

TEST ANXIETY



WHAT IS TEST ANXIETY?

Test anxiety is a fancy term for feelings of worry and uneasiness that students feel before or during a test. Almost everyone experiences some anxiety at one time or another. Experiencing feelings of anxiety before any challenge is a normal part of life. However, when worrying about tests becomes so intense it interferes with test taking, or if worrying causes students mental or physical distress, this is called test anxiety.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF TEST ANXIETY?

Test anxiety is much more than feeling nervous. In fact, students will notice test anxiety in four different areas: thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and physical symptoms. No wonder test anxiety gets in the way of students doing or feeling well.

1. Thoughts

Students with test anxiety usually feel overwhelmed with negative thoughts about tests and about themselves. These thoughts interfere with the ability to study and to take tests. Usually, these bothersome thoughts fall into three categories;

- **Worrying about performance**—A student who worries may have thoughts such as, "I don't know anything. What's the matter with me? I should have studied more. My mind is blank; now I'll never get the answer. I can't remember a thing; this always happens to me. I knew this stuff yesterday and now I can't do anything."
- **Comparing oneself to others**—A student who compares performance might say, "I know everyone does better than I do. I'm going to be the last one to finish this. Why does everything come easier for everyone else? I don't know why I have to be different than others."
- **Thinking about possible negative consequences**—A student with negative thoughts would think, "If I don't do well on this test, my classmates will make fun of me. If I don't do well on the WASL Writing and Reading Assessments, my guidance counselor will think less of me. I won't be able to go to my favorite college. My parents are going to be angry."

Many of us worry or have negative thoughts from time to time. However, students with test anxiety have no escape and feel this worry whenever they study or take tests.

2. Feelings

In addition to having negative thoughts, students with test anxiety are buried by negative feelings. Students with test anxiety often feel:

- **Nervous and anxious**—Students feel jittery or jumpy. Anxious feelings may not only disrupt test taking but may interfere with a student's life in other ways. Small obstacles, such as misplacing a book, forgetting an assignment, or having a mild disagreement with a friend, may easily upset students. They may become preoccupied with fear, may have poor self-esteem, and may feel that the weight of the world is on their shoulders. They seem to be waiting for "the next bad thing to happen."
- **Confused and unfocused**—Students with test anxiety have their minds in hundreds of anxious places. They find it difficult to focus on their work, which makes studying for tests even harder. Students with test anxiety also have difficulty concentrating in other areas. When they should be listening in class, their minds worry about poor grades and test scores. They jump to conclusions about the difficulty of an upcoming test. They find themselves fidgeting. They constantly interrupt themselves while studying, or they forget how to complete simple assignments. Anxiety can interfere with a student's ability to focus, study, and learn.
- **Angry and resentful**—Test anxiety can lead to irritable and angry feelings. Anxious students are defensive when communicating with others. They become overwhelmed by negative thoughts and feel they are not good enough. Test anxiety also makes students feel "trapped" and as though they have no escape from school or tests. Students who feel there is no way out may get angry; they may resent the situation. They feel jealous of people they believe find school easier. They are angry at the demands placed on them. The more angry and resentful students become, the more isolated and alone they feel. This only leads to further anxiety and increased difficulties in their lives.
- **Depressed**—Anxiety and stress can lead to depression. Depression sometimes comes from "learned helplessness." When people feel they can never reach a goal and that they are never good enough to do anything, they tend to give up. Students who are overly anxious may get depressed. They lose interest in activities because they feel preoccupied with their worries about tests and school. It might seem as though they have no time or energy for anything. Some students with test anxiety give up on themselves completely, believing if they cannot do well in school (even though this may not be true), then why bother with anything?

Not all students with test anxiety have these feelings. However, if you or anyone you know seem to be overwhelmed by school, feel negative most of the time, or feel hopeless about school work (test taking included), you should look to a responsible adult for some guidance.

3. Behavior

Students with test anxiety often engage in behavior that gets in the way of doing well. When students have negative thoughts and feelings about tests, they participate in counterproductive behavior. In other words, they do things that are the opposite of helpful. Some students avoid tests altogether. Other students give up. Other students become rude and sarcastic, making fun of school, tests, and anything to do with learning. This is their way of saying, "We don't care." The truth is, they feel anxious and frustrated. Their negative behaviors are the result of thoughts and feelings that get in the way of their studying and test taking.

