



# Fearless Testing: Helping Students Conquer Test Anxiety

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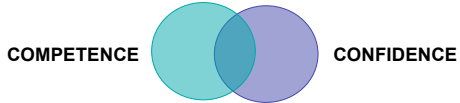
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## Test Success is the Merger of Confidence and Competence



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## What is Confidence?

- A feeling of assurance and certainty...a lack of anxiety
- Translates to an “I can do it” attitude in students
- But confidence without competence can quickly set the stage for task failure and developing greater and more intractable anxiety

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## EVER GO KAYAKING?

- “Heck, it just looks like a little ole canoe!”
- “I won’t even have to get very wet”
- “How hard could that be?”
- “Why do I need to spend \$35 for a beginners class anyway?”



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## Blind Confidence Building Is Not Scientifically Sound Practice

- Students who were overly confident on a computer target game performed more poorly on that game than those who were moderately confident
- They performed more poorly on later tasks that were less demanding
- Failures rapidly “generalize” to negative thoughts, avoidance and anxiety

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## Compare to Psychological Treatment of Anxiety and Depression

- Overwhelming evidence that a reduction of the *physiological symptoms of anxiety* (through medication) and the *acquisition of self management skills* (cognitive-behavioral therapy) is significantly more effective than either intervention alone
- In school settings, anxiety can be reduced through non-medical interventions, and with test taking strategies, can lead to student success

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## What Is Competence?

- Properly qualified/capable
- Adequate for a purpose
- Sufficient means for a comfortable existence
- Basically, a level of comfort with using effective skills for a specific challenge



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## The Multiple Origins of Anxiety

- Physiological
- Developmental
- Experiential
- Cognitive



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## Physiological Origins of Anxiety

- “Survival of the fittest”; effective alertness
- Neurological “wiring” pre and postnatal
- Neurotransmitters
- Genetic/temperament



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### Developmental Origins of Anxiety

- Increased capacity for awareness over time: ex.: recognition that tests are important
- Universal and expected anxiety responses: ex.: novel situations, need for “parental” approval and guidance



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### Experiential Origins of Anxiety

- Exposure to early trauma
- Lack of “safe harbor”
- Unsuccessful “building block” experiences
- Poor role models as problem solvers
- A “hot pepper”, “one trial” disaster



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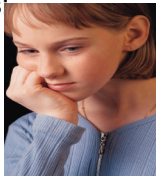
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### Cognitive Origins of Anxiety

- Limited or negative focused observational skills: ex.: poorly attends to positive learning opportunities
- Weak general verbal skills: ex.: limited “self talk”



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### “Normalizing” Anxiety

- Make it clear: **everyone** has worries about doing well on tests
- It is wrong to tease or belittle **anyone** for talking about or feeling anxiety
- Anxiety is a **normal** reaction to new or challenging situations
- Everyone needs **some** anxiety to succeed!

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### Worries About Tests Are Universal Across Grade Levels

- I think about tests all the time
- I feel bad if I have fun because I should be studying
- My stomach or head hurts when I think about tests
- I can't stop thinking about how other kids do on tests
- On test days, I wish I could stay home

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### More Universal Worries About Tests

- If I miss one or two questions on a test, I feel terrible
- If a question is hard, I want to pack it up
- Tests are out to ruin my life
- My (parents, teachers, friends) will think I am dumb if I don't do well
- Other kids just naturally do better than me

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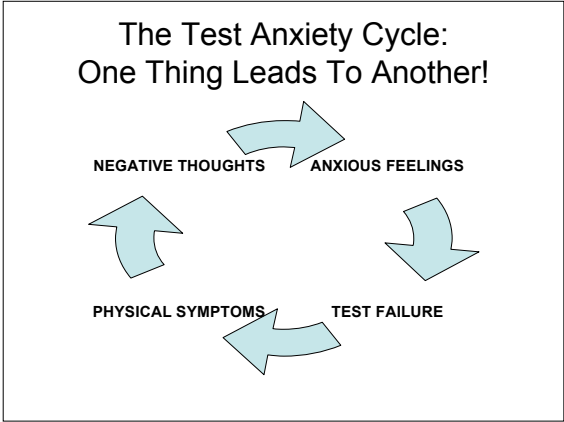
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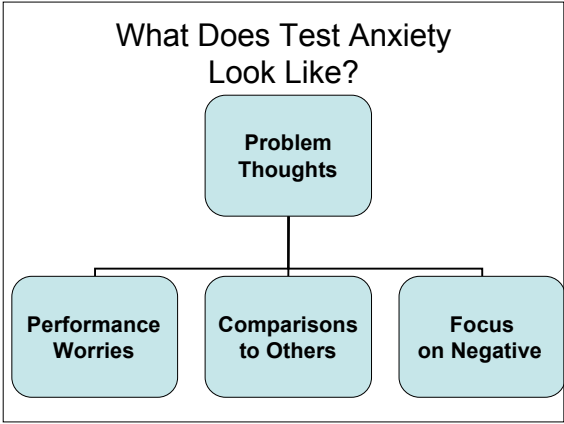
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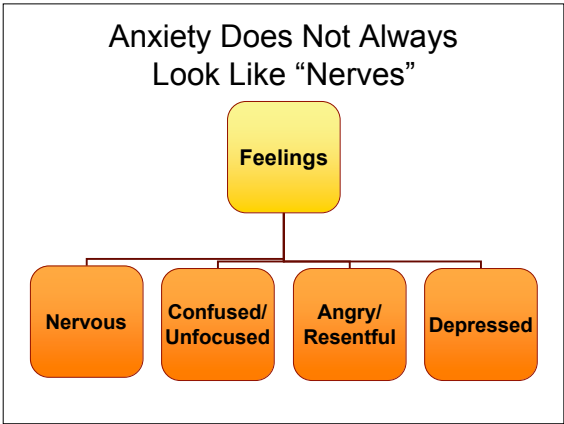
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## Physical Symptoms

