

2.13: Managing Stress and Anxiety

Student Objective

Students will effectively manage their stress and anxiety levels, both in preparation for and during tests.

Overview

For students, tests are often a source of anxiety. In fact, it would be unusual to find a student who does not approach a large test without some degree of apprehension. Test anxiety and other stressful emotions can interfere with a student's ability to absorb, retain, and recall information. Learning to identify the signs of test anxiety, along with coping strategies, can help students remove a common psychological barrier to academic success.

Materials/Set-Up

- Handouts:
 - 2.13a: Thinking Traps and Test Anxiety
 - 2.13b: Strategies to Consider for Reducing Test Anxiety
 - 2.13c: Realistic Thinking Log

Instructional Steps

1. Have students complete a **quickwrite** on the topic of anxiety. They can define it, talk about different types, or relay their personal experiences. Encourage students to use the full two minutes.
 - Consider providing a **word bank** to support students' use of academic language.
2. Distribute Thinking Traps and Test Anxiety to all students.
3. Have students read the handout and identify the thinking trap that they struggle with most.
4. Tell students to pair up and discuss what thinking trap they struggle with, how it might negatively impact their test performance, and what they could do to overcome it.
5. Distribute Strategies to Consider for Reducing Test Anxiety and have students highlight any strategies that they believe might help them deal with test anxiety.
6. Using the Realistic Thinking Log, have students track instances of anxiety over a two-week period.
7. **At the end of two weeks, allow students to volunteer to share out instances when they became anxious, their self-talk in those instances, and what language they used to bolster their confidence and cope with the anxiety.**

➤ Extension

- To increase scaffolding, have students reflect on their level of anxiety during a test and how they can prepare differently for future tests to improve test performance.

Quickwrite is a fluency activity where students write nonstop for two to five minutes on a specific topic that they are studying. The purpose of focused writing is for students to find out what they know about a topic, to explore new ideas, and to find out what they need to learn about a topic.

Example: "Before we start our lesson today, compose a quickwrite to the following prompt: What people in my life are encouraging me to go to college, and how are they supporting me in being college-ready?"

ELL Integration: Consider having a variety of academic words that may attribute to the cause of anxiety in a word bank and allowing students to incorporate them into their discussions.

ELL Integration: Provide students with the opportunity to rehearse their responses before sharing with the entire class.

Thinking Traps and Test Anxiety

Thinking Trap	Example
Fortune-telling —the prediction that things will turn out badly regardless of preparation.	<p><i>"I know I'll mess up."</i></p> <p><i>"I'll never be able to pass math."</i></p>
Black-and-White Thinking —the practice of looking at a situation only in terms of extremes (e.g., good or bad, success or failure, etc.) and ignoring the fact that the vast majority of situations are resolved in terms of moderation.	<p><i>"If I don't get a good grade, I'll totally fail."</i></p> <p><i>"I planned to study for six hours, but I only studied for four. Now, there's no way that I can pass!"</i></p>
Mindreading —the belief that a person knows what another person is thinking, with the attached assumption that one is thinking the worst of the other.	<p><i>"Everyone will think that I'm stupid."</i></p> <p><i>"The teacher doesn't like me."</i></p>
Overgeneralization —the constant use of absolutes, such as "always" or "never," to describe situations or events, despite the fact that absolutes seldom, if ever, represent reality.	<p><i>"I always fail schoolwork."</i></p> <p><i>"I never pass tests."</i></p>
Labeling —the practice of using a negative, mean-spirited, single word to describe oneself.	<p><i>"I'm dumb."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm a loser."</i></p>
Overestimating Danger —the continuing belief that an unlikely event is inevitable and will occur soon.	<p><i>"I'm going crazy."</i></p> <p><i>"I will throw up."</i></p>
Filtering —the practice of focusing exclusively on the negative things that happen to the detriment of any positive aspect or situation.	<p><i>"I completed 22 of the 25 questions, but I left the other three blank, so I'm already starting from behind! This isn't going to go well."</i></p>
Catastrophizing —the fixation that the worst-case scenario of any situation is about to happen and the inability to cope with its outcome will be prevalent.	<p><i>"I'll freak out, and everyone will sit and watch me. No one will help."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm going to look like such an idiot! The other kids will laugh, and I'll die from embarrassment."</i></p>
Should Statements —the continued practice of telling oneself how one "should," "must," or "ought" to feel or behave, regardless of how one truly feels, contributing to an ongoing sense of disappointment and anxiety in oneself and surrounding peers.	<p><i>"I should stop worrying about my tests."</i></p> <p><i>"I must never make mistakes in my schoolwork."</i></p>

Adapted from "Realistic Thinking & Test Anxiety Form" from AnxietyBC (www.anxietybc.com).

Strategies to Consider for Reducing Test Anxiety

Before the Test

- Being well prepared for the test is the best way to reduce test-taking anxiety.
- Space out your studying over a few days or weeks (i.e., distributed practice) and continually review class material and notes. Avoid relying on “cram” sessions.
- Attempt to maintain a positive attitude—with realistic, constructive self-talk—while preparing for and during the test.
- Get a good night’s sleep before the test.
- On the test day, avoid spending time with classmates who generate stress for you.
- Use the last few moments before the test to relax. Avoid last-minute cramming. Spend time reading for pleasure or some other minor distraction.
- Show up to class early, so you avoid worrying about being late.
- If experiencing physical tension, consider going for a brisk walk (not just a leisurely stroll) or other aerobic activity that will elevate your heart rate for 20 to 30 minutes.

During the Test

- Remind yourself that the test is only a test.
- Focus on integrating details into the main ideas.
- Tell yourself that you will do your best on the test, and that will be enough.
- If you begin to get nervous, take a few deep, slow breaths to relax yourself.
- Read the directions slowly and carefully.
- If you do not understand the directions on the test, ask the teacher to explain.
- Skim through the test so that you have a good idea of how to pace yourself.
- Use the margins on paper tests—or scratch paper on e-exams—to write down important formulas, facts, definitions, and/or key words in the margin first, so you don’t worry about forgetting them.
- Do the simple questions first to build positive momentum and confidence.
- Concentrate on your own test and pacing. Ignore classmates and how fast they may have finished their own test.
- You do not always have to get every question right. If you do not know an answer, skip the question for the time being and come back to it later.
- Focus on the question at hand, making sure not to let your mind wander to other things.

After the Test

- After completing the test, reward yourself with a favorite food item, a movie, or some other treat.
- Maintain positive self-talk and avoid dwelling on that one question that went unanswered.
- Reflect on one aspect of the test experience—a challenging question or tricky wording that you ultimately caught—and allow yourself a sense of pride for handling it to the best of your ability.

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Realistic Thinking Log

Name: _____

Directions: Use this log to regularly write down thoughts that make you anxious and provide corresponding realistic ones.

Situation or Trigger	Anxious or Worrysome Thoughts	Realistic Thoughts
Math test tomorrow	<i>I'm not good at math, and I'm terrible at tests. I will fail and never pass math!</i>	<i>I will study tonight and review my notes. I am fortunetelling and don't know for sure that I will fail. I did pass the last test, so I will probably pass math, even if I don't do well on this test.</i>

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