

Test & exam anxiety:

A guide for teachers to support students

As teachers, we strive to encourage our students to excel. We want them to be engaged and challenged. At times, we may even push them without taking the time to nurture them to feel like they are prepared for the challenge.

Feeling anxious about tests and exams is an experience to which many of us can relate. This can happen in anticipation of an upcoming test or even when waiting afterwards to receive a grade. Both testing and anxiety are a natural part of school life. Each of them has the potential to be beneficial and provide growth-oriented experiences for students.

In proper doses, anxiety and fear of failure aids focus and concentration and can lead to increased motivation to learn content at greater depth. Testing also serves a valuable purpose: it can help students and instructors determine how well the material is understood. However, trouble can arise when anxiety starts to interfere with a student's ability to function. Too great a focus on the fear of failure can do more harm than good. It may lead students to be so fearful of the consequences of failure that they struggle to focus while in class or when preparing for a test/exam.

It is not realistic or desirable for students to avoid the stress of evaluation, but it is vital to help them learn how to both understand and manage it in a way that will reduce the likelihood of prolonged anxiety on their academic journey.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN STRESS AND ANXIETY

Stress is a response to an external cause, such as a tight deadline for a test or assignment or having an argument with a family member, and subsides once the situation has passed or been resolved. Since stress has a direct external cause, tackling these head-on can help. Anxiety is a person's specific reaction to stress and its origin is internal. It is typically characterized by a persistent feeling of apprehension or dread in situations that are not actually threatening. Anxiety tends to persist even after a concern has passed. Both stress and anxiety tend to manifest with similar symptoms which are outlined herein.



TEST ANXIETY MAY HAVE DIVERSE PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The experience of text anxiety will vary from student to student, in both overt appearance and intensity. Some students may appear vigilant and demanding throughout the semester, while others might appear nervous in the days leading up to a test, agonizing over the material. Some may even feel anxiety long after the test/exam is complete as they worry about the potential implications of their grade. The underlying mechanisms leading to test anxiety can include:



LEARNED BEHAVIOUR

Students do not typically begin their academic career anxious about every test that comes up. This is often conditioned due to external pressures (such as pressure from parents or further educational goals that are dependent upon GPA). These external pressures may be internalized by students into a prolonged anxiety response.



BEING PLACED INTO A COURSE ABOVE CURRENT LEVEL OF COMPETENCY

It is important to make sure that students are not placed into a class that is not right for them. If a student is in a course beyond their current level of understanding or skill level, both their grades and their mental well-being can suffer.



ASSOCIATING GOOD GRADES WITH PERSONAL WORTH

If a student sees their grades as representative of their worth as a person, rather than simply one aspect of their lives, naturally they will be more anxious about tests.



FEAR OF ALIENATION FROM PARENTS, FAMILY, OR FRIENDS DUE TO POOR GRADES

Parents and guardians want to encourage their child to succeed. However, if a student feels their parents will reject them due to poor grades, this type of “encouragement” will do more harm than good.



FEELING OF A LACK OF CONTROL

This is the same with about any type of anxiety. As humans, we worry over the things we cannot control. The more something feels out of control, the more anxious we tend to feel. If students do not feel capable of doing well on the test, this can intensify their test anxiety.



TIMED TESTS AND THE FEAR OF NOT FINISHING, EVEN IF THE STUDENT'S CAPABLE OF ANSWERING ALL THE QUESTIONS

Timed tests are a bane for many students, as the limited nature significantly increases the pressure put on the test. This is especially true when the test has a high impact on the student's overall grade.



A TEACHER EMBARRASSING A STUDENT

Remember that students are still learning, and it is important to be patient with them. If a student feels singled out or mocked by their teacher, this will only add to their test anxiety.

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF TEST ANXIETY

BEHAVIOURAL/ COGNITIVE SYMPTOMS

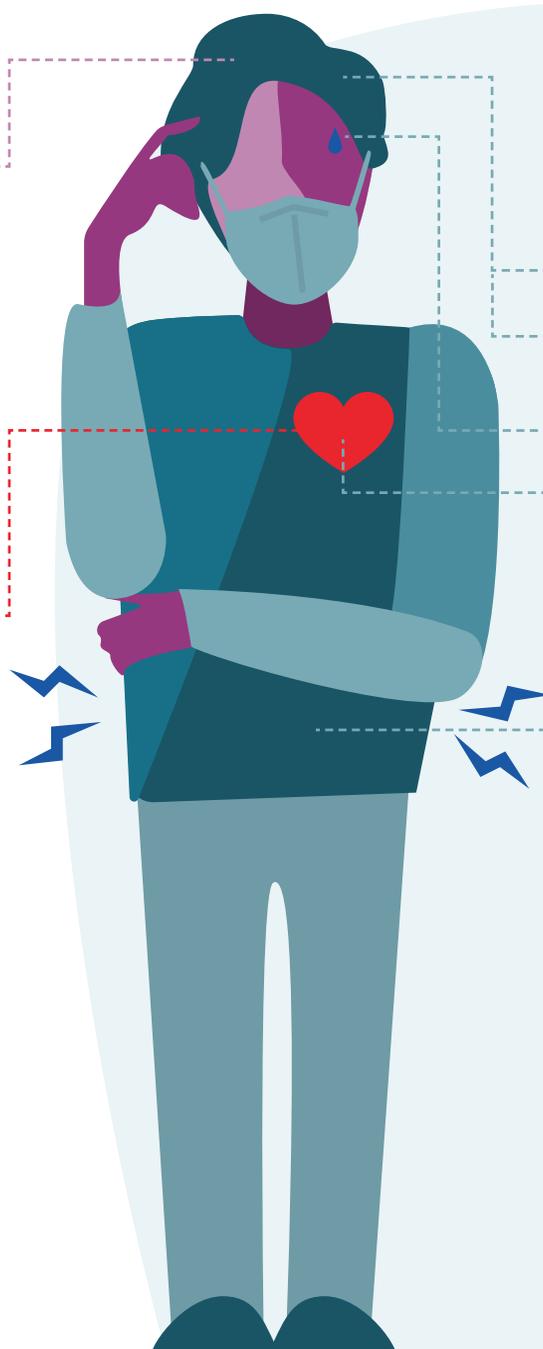
- Difficulty concentrating
- Negative thoughts or self-image
- Comparison of self to others
- *Procrastination

EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS

- Feelings of fear, helplessness, disappointment and stress
- Negative thoughts and fixation on past performance
- Worry about the future
- Racing thoughts or mind-blanking

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

- Headaches
- Light-headedness or faint feelings
- Excessive sweating
- **Panic attacks
- Rapid heartbeat
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea



**Procrastination is often a symptom of perfectionism. When students are taught to conflate their academic success with personal worth, they can fall into perfectionism: a need to do everything perfectly, or at least exceptionally. Perfectionists tend to be intensely self-critical when they fall short of their lofty standards. They may procrastinate or slack off, feeling that if they cannot do something right, they should not try at all. It is important to emphasize that mistakes are a part of learning and are necessary for improving.*

***If the student has never experienced a panic attack before, it is important to know what one looks like. As with symptoms of test anxiety in general, panic attacks can look different depending on the student. However, they are always characterized by a sharp, intense fear or anxiety, and are often accompanied by a rapid heartbeat that can sometimes feel as though the student is having a heart attack. This differs from anxiety attacks, which can last for days or even weeks at a time, with milder symptoms like chest pain, headaches or stomach aches.*

OFFSETTING TEST ANXIETY

There are several steps we can take as teachers to help offset test anxiety in our students. These include:



CLASSROOM CULTURE

The best thing we can do is create a positive classroom environment that prioritizes proficiency in skills and rewards effort more than performance on assessments. This includes avoiding sarcasm and ridicule, and inappropriately comparing students to each other.



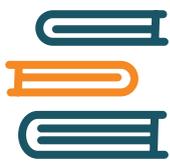
BE AVAILABLE TO YOUR STUDENTS

Make sure your students know they can come to you if they have any questions or concerns, or even if they are simply feeling anxious about the upcoming test. It is important as an educator to know where your students are emotionally, and it is important for your students to know you are a trusted ally. Help students identify with your office hours. What will make it desirable for them to take advantage of them?



BE MINDFUL WHEN DESIGNING YOUR COURSE OUTLINE

Think about humanizing it from the student perspective. We want to nurture their learning by crafting a course outline that is easy for them to consume. When they have less ambiguity about the roadmap for the course, there will inherently be less anxiety.



HELP STUDENTS TO STUDY MORE EFFICIENTLY

Are your students skimming over the selected reading until their eyes glaze over, not retaining the material? Find ways to integrate multiple ways of addressing the most important course content, concepts, and problems to help students understand which material will require most of their study time and energy. This means that tests and exams should be reflective of what you spend the most time on in class. Utilizing the adaptive quizzing services offered by textbook providers can help you add regularly-scheduled quizzes to help students stay on track and engaged.



REBALANCE THE COURSE GRADING TO ENCOURAGE ENGAGEMENT THROUGHOUT THE SEMESTER

Finding ways to evenly spread-out meaningful evaluations throughout the semester encourages students to stay engaged and cultivate weekly study habits. Some instructors have found gradually decreasing the grade weighting as the semester progresses has a positive impact on student anxiety levels. Increasing the weighting of weekly participation in class may be an effective way to keep students more engaged and better prepared.



DESIGN YOUR TESTS AND EXAMS TO MINIMIZE ANXIETY

Ensuring your tests and exams start with a few easier questions can help students feel more comfortable once the test/exam has commenced. Gradually progress to some more difficult questions after providing them an opportunity to get a few quick wins. Other considerations include not crowding pages with items, avoiding trick questions and diversifying the types of questions being asked. A humorous/silly question may lighten the mood and help students relax.



HAVE A PRE-TEST ROUTINE

Students are responsible for studying on their own in large part, but teachers can also give reviews leading up to the test to help students retain the information they need. While your students work on their pre-test routine, work on your own. Incorporate study and review times as well as short breaks where students can focus on something less stressful. Building in a full class to discuss major exams and review the material together can be extremely helpful.



TEACH RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Remember the point about offering short breaks as part of your pre-test routine? One way to do this is by teaching your students some relaxation techniques. To keep students from becoming too tense, go through deep-breathing exercises, light stretches and opportunities to envision a positive outcome.



ENCOURAGE EXERCISE AND PLENTY OF SLEEP

Studying is good, but not if students cram in hours of studying without any rest. Encourage them to get up and move around or take a walk when studying and remind them that sleep is an important part of test preparation.



BE AWARE OF ACCESSIBLE LEARNING CONSIDERATIONS

We know not all students learn the same way. Engage with teaching and learning support at your campus to help ensure your course material and tests/exams are inclusive to as many students as possible.



SUGGEST STUDENTS SPEAK TO A COUNSELLOR

A teacher can't do it all. If you notice some of your students are especially struggling with test anxiety (or anxiety in general), recommend they engage with counselling and wellness services on your campus for additional support and guidance.

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