Addressing Test Anxiety: Strategies for Teachers and Students

Barbara Chorzempa
chorzemb@newpaltz.edu

Spence Salend
salends@newpaltz.edu

SUNY-New Paltz
Raise Your Hands If You:

Know someone who experiences test anxiety
Raise Your Hands If You:

Experience test anxiety
Raise Your Hands If You:

Have taught a student who experiences test anxiety
What is Test Anxiety?

High levels of stress, nervousness, and apprehension during testing/evaluative situations that significantly interfere with performance, emotional and behavioral well-being, and attitudes toward school (Cizek & Burg, 2006; Huberty, 2009)
Test Anxiety?

B, one of my students, has shown real improvement over the weeks I’ve been working with him. That is why I was surprised when, during the last test, B put his head down and said he couldn’t concentrate, couldn’t solve the problems, and didn’t know what he was doing.

I later found out from the support teacher that B was having some problems at home and was worried about his future. He had just had an argument with his uncle the day before, and that probably accounted for his anxiety and inability to complete his math.
Trait Anxiety

• Trait anxiety occurs across settings/situations
State Anxiety

- State anxiety is situation specific

- Extreme and unwarranted tension during testing or evaluative activities

(Cassady, 2010; Cizek & Burg, 2006)
Which of Your Students are More Likely to Experience Test Anxiety?

- 25-40% of students (Cassady, 2010; Huberty, 2009)

- Students with disabilities tend to have higher rates (Whitaker Sena, Lowe, & Lee, 2007; Woods, Parkinson, & Lewis, 2010)

- Students attending classes for the gifted and talented may be vulnerable (Goetz, Preckel, Zeidner, & Schleyer, 2008)

- Female students (Cizek & Burg, 2006)

- Students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Carter, Williams & Silverman, 2008)
How Do You Identify Students Experiencing Test Anxiety?

• Discrepancy between class & test performance

• Physical, behavioral, and affective signs

• Observations, interviews, and surveys
Physical Signs

“I’m working on the test and then when I encounter something I’m not sure of, I start to panic. My chest gets tight, my stomach starts churning, I get sweaty, and feel overwhelmed. I don’t care about the test or how I do on it. I just want to get it over with and get out of there.”
Physical Signs

- Excessive perspiration
- Sweaty palms
- Unexplained headache or stomachache
- Nausea
- Shaking body parts
- Rapid heart beat
- Dizziness/light-headedness
- Muscle tension
- Tics
- Flushed skin color
- Difficulty sleeping, eating, or using the toilet
Behavioral Signs

“I start to think about what will happen if I don’t do well on the test and then things snowball and I lose my focus. Even if I know the answer, I start to blank out and struggle to find the right words to explain it or start to think about other things. As soon as I leave the room, I remember everything and can answer the questions.”
Behavioral Signs

Experiencing repeated mental blocks/forgetting

“I can’t believe you had a brain freeze during the test on the Ice Age.”
Behavioral Signs

Difficulties with concentration, attention, and memory that interfere with:

– Reading and understanding test directions & items
– Retrieving words, facts and concepts
– Organizing thoughts and answers
Behavioral Signs

- Off-task behaviors such as inappropriate comments, fidgeting, squirming, pacing, staring, tapping, nail-biting, crying, and rapid speech
- Asking unnecessary questions about tests
Behavioral Signs

- Complaining about test items (e.g., “We didn’t cover this in class.”)
- Seeking unnecessary assistance from others
- Feeling overwhelmed during testing
Cheating
Feigning Illness or Being Absent

"Is it too late to get the flu?"
Affective Signs

• Making negative self-statements or comparison (I’m not as smart as others)

• Having pessimistic expectations (I’m going to fail this test)

• Making excuses for poor test performance (I don’t do well on tests because I have test anxiety)
Why Do Your Students Experience Test Anxiety?

Interaction of:

• Individualized student characteristics

• Family and peer dynamics

• School- and classroom-related practices
Individual Student Characteristics

- Anxiety and attention disorders
- Perfectionist and unreasonable expectations
- Negative self-statements and criticism
- Poor motivation
- Lack of confidence
- Procrastination
- Stereotype threat
- Inadequate study and test-taking skills
- Poor prior testing performance
“My grades don’t look good right now, but I can fix that in Photoshop.”
Teacher/School Accountability Pressures
Even Stressing Teddy Bears & Cats
Instructional Factors

• Unfavorable testing environments

• Lack of instruction in study & test-taking skills

• Ineffective teaching
Invalid, Flawed, and Timed tests

Sally Forth

This exam is over 1,000 pages long! And it's all printed in Zapf Dingbat!