- Sweaty palms
- Stomachaches
- “Butterflies”
- Difficulty breathing
- Headaches
- Dry mouth
- Sleep or appetite problems
- Dizzy



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## Changing Cognitions, Reducing Anxiety

- Positive thinking can block out negative thinking
- You can't think of two opposite ideas at the same time
- Positive thinking takes practice!
- Negative thinking is often more “automatic”



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## Types of “Distorted” Thinking That All Of Us Do!

- |                            |                             |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ✓ All or nothing           | ✓ Magnification of negative |
| ✓ Overgeneralization       | ✓ Minimization of positive  |
| ✓ Mental filter            | ✓ Emotional reasoning       |
| ✓ Discounting the positive | ✓ “Should” statements       |
| ✓ Jumping to conclusions   | ✓ Labeling                  |
| ✓ Personalization          | ✓ Blame                     |

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### The “Soda Pop” Test

- I can buy a large drink for less than a dollar
- It is refreshing on a hot day
- I can get an extra straw and share it with my sister
- A paper cup is better for the environment
- It gets warm before I am finished
- It will give me cavities
- Sharing with my sister is nasty!
- A plastic bottle is easier to carry

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### Thinking of Success



- “Treasure Chest” of previous successes
- Recognition of small successes
- “Redefining” success
- Learning to be one’s own “cheerleader”
- Creating a mental “game plan” for success, both overcoming obstacles and imagining the joy of accomplishment




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### Controlling Physical Symptoms of Anxiety

- ✓ Relaxation exercises: As a class, with a counselor....can be simple to complex
- ✓ Music as magic: Listening to music (classical, oldies) while practicing for tests or prior to tests
- ✓ Good exercise, sleep and eating habits
- ✓ During testing cognitive and physical strategies for anxiety reduction

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**School and Classroom Interventions**

- ✓ Reduce isolation and “taint” by making it expected to discuss worries about challenges in the school and classroom
- ✓ Educate students to recognize anxiety in self and others
- ✓ Provide teacher education to assess and address students at-risk for test anxiety

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**More School and Classroom Interventions**

- ✓ Recognize your own responses and affect
- ✓ Set a moderate pace for test preparation
- ✓ Teach relaxation and coping strategies as part of the general education
- ✓ Use positive thinking in all aspects of classroom management
- ✓ Provide specific concrete tools and strategies

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**Test-Taking Strategies: The “Competence” Part Of the Equation**

Test success comes from utilizing strategies

**BEFORE** and **DURING ALL TESTS**



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### Ages May Vary But Strategies Don't

- Set up a study schedule
- Find the best place to study
- Organize your bookbag and supplies
- Get your "support" team at home and school
- Eat and sleep right



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### More Test Preparation Strategies

- Be an "active" learner
- Have a "game plan"
- Become familiar with the test format (on all tests)
- Learn how you learn best
- Practice basic reading, writing and math skills
- Have a good attitude about homework
- Do something every day



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### Strategies During The Test

- Read directions
- Write neatly
- Check answers
- Correctly fill in "grids" and "bubbles"
- Read all answer choices
- Don't get "stuck"
- Don't speed either



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### More Strategies During The Test

- Use “common sense”
- Focus on the test
- Look over the whole test first
- Use the margins and “mind joggers”
- Use “codes” to eliminate choices



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### And More Strategies During Testing

- Don't immediately choose the first answer that seems correct
- Use all your knowledge
- Read titles for better understanding
- Use formulas provided
- Answer what is asked
- Spell, capitalize and punctuate carefully



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### The Extended Benefits of Confidence and Competence

- Educate your students not just about tests, but about challenges, academic and social
- Show how problem solving and self regulation has a positive impact on their lives
- Teach communication, open support, trust



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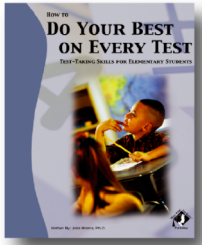
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## How To Do Your Best On Every Test

Available Now!



### Workbook Activities:

- ✓ Help students understand how they feel about tests
- ✓ Show children how to reduce stress
- ✓ Illustrate many ways to learn and study
- ✓ Preparing for tests & more!

Author: Jolie S. Brams, Ph.D.

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Many test preparation [workbooks](#) and [flashcards](#) are available through the publisher: Show What You Know ® Publishing

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