

# Test Anxiety



## Associated Symptoms

### **Physical symptoms.**

Headache, nausea, diarrhea, excessive sweating, shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, light-headedness and feeling faint can all occur. Test anxiety can lead to a panic attack, which is the abrupt onset of intense fear or discomfort in which individuals may feel like they are unable to breathe or having a heart attack.

### **Emotional symptoms**

Feelings of anger, fear, helplessness and disappointment are common emotional responses to test anxiety.

### **Behavioral/Cognitive symptoms**

Difficulty concentrating, thinking negatively and comparing you to others are common symptoms of test anxiety.



## What is Test Anxiety?

The word **TEST** can cause many different feelings and emotions in our children. You may remember your own anxiety and worries from when you were in school and you heard this word. Now your children may be the one dealing with a fear of exams or tests. He or she may work hard in class, study and complete their homework at home, and have confidence in their abilities yet freeze or reach a peak of stress come test time. If so, he or she may have a type of performance anxiety known as **Test Anxiety**.

Stressful emotions can inhibit a student's ability to absorb, retain and recall information. Anxiety creates a kind of "noise" or "mental static" in the brain that blocks our ability to retrieve what's stored in memory and also greatly impairs our ability to comprehend and reason. The key to understanding how anxiety inhibits cognitive and physical performance lies in understanding how emotions affect the rhythmic activity in the nervous system.

Feelings such as frustration, fear, anger and anxiety cause the neural activity in the two branches of the autonomic nervous system to get out of sync. This, in turn, affects the synchronized activity in the brain, disrupting our ability to think clearly. On the other hand, uplifting feelings such as appreciation lead to increased harmony and synchronization in the brain and nervous system, which facilitates our ability to think more clearly.

## What Causes Test Anxiety?

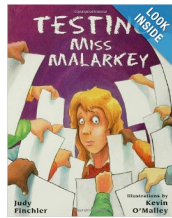
- **Fear of failure.** While the pressure to perform can act as a motivator, it can also be devastating to individuals who tie their self-worth to the outcome of a test.
- **Lack of preparation.** Waiting until the last minute or not studying at all can leave individuals feeling anxious and overwhelmed.
- **Poor test history.** Previous problems or bad experiences with test taking can lead to a negative mindset and influence performance on future tests.

## What to do?

Research has shown that providing children with tools and strategies that build both emotional skills and healthy physical habits when preparing for a test can help them overcome test anxiety and the associated symptoms, while improving their ability to prepare for and perform on critical testing. It's important to help children identify what they are feeling and give them tools that will help them learn to manage emotions such as anxiety, self-doubt, anger or frustration. The proper physical habits enable students to have enough energy and stamina for their brain to do its job of thinking and analyzing for a sustained period of time

# Helpful Books on Test Anxiety

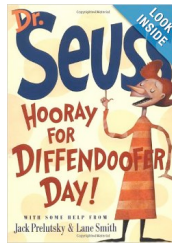
## Children's Bibliotherapy



### *Testing Miss Malarkey*

By: Judy Finchler

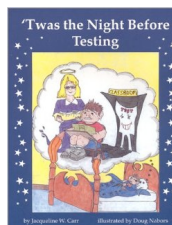
Publisher: Walker Childrens  
August 2003  
ISBN-10: 0802776248  
Ages 6-9



### *Hooray For Diffendoofer Day!*

By: Dr. Seuss

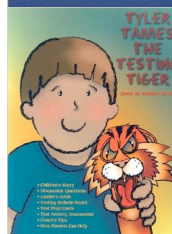
Publisher: Knopf Books  
April 1998  
ISBN-10: 0679890084  
Ages 3-7



### *Twas' the Night Before Testing*

By: Jacqueline W. Carr

Publisher: Fundamentals in Ed.  
December 1999  
ISBN-10: 0970511701



### *Tyler Tames The Testing Tiger*

By: Janet Bender

Publisher: NCOYI  
December 2004  
ISBN-10: 1931636273  
Ages 7 & up

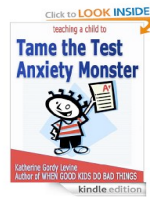


### *The Big Test*

By: Julie Danneberg

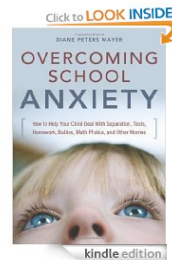
Publisher: Charlesbridge  
July 2011  
ISBN-10: 1580893619  
Ages 6-9

