



Ideas for Students Who Suffer from Test Anxiety

SUNY/New Paltz professor Spencer Salend analyzes what to do with students who suffer from extreme and unwarranted tension during testing or evaluative activities. “Most people feel some level of stress when preparing for and taking tests,” says Salend, “and moderate and appropriate levels of nervousness can foster students’ motivation, memory and attention.” But heightened and detrimental levels of anxiety are another matter; they afflict between 25 to 40 percent of students. Those with disabilities, as well as those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, appear to be particularly susceptible.

Salend has the following suggestions for helping students overcome test anxiety and do their best work on tests:

- *Teach effective test-taking skills.* These can help students stay relaxed, focused, and motivated during tests:
 - Do a memory dump or download as soon as the test is handed out, jotting down key points, definitions, formulas, dates, mnemonics, drawings, memory clues, and names you are likely to use in the test.
 - Work on the easier test items first to build confidence.
 - Budget time according to the time allotted, the value of each test item, and difficulty level.
 - Highlight essential parts of test directions to focus on specific details (for example, *Answer three out of the five essay questions*), types of answers being asked for, aids, resources, and assistance you can use, and time, length, and space constraints.
 - Use specific strategies for answering multiple-choice, matching, true-false, sentence-completion, and essay questions.
- *Teach and prompt the use of anxiety-reduction strategies:*
 1. Arrive at the test site on time, rather than early,
 2. Avoid interactions with other students than can heighten anxiety;
 3. Avoid conversations with peers about what was studied, answers to questions, and false rumors;
 4. Use encouraging self-statements;
 5. Wear comfortable clothes;
 6. Take a few minutes to relax and focus on your goals and plans for success;
 7. Use anxiety-reduction techniques including meditating, taking deep breaths and breaks, tensing and relaxing muscles; using a squeeze ball; engaging in positive



self-talk; focusing on past successes; and listening to guided imagery, affirmations, meditation recordings, or calming music.

• *Positive Attribution.* Students sometimes approach a test with low expectations for success. “As a result,” says Salend, “they ascribe their poor performance to bad luck (e.g., “I got the hardest questions”), teacher mistakes (e.g., “The teacher didn’t teach that”), lack of ability (e.g., “I’m not good at that”), and other factors that they view as out of their control.” Attribution training is designed to counteract these thoughts by getting students to focus on the events and actions that contribute to their success and failure on tests and engage in positive attributions that credit effort and factors they can control (e.g., “I worked hard studying for this test” and “I learned that material”). The key insights are:

- Understand how attributions and effort affect your test performance.
- Interpret poor performance as a signal to work harder and identify ways to improve.
- Acknowledge and analyze successful outcomes to identify behaviors that need to be continued and enhanced.
- Discuss and learn from mistakes.

The role of parent feedback is critical to positive attribution, Parents can reinforce effective effort (“You really worked hard to learn this”) and get your child focusing on the right kind of reflection after tests (“Can you think of another way you could have answered this?”). After tests, children might be asked to reflect to these prompts: I did well on this test because_____. I struggled on this test because_____. The things I can do to be successful on future tests are_____.

Salend also offers suggestions for accommodations your child’s teacher could consider:

- *Teach study skills.* There’s nothing like effective studying to reduce test anxiety, says Salend, but many students don’t know the best ways to study. Here are some tips:
 - Give students study guides that address the purpose, content, and format of the test.
 - Ask students to work in groups to predict the content and test items that will be on the test, quiz each other, and create study materials and memory aids.
 - Use educational games and simulated tests to review and practice possible test content, questions, and conditions.
 - Give students a list of items that may be on a test – for example, essay questions.
 - Give study tips, including creating a schedule of study sessions, identifying difficult material that may require further explanation by teachers, focusing on specific goals, having the necessary resources and materials on hand, creating an outline, summary, or



visual aid of key points and questions and resources, and using games, flash cards, and mnemonic devices to remember key items.

- *Ask about testing accommodations.* These can include timing for the test, scheduling of the test (taking into account other teachers tests), and settings, as well as coaching, formula sheets when appropriate.
- *Consider a range of scoring methods.* These might include granting partial credit for correct aspects of an answer, letting students earn back points by revising incorrect answers, or retaking the test using different questions assessing the same content.
- *Collaborate with students' families and other professionals.* This includes sharing information about the interventions that you know work best for your child.
- *Evaluate what works and what doesn't work.* This involves touching base with students, teachers, and family members.

The above is adapted from the article: "Addressing Test Anxiety" by Spencer Salend in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, November/ December 2011 (Vol. 44, #2, p. 58-68).