4. Physical Symptoms

All types of anxiety, especially test anxiety, can lead to very uncomfortable physical symptoms. Thoughts control the ways in which our bodies react, and this is certainly true when students are worried about test taking. Students with test anxiety may experience the following physical symptoms at one time or another:

- sweaty palms
- stomach pains
- "butterflies" in the stomach
- difficulty breathing
- feelings of dizziness or nausea
- headaches
- dry mouth
- difficulty sleeping, especially before a test

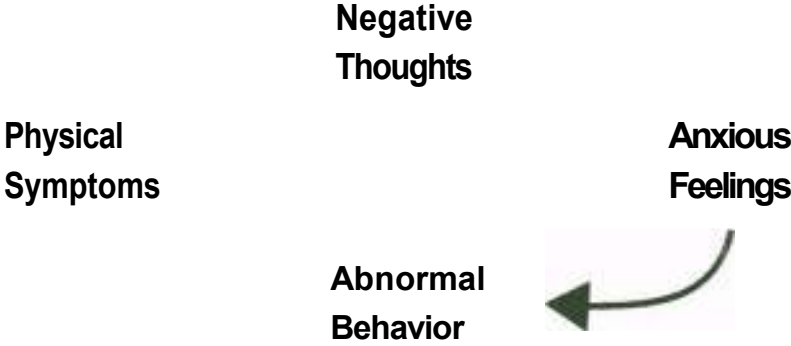
Test anxiety causes real physical symptoms. These symptoms are not made up or only in your head. The mind and body work together when stressed, and students can develop uncomfortable physical problems when they are anxious, especially when facing a major challenge like the WASL.

THE TEST ANXIETY CYCLE

Have you ever heard the statement "one thing leads to another"? Oftentimes, when we think of that statement, we imagine Event A causes Event B, which leads to Event C. For example, being rude to your younger brother leads to an argument, which leads to upset parents, which leads to some type of punishment, like grounding. Unfortunately, in life, especially regarding test anxiety, the situation is more complicated. Although one thing does lead to another, each part of the equation makes everything else worse, and the cycle just goes on and on.

Let's think back again to teasing your younger brother. You tease your younger brother and he gets upset. The two of you start arguing and your parents become involved. Eventually, you get grounded. Sounds simple? It might get more complicated. When you are grounded, you might become irritable and angry. This causes you to tease your little brother more. He tells your parents, and you are punished again. This makes you even angrier, and now you don't just tease your little brother, you hide his favorite toy. This really angers your parents who now do not let you go to a school activity. That upsets you so much you leave the house and create trouble for yourself. One thing feeds the next. Well, the same pattern happens in the test anxiety cycle.

Look at the following diagram.



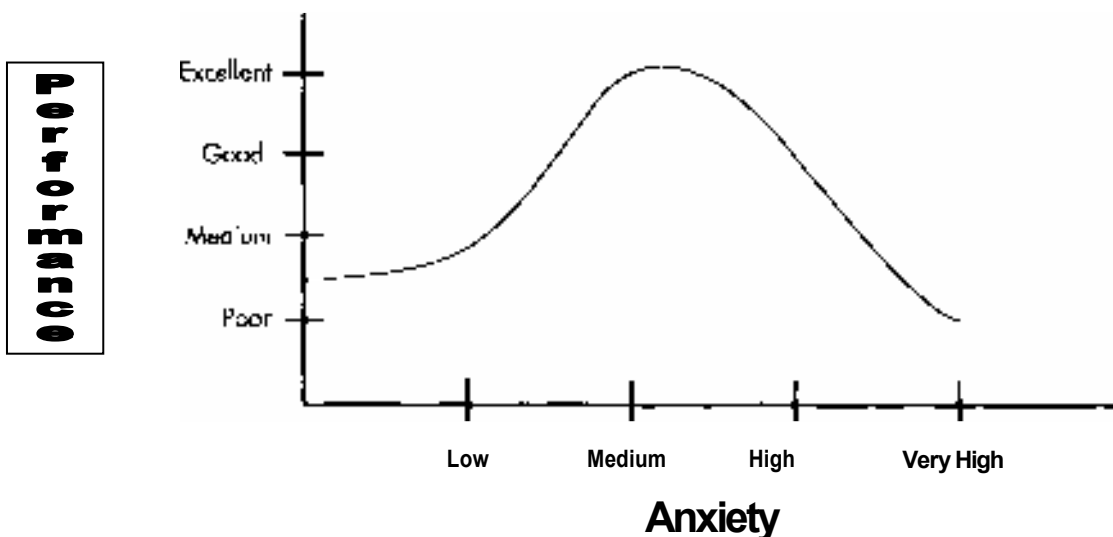
As you can see, the four parts of this diagram include the thoughts, feelings, behavior, and physical symptoms discussed earlier. When a student has test anxiety, each area makes the others worse. The cycle continues on and on. Here's an example:

Let's start off with some symptoms of negative thinking. Some students might say to themselves, "I'll never be able to pass the WASL Writing and Reading Assessments!" This leads to feelings of frustration and anxiety. Because the student has these negative thoughts and feelings, his or her behavior changes. The student avoids tests and studying because they are nerve racking. Physical symptoms develop, such as the heart racing or the palms sweating. Negative thoughts then continue, "Look how terrible I feel; this is more proof I can't do well." The student becomes more irritable, even depressed. This affects behavioral symptoms again, making the student either more likely to avoid tests or perhaps not care about tests. The cycle goes on and on and on.

IS TEST ANXIETY EVER GOOD?

Believe it or not, a little worrying can go a long way! Too much test anxiety gets in the way of doing one's best, but students with no anxiety may also do poorly. Studies have shown that an average amount of anxiety can help people focus on tasks and challenges. This focus helps them use their skills when needed. Think about a sporting event. Whether a coach is preparing an individual ice skater for a competition or is preparing the football team for the Friday night game, getting each athlete "psyched up" can lead to a successful performance. A coach or trainer does not want to overwhelm the athlete. However, the coach wants to sharpen the senses and encourage energetic feelings and positive motivation. Some schools have a team dinner the night before a competition. This dinner provides some pleasant entertainment, but it also focuses everyone on the responsibilities they will have the next day.

Consider the graph below. You can see that too little test anxiety does not result in good test scores. As students become more concerned about tests, they tend to do better. But wait! What happens when too much anxiety is put into the equation? At that point, student performance decreases remarkably. When anxiety reaches a peak, students become frustrated and flustered. Their minds tend to blank out, they develop physical symptoms, they cannot focus, and they also behave in ways that interfere with their performance on tests.



An important key to successful test taking is to get yourself in the right mood about taking a test. Looking at a test as a challenge and looking forward to meeting that challenge, regardless of the end result, is a positive and healthy attitude. You will feel excited, motivated, and maybe a little nervous but certainly ready to face the WASL.

How Do I TACKLE TEST ANXIETY?

Although test anxiety is an uncomfortable and frustrating feeling, the good news is you can win the battle over test anxiety! Conquering test anxiety will not be accomplished by luck or magic, but it can be done by students of all ages in a relatively short period of time. If you can learn to master test anxiety at this point in your life, you will be on the road to successfully facing many other challenges you will encounter.

1. Change the Way You Think

Whether you realize it or not, your thoughts—good and bad—influence your life. The way we think is related to how we feel about ourselves, how we get along with other people, and how well we do in school, especially when taking tests.

- *Positive Thinking Can Block Out Negative Thinking*—It is impossible to think two opposite thoughts at the same time. You may have one idea and then think about another, but one is always going to "win" over the other. When you practice positive thinking, you are replacing negative thoughts with positive ones. The more you are able to think positive thoughts, the less you will be troubled by negative ones.

The Soda Pop Test—It is just as easy to have positive thoughts as negative ones. Everyone has heard the saying, "There is more than one side to any story." Just as there are two opinions on any given subject, there is generally more than one way to look at almost every situation in life. Some ways are more helpful than others.!?""

Think about a can of soda pop. Draw a line down the middle of a blank piece of paper. On one side, put the heading, "All the bad things about this can of soda pop." On the other side, put another heading, "All the good things about this can of soda pop." Now, write appropriate descriptions or comments under each heading. For example, you could write, "This can of soda pop is a lot smaller than a two-liter bottle," which is negative thinking. Or, you could write, "This can of soda pop is just the right size to stay cold and fizzy until I finish it." It's easy to look at the soda-pop can and think bad thoughts. But you are also able to come up with many good things. If you spent all your time focusing on the negative aspects, you might believe the can of soda pop is bad. It is better to look at the positive side of things.

