

# Test Anxiety: Causes and Remedies

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There hasn't been a lot written recently about test anxiety, but that doesn't mean it's no longer an issue for a significant number of students. Those of us who don't suffer from test anxiety—and I'm betting that's most faculty—can find it hard to be sympathetic. Life is full of tests, and students need to get over it. Besides, if students have studied and prepared, there's no reason for them to feel excessively anxious about a test.

Perhaps we should start by reestablishing that test anxiety is a legitimate problem. A significant amount of research says that it can affect students in kindergarten right on up through college and graduate school. Here's one study (with lots of references, including several meta-analyses) that investigated the relationship between test anxiety and academic performance in 4,000 undergraduate students and 1,414 graduate students: "Low-test-anxious female and male undergraduates had cumulative GPAs averaging 3.35 and 3.22, respectively, whereas high-test-anxious female and male undergraduates had cumulative GPAs averaging 3.12 and 2.97, respectively" (Chapell et al. 2005, 271). That's essentially the difference between a B+ and a B. In this study, the relationship between test anxiety and performance was weaker for graduate students.



Granted the study is more than 10 years old, but I'm not sure that makes a big difference. College students continue to take a lot of tests, and the importance of grades, coupled with the pressure to get good ones, hasn't diminished. Another article does an excellent job sorting through the causes of test anxiety, starting with anxiety that's legitimate. If students haven't prepared for the exam and they're nervous, that's test anxiety for the right reason. Perhaps it will motivate necessary behavior changes. Mealey and Host (1992) describe three other causes of test anxiety:

- Some students don't have good study skills, don't know how to study for exams, know they're deficient, and experience anxiety as a consequence. These are the students who memorize answers but can't match them to questions, who come to exams with a head full of facts but no sense of the big picture.
- Then there are students whose negative self-talk distracts them, making it difficult to focus before and during the exam. Often these are students who've done poorly on other exams, hate taking tests, and are convinced they won't do well. They read a question and quickly decide they can't answer it, so they leave it blank and then forget to come back and make a guess. These students may have fine study skills and they may have prepared for the exam, but the experience is so anxiety provoking that it clouds and confuses their thinking. Many of us have encountered these students and discovered that they can provide perfectly coherent answers after the test.
- Finally, there are students who think they know how to study, but they're using woefully inadequate strategies. They recopy their notes word for word. They highlight long passages in the text without any real understanding of why they're highlighting them. They talk to friends who've taken the course previously and get persuaded that the test will be easy. Many of us know these students well. They can't believe they've done so poorly. How is it possible? They studied for hours.

Teachers can't cure test anxiety. But they can offer remedies that students should be encouraged to try. Information about good study strategies should be included in every course. Sometimes that information is more persuasive if it comes from fellow classmates. Discussion of the study strategies used for the test ought to be part of the debrief session. Many test-anxious students think that nobody else falters under pressure. It is helpful for them to talk with others who experience the same problem. Most learning centers regularly offer sessions on coping with test anxiety.

Teachers can encourage students with test anxiety by recognizing it as a real problem and by suggesting solutions.

Mealey and Host also asked a 100-student cohort of developmental reading students to identify things teachers do that make them feel more or less nervous during an exam—a good question for any teacher to ask students. Half of those students said it was distracting when the teacher talked during the test, and more than half said they found it stressful when teachers walked around the room and looked over their shoulders. Three-quarters said they went into tests more confident if the material had been reviewed in class before the test.

References:

Chapell, Mark S., Z. Benjamin Blanding, Michael E. Silverstein, Masami Takahashi, Brian Newman, Aaron Gubi, and Nicole McCann. 2005. "Test Anxiety and Academic Performance in Undergraduate and Graduate Students." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 97 (2): 268–274.

Mealey, Donna L., and Timothy R. Host. 1992. "Coping with Test Anxiety." *College Teaching* 40 (4): 147–150.