And now I'm being chased! And I have LEGO minifig hands! What kind of American History final is this?!!
Escalating Cycle

- Poor Test Preparation
- Poorly Designed Test
- Family Pressures
- Poor Test Performance
What Do You Do To Help Your Students Who Experience Test Anxiety?

• Collaborative

• Multi-dimensional

• Address triggers
Use Authentic Classroom-Based Assessments

- **Observations**
  - Checklists
  - Anecdotal records

- **Interactive Informal Assessments**
  - Conferences
  - Interviews
  - Educational games
  - Active responding systems

- **Portfolios**

- **Attitude and Interest Inventories**

- **Self-Assessment**

- **Other Informal Measures**
  - Retellings
  - Running records
  - Informal reading inventories
  - Miscue analysis
  - Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)

- **Instructional Rubrics**

- **Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM)**

- **Technology-Based Performance Assessments**
Teach Study Skills

“I suffer from test-taking anxiety, brought on by lack of studying.”
Focused Studying

I'd like to sell back my text books.

OK.

Campus Bookstore

End of semester book buyback!

Let me examine them to make sure they're in good condition...

I'd like to sell back my text books.

Ok.

Campus Bookstore

End of semester book buyback!

You highlighted every word in this book with a marker!

I wasn't sure what I needed to remember!

You even highlighted the index!
Study Guides

• Move from teacher to student created study guides
Test Date, Studying Time, Number, Type and Value of Items

When is the test?
The date of the test is _____________________.

How much time should I spend studying for the test?
You should study at least ______ minutes/hours each day beginning on _________________.

How many and what types of questions will be on the test?
How many points are sections worth?
The test will be made up of
______ Multiple-choice questions worth ______ points
______ Matching questions worth ______ points
______ True-false questions worth ______ points
______ Sentence-completion (fill in the blank) questions worth ______ points
______ Essay questions worth ______ points
______ Other types of questions worth ______ points

Salend (2009)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics, Concepts, Vocabulary Covered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### What topics will be covered on the test?
The test will cover the following topics:

- [ ]
- [ ]
- [ ]
- [ ]

### What vocabulary words should I know?
You should study and know the following vocabulary words:

- [ ]
- [ ]
- [ ]
- [ ]

### What concepts should I know?
You should study and know the following concepts:

- [ ]
- [ ]
- [ ]
- [ ]
Study Materials

What materials should I study?

When studying for the test, make sure you review:

- Textbook Chapters and Other Readings
- Class Notes
- Class Assignments
- Homework Assignments
- Web Sites and Online Information
Test Practice and Preparation

How can I practice for the test?
Here are some practice questions:
1.
2.
3.
4.

What else can I do to prepare for the test?
Here are some other things you can do to prepare for the test:
Study Groups

• Predict the content and test items
• Quiz each other
• Create study materials and memory aids
Supportive and Focused Study Groups
Develop Study Schedules

• Early session to identify difficult material and to seek assistance

• Reasonable focused sessions in terms of goals, content, materials, and time

• Planned breaks

• End with a product that summarizes key information (Flashcards, mnemonic device, graphic organizer)
Educational Games as Study Tools
Teach and Prompt Test-Taking Skills and Strategies

- Ten minutes left. Must keep writing!
- Five minutes left. Gotta keep writing!
- Time's up! Can't stop writing! Help! Help!!!
Memory

Download

Dump

Formulas, dates, definitions, mnemonics, names, drawings, etc
Give Students Scrap Paper

Perform a Memory Dump or Download
General Test-Taking Strategies

• Survey the test

• Highlight critical parts of test items/directions

• Work on easiest items first

• Mark/work on items based on difficulty/points

• Budget time based on the:
  – time allotted,
  – point totals of items and sections, and
  – difficulty level of the items
Teach Strategies for Specific Item Types
Test-taking Strategies for True-False