## Parent/Professional Guides



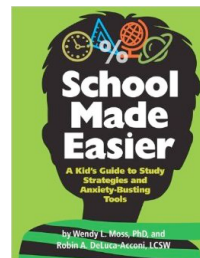
### *Tame The Test Anxiety Monster*

By: Katherine Levine  
Publisher: MetaPlume Corp.  
August 2012



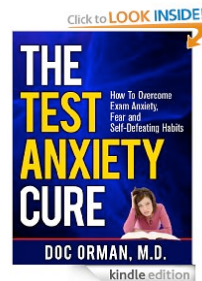
### *Overcoming School Anxiety*

By: Diane Mayer  
Publisher: Amacom  
July 2008



### *School Made Easier*

By: Wendy Moss  
Publisher: Magination Press  
August 2013



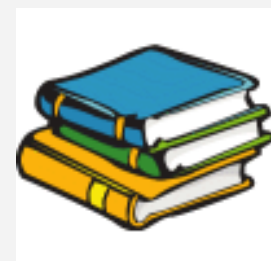
### *The Test Anxiety Cure*

By: Doc Orman  
Publisher: Stress Management Group  
2014

## Test Anxiety in Stories

A number of children's books address the topic of Test Anxiety. Read some of these stories leading up to a major test as a means of bringing a fun and creative way to decrease fears and worries.

Use some of the parent guides to learn how to best help your children with their test taking fears.



## 10 Helpful Hints to Ease Test Anxiety

1. **Prepare your child on a daily basis.** Be sure they consistently complete assignments and homework. A child who keeps up with his schoolwork daily will absorb more than if they attempt a last-minute cramming session. Give practice exams. Identify a subject in which the child is struggling. Get the school textbook for that subject and use the information to create a practice exam. Duplicate the environment where his actual tests occur by turning off the television and sitting the child down at his desk. Later, praise them for their efforts on the practice exam.
2. **Emphasize effort over grades.** Learning comes easier to some children than others. While one child can get an "A" by barely cracking a book, another could study all week and still do no better than a "B." Praise your child for the effort you see them putting in. Encourage them and offer little rewards when you see them doing their best.
3. **Listen to your child's feelings:** Do not deny the child's anxiety or worries, but acknowledge them and reassure him/her. For example: "I know you're worried about taking this test, but you know the information and are going to do great."
4. **Bibliotherapy:** Read stories and discuss concerns with your child. A number of children's books incorporate the theme of test anxiety. Talk about how a fictional character might handle the stressors of the test.
5. **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. Start by focusing on the area around your heart. This helps to take the focus off the mind loop. Then 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.
6. **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?"
7. **Think good thoughts:** Science is showing that good feelings like appreciation can actually help your brain work better. When you feel nervous or anxious, try this. You can do it as many times as you need to or want to. Remember something that makes you feel good. Maybe it is your pet or how you felt when you got a big hug from your mom, or how you felt after a super fun day at the amusement park with your friends. After you remember how you felt, hold that feeling. Pretend you are holding it in your heart. Let yourself feel that feeling for 10-20 seconds or more. It's important to let yourself really feel that good feeling all over again. Practice this tool right before the big test. Help change your child's negative thoughts. Anxious children tend to have negative thoughts that might come out in comments such as "I hate tests!" or "I always fail." Gently help her to change those negative thoughts to more positive ones, such as "The more tests, I take the better I get at them" or "I always do better on tests that I study for." This can help greatly in reducing their anxiety on test day.
8. **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.
9. **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 complex 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 a burrito to sustain energy until lunch.
10. **Have fun:** Do something fun the night before to take your mind off the test, like see a movie, play a board game with your family or participate in a sports activity. That way your mind and emotions are more relaxed in the time leading up to the test.