Part of successful test taking has to do with how you look at tests. With the can of soda pop, you could choose to think negatively, or you could have positive thoughts. The same holds true for tests. You can look at a test as a scary or miserable experience, or you can look at a test as just one of many challenges you will face in your life.

Counselors have known for years that people who are worried or anxious can become happier when thinking positive thoughts. Even when situations are scary, such as going to the dentist or having a medical test, "positive imagery" is very helpful. Positive imagery simply means focusing on good thoughts to replace anxious thoughts.

You can replace negative thoughts with positive ones through practice. Believe it or not, it really works!

- *Thoughts of Success* — Thinking "I can do it" thoughts chases away ideas of failure. Times that you were successful, such as when you did well in a sports event or figured out a complicated math question, are good things to think about. Telling yourself you have been successful in the past and can now master the Writing and Reading Assessments of the WASL will replace thoughts that might otherwise cause anxiety.
- *Relaxing Thoughts* — Some people find that thinking calming or relaxing thoughts is helpful. Picturing a time in which you felt comfortable and happy can lessen your anxious feelings. Imagining a time when you visited the ocean, climbed a tree, or attended a concert can help you distract your mind from negative thoughts and focus on times that you were relaxed, happy, and felt positive.

- *All-or-Nothing Thinking*— Nothing is ever as simple as it seems. Sometimes we convince ourselves something is going to be "awful" or "wonderful," but it rarely turns out that way.

No test is "completely awful" or "completely perfect." Tests are going to have easy questions and hard questions, and you are going to have good test days and bad test days. The more you set up expectations that are all positive or negative, the more stressful the situation becomes. Accepting that nothing is totally good or bad, fun or boring, or easy or hard will reduce your anxiety and help you set reasonable expectations about tests. When you think about tests, try not to think about them as the road to academic success or a pit of failure. Instead, realize that all challenges have both good and bad elements, and you have to take everything in stride.

- *Making "Should" Statements*—Making "should" statements sets students up for failure. Sure, it is important to try your best, to study hard, and to make a reasonable effort on the WASL; it may even be good to take an extra study session, try another practice test, or ask a teacher or tutor for advice and suggestions. It is also a good idea to use a book such as this one to help you do your best and show what you know. However, there is a big difference between doing your "reasonable best" and living your life with constant worries and put-downs. Students who constantly tell themselves "I should" and berate themselves for not having done everything possible only increase their levels of anxiety.

Go back to the test anxiety cycle. Suppose your thoughts are, "I should have stayed up an extra hour and studied," or "I should have reviewed those geometry formulas." The more you think these thoughts, the more anxious you get. The more anxious you get, the worse you feel. Again, the cycle goes on and on.

One part of maturing is learning to balance your life. Life is happiest when you find a good balance between being a lazy do-nothing and being a perfectionist. While we all know laziness gets us nowhere, being a perfectionist may actually paralyze your future chances of success because you will eventually fear meeting any new challenges. Failure does not mean real failure; it just means being imperfect. Preventing perfectionism begins by saying "no" to unreasonable thoughts and "should" statements. "Should" statements place high demands on a student and only lead to frustration and feelings of failure, shame, and anxiety.

Students who always think about what they "should" do often exhaust themselves by doing too much and worrying excessively. Exhaustion is another factor that leads to poor test-taking results.

Breaking the "should" habit means replacing "should" statements with positive comments about what you have accomplished and what you hope to reasonably accomplish in the future. For example, instead of saying, "I shouldn't have gone to the football game," or "I should have stayed

- home and studied," say, "I studied for two hours before the football game, and then I had a good time. Two hours was plenty of study time for a geometry quiz. I need to have time for friends as well as studying. I concentrated while studying, and I think I did a good job. Even if I don't get a perfect score on the geometry quiz, I know I will do pretty well, and I gave myself the opportunity to do my best."

2. Control Physical Symptoms

Changing your physical response to stress can help break the test anxiety cycle. Relaxing is difficult when facing a major challenge such as the WASL, but there are many proven techniques that can help you calm down.

