Helping a Child with Test Anxiety

What is Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety is a type of performance anxiety which occurs when a person feels worried about how they will do on something, especially when they feel it is important. For instance, a student might feel performance anxiety when trying out for the school band or basketball team.

When taking a test, a student might feel "butterflies," a stomachache, or a headache. Some may feel shaky, sweaty, or feel their heart beating quickly as they wait for the test to start. Just about everyone — adults and kids — feel some anxiety before a test. In fact, a small dose of anxiety can be helpful to keep people sharp and focused. But when symptoms take over so much that the student cannot function, or the student is so anxious they feel sick, they may not be able to do their best work.

Why Continue to Give Tests?

Assessment is beneficial because it provides feedback to both students and teachers on how well students are learning skills. Assessment not only occurs at school, but also occurs in all parts of life — from a driving test to college entrance exams to career certification exams.

What Makes Anxiety Happen?

Anxiety is a feeling a person gets when expecting something stressful. When under stress, the body releases the hormone adrenaline, which prepares it for danger. Adrenaline causes physical symptoms, such as sweating, a pounding heart, and rapid breathing. These symptoms can be mild or intense.

What Can You Do?

- **Talk to the Student** Just talking about their anxiety can make them feel better. Have them describe what happens when they are taking a test and try to help figure out some solutions. For instance, learning study skills can boost test-day confidence, and a positive attitude can change their perspective about the test and allow them to concentrate.

- **Help the Student Prepare for the Test.** Talk about paying attention in class, doing homework, and studying for tests. Use practice tests and sample test questions with the student (if available) as they are more likely to feel calm on test day if they feel like they know what to expect.

- **Train them to Expect the Best.** Teach them to think positively. Have them say to themselves, "I studied and I'm ready to do my best".

- **Focus on Blocking Bad Thoughts.** Teach them to watch out for any negative messages they might be sending themselves about the test ("I'm no good at taking tests" or "I'm going to freak out"). These thoughts can make anxiety worse and make it harder your child to do well on the test.

- **Help them Accept Mistakes.** Assure them that everyone makes mistakes and that is alright. Mistakes help us learn.

- **Teach them Breathing Exercises.** Help your child learn breathing exercises to calm them before and during testing.

  Breathing Exercise Example – **Inhale** (breathe in) slowly and deeply through your nose, and then **exhale** (breathe out) slowly through your mouth. Have your child do this exercise two to four times before a test or when they start to feel anxious, and they may find they it is calming.

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