• Examine the questions for specific determiners, which are words that modify/limit a statement (e.g., rarely, usually)

• Pick true if:
  – it contains words that moderate a statement (e.g., sometimes, most, many, generally, usually)
  – it is a longer statement containing specific details suggest true
  – unsure of the answer

• Mark the statement false if:
  – any part of it is not true or correct
  – it contains qualifiers making the statement extreme (e.g., never, every, always, all)
  – it includes a justification or reason

(Brigham Young University Counseling and Career Center, 2008; Glenn, 2004; Walker & Schmidt, 2004)
Specific Mnemonic-Based Test-Taking Learning Strategies

- **P**repare to Succeed
- **I**nspect the Test’s Directions
- **R**ead, Remember, and Reduce to Answer the Test’s Questions
- **A**nswer or Abandon
- **T**urn Back to all questions that were not answered
- **E**stimate when you are unsure of the answer
- **S**urvey the test before handing it in
Use Strategies That Are Not Too Complex

OKAY, IT'S AN ESSAY EXAM. THAT GIVES ME BETTER ODDS AT SCORING POINTS THAN MULTIPLE CHOICE.

OKAY, THE ESSAY'S IN SIX PARTS, EACH COVERING A DIFFERENT ERA. THAT GIVES ME BETTER ODDS AT GETTING AT LEAST SOME RIGHT.

OKAY, THOSE SIX PARTS EACH HAVE 12 SUBSETS. THAT GIVES ME BETTER ODDS AT GNASHING MY TEETH UNTIL MY EYEBALLS SCREAM.
Prompts and Pictorials Embedded in Tests

Prompting Students to Ask Questions or Seek Clarification

Do you have any questions?

Prompting Review of Answers

Did you check ALL of your answers?
Checklists and Classroom Posters

My Test Taking Checklist

Remind yourself:
I can do it!
I am capable!
I can use my brainpower!

Check off each step as you use it:
1. Read the directions and titles. ______
2. Read the question. ______
3. Reread and explain in your own words. ______
4. Determine what is being asked. ______
5. Circle key clue words. ______
6. Select a strategy. ______
7. Think through your solution. ______
8. Eliminate choices. ______
9. Select the best answer choice. ______
10. Check your work. ______

Take a deep breath...
Go with the flow...
Just do your best...
Show what you know!

Test-Taking Tips

1. Read all directions carefully.
2. Read all questions carefully.
3. Be sure you know what is being asked.
4. Look at all choices before you answer.
5. Eliminate answers you know are wrong. XXX
6. Paraphrase the questions.
7. Think carefully.
8. Check your work.

Do your Best!
Teach and Prompt Anxiety Reduction and Relaxation Techniques
Why Shouldn’t You Be Early to a Test?
How Do You Relax?

- NAPPING?
- NO. I'M VISUALIZING WORLD PEACE.
- WHAT'S IT LIKE?
- THERE'RE A LOT FEWER ANNOYING QUESTIONS.
How Do You Relieve Stress?

- Engaging in good humor
- Meditating or praying
- Smelling fragrances
- Taking deep breaths and breaks
- Engaging in positive self-talk
- Focusing on past successes
- Listening to guided imagery, affirmations, meditations, or music
- Visualizing positive and relaxing images/experiences
- Sitting in a non-distracting area
- Tensing and relaxing muscles
- Doing yoga
- Exercising
- Squeezing a ball
- Eating or chewing
- Engaging in positive attributions ("I studied and will do well")

(Cizek & Burg, 2006; Conderman & Pedersen, 2010; Salend, 2011).
Create Student Friendly Tests

To ensure a fair selection you all get the same test. You must all climb that tree.
Student Friendly Tests are Valid and Accessible

Foster:

– Validity
– Representation
– Engagement
– Expression
Offer Testing Accommodations

- **Timing accommodations:** Additional time, untimed or shortened versions of test
- **Scheduling accommodations:** Multiple sessions, changing the test sequence, breaks
- **Setting accommodations:** Proctors, private locations, and distraction-free locations

Salend (2009)
Use Technology-Based Testing

• Tailor the testing experience to students
• Students in consultation with their teachers can determine the presentation and response modes for items

Salend (2009)
Evaluate Success

• Examine student performance and grades
• Observe students during testing
• Interview or survey students and family members


References