- *Relax the Morning of the Test*—Try to allow yourself to relax the morning of the test. Engaging in some mild exercise, such as taking a walk, will relieve a lot of your physical stress. Some students may find that a workout the night before an exam makes them feel more relaxed and helps them sleep well. This is probably because the exercise distracts the student from the upcoming test. Also, intense exercise releases chemicals in the brain that cause you to feel calmer and happier. It may only take a quick walk around the block to help you relax and get your mind off your problems.

- *Listen to Music* - Listening to music in the morning before a test may also be helpful for students. It probably doesn't matter what kind of music you listen to as long as it makes you feel good about yourself, confident, and relaxed.
- *Relaxation Exercises*—Relaxation exercises are helpful to many students. Stress causes many physical changes in the body, including tenseness in all muscle groups, increased heart rate, and other physical symptoms. Learning simple exercises to feel less tense can also help break the test anxiety cycle.

Most exercises include tightening and releasing tension in your body as well as deep breathing. The purpose of all of these exercises is to distract you from the anxiety of an upcoming test and to allow your body to feel more loose and relaxed. These exercises can be completed while sitting at your desk, taking a test, or studying.

Try this simple relaxation exercise the next time you are tense. Sit upright in your chair, but allow yourself to be comfortable. Close your eyes and take four deep breaths in and out. When you get to the fourth breath, start breathing quietly but remain focused on your breathing. Start increasing the tension in your feet by squeezing your toes together lightly and then slowly releasing the pressure. Feel how relaxed your toes are feeling? Now tighten and release other muscle groups. Go from your legs to your stomach, to your shoulders, to your hands, and finally to your forehead. Squeeze and tighten your muscles and then relax them, all while focusing on your breathing. Once you practice this strategy, you might be able to feel more relaxed in a matter of seconds. This would be a good strategy to use during tests when you feel yourself becoming unfocused and anxious.

PREPARE FOR THE WRITING AND READING ASSESSMENTS OF THE WASL AND CHANGE THE WAY YOU BEHAVE

Preparation always reduces anxiety. Taking the WASL Writing and Reading Assessments seriously, trying to do well on practice tests, and making an effort in all your classes will help you feel more confident and relaxed about the WASL. Learning test-taking strategies can also give you a feeling of power and control over the test. No feeling is worse than realizing you are not prepared. Going into a test without ever having reviewed the WASL Writing and Reading material, looked at test-taking strategies, or concentrated on your schoolwork is very much like jumping out of an airplane without a parachute. You would be foolish if you were not panicked. Looking at the WASL Writing and Reading Assessments as just one more reason to take school seriously will help your grades, attitude, and success on the test.

1. Use Mental Preparation

Before the test, imagine in step-by-step detail how you will perform well and obtain a positive result. Several days before the test, think through the day of the test; repeat this as many times as you need. Imagine getting up in the morning, taking a nice shower, getting dressed in comfortable clothes, and listening to music on your way to school. Think about sitting in the testing room with a confident expression on your face. Imagine yourself remembering all of the strategies you read about in this book and learned in your classroom. Go through an imaginary test, step by step, practicing what you will do if you encounter a difficult question. You should also repeat the positive thoughts that should go through your head during the test. Preparation like this is key for reducing anxiety, as you already feel you have taken the test prior to ever having stepped in that testing room!

2. Don't Feel Alone

People feel more anxious when they feel alone and separate from others. Have you ever worried about a problem in your family or something going wrong at school? Things seem much worse when you are alone,

but when you talk to someone who cares about you, you will find your problems soon seem less worrisome. Talk to your friends, parents, and teachers about your feelings. You will be surprised at the support you receive. Everyone has anxious feelings about tests. Having others understand your anxious feelings will help you accept yourself even more. Other people in your life can also give you suggestions about tests and can also help you put the WASL Writing and Reading Assessments and other tests in perspective.

3. Congratulate Yourself During the Test

Students with test anxiety spend a lot of time putting themselves down. They have never learned to say good things about themselves or to congratulate themselves on successes. As you go through the WASL Writing and Reading Assessments, try to find ways to mentally pat yourself on the back. If you find yourself successfully completing an extended-response question, tell yourself you did a good job. When you finish reading a test item and feel you understand the information fairly well, remind yourself you are doing a good job in completing the WASL Writing and Reading Assessments. Paying attention to your successes, and not focusing on your failures, can greatly reduce test anxiety.