else's behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him, "He's a damn louse." Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.
10. **Personalization:** You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event for which, in fact, you were not primarily responsible.

From: Burns, David D., MD. 1989. The Feeling Good Handbook. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.





Refuting Irrational Beliefs

- Respond back to these thoughts with reasons why these thoughts are inaccurate and with a different and better way to think about the situation.
- Example:
 - Eryn tends to overgeneralize when it comes to tests, with thoughts such as, “If I don’t do well on this test, my academic record will be ruined and I’ll never get into a good college or get the job I want. My life will be ruined/over.”
 - Gaby, on the other hand, thinks “I would like to do well on this test, and so I will study. But, if it doesn’t go well, it won’t be the end of the world. Maybe I can get extra credit or my other grades will compensate for this one bad one. In the worst case scenario, I can take the class over for a better grade.” She tends to like to add, “it’s really not that hard to get into college”.

Put It All Together: 4-Step Model for Reducing Test Anxiety

■ Step 1: *Identify*

- Identify the thoughts you commonly have when you are anxious about a test.

■ Step 2: *Evaluate*

- Evaluate whether or not these thoughts are correct or irrational and how helpful they are.

■ Step 3: *Respond*

- What would be better or more useful thoughts to have?

■ Step 4: *Relax*

- Use various techniques to relax your body, which will further calm your mind..



A Closer Look at Step 4:

- Steps 1 through 3 addressed our first mission: to understand and avoid test anxiety
- Step 4: Relaxation is going to be how we achieve our second mission: how to cope with anxiety if it still occurs



Relaxation Techniques

- Deep abdominal breathing exercise – practice five minutes a day
 1. Note current tension level.
 2. Place one hand on abdomen just below rib cage.
 3. Breathe slowly and deeply through your nose. Try to pull the air down into the bottom of your lungs. Your hand should actually rise.
 4. When you've taken in a full breath, pause for a moment and exhale slowly and fully. As you exhale, allow your body to completely *let go*. Notice how your entire body feels more calm, open, and ready with each exhale.
 5. Do at least five slow abdominal breaths – smooth and regular.
- Use this exercise when studying for a test and before and during an exam.



Questions for Thought & Next Steps

- What other productive ways can you think of for reducing test anxiety?
- How will you use this information in the future for yourself?





Need More Information?

If you would like further information or would like to speak to a therapist, call

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Or

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