

Helping Students Overcome Test Anxiety

Test anxiety is almost universal. In fact, it is unusual to find a student who doesn't approach a big test without a high level of anxiety. Test anxiety can cause a host of problems in students, such as upset stomach, headache, loss of focus, fear, irritability, anger and even depression. New research is helping to better define how emotional stress and anxiety affect learning and academic performance.

Here are a few tips from the Institute of HeartMath based on its TestEdge™ programs. Share these with your student ahead of time to better prepare them emotionally and physically for test taking.

Tips for Students

Address the what-if questions: A lot of times before we have to do something like take a test, much of the anxiety we feel is a build-up from negative "what-if" thoughts. What if I fail, what if I can't remember anything, or what if I run out of time. Try writing a what-if question that is positive and can help you take the big deal out of the situation and begin to see things in a different way. Examples of these kinds of questions are, "What if I can remember more than I think I can?" "What if I can feel calmer than I think I can?"

Get enough sleep: Big tests require a lot of energy and stamina to be able to focus for several hours. Make sure you get at least eight-10 hours of sleep the night before the test.

Have fun: Do something fun the night before to take your mind off the test, like see a movie, play a board game or participate in a sports activity. That way your mind and emotions are more relaxed in the time leading up to the test.

Eat a hearty breakfast: The brain needs a lot of energy to maintain focus on a big test for several hours. Eat a hearty and healthy breakfast, including carbohydrates and protein to make your energy last as long as possible. Foods such as eggs, cereal and whole-wheat toast help energize your brain to think more clearly and much longer compared with the fast-disappearing bolt of energy from drinking a soda pop or eating a cookie for breakfast. For a snack food, bring simple foods such as peanut butter and crackers, cheese and crackers or nuts.

Practice the neutral tool: When you have uncomfortable feelings about whether you will do well on the test, practice the neutral tool. It's important to catch negative mind loops that reinforce self-doubt or uncomfortable feelings. Every time you catch a negative thought repeating itself, stop the loop and practice going to neutral. Breathe deeply. Breathe as if your breath is flowing in and out through the center of your chest. Breathe quietly and naturally, four-five seconds on the in-breath, and four-five seconds on the out-breath. While you're breathing, try and find an attitude of calmness about the situation. Do this in the days leading up to the test, right before and during the test.

Practicing these tools in advance of and during a test can help students limit test anxiety and perform even better on their school work.

This material has been provided by the Institute of HeartMath, a nonprofit research and education organization specializing in research on how stress and emotions impact learning and performance. To learn more about the TestEdge™ programs and tools for enhancing academic performance visit www.heartmath.org.