

Taming TEST Anxiety

Tips from test-prep pro Ned Johnson

Test day is on the horizon, and the mere thought is making you sweat. How to get a grip? First, take a deep breath and tell yourself it's normal to be anxious – in fact, some anxiety is good, since it'll provide incentive to prepare. The problem is that being really anxious may actually hurt your performance. The good news: You can do quite a bit to stop test anxiety before it stops you!

First, a lesson on how brains work. Two parts of the brain play a big role in anxiety, the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex. The amygdala is basically a really, really good built-in threat detector. Imagine strolling through the forest thousands of years ago, when suddenly a hungry tiger rushes up to grab you for lunch. You would not want to pause and think – you would want to either run or fight immediately. Your amygdala would send out chemical signals (cortisol and adrenaline) that would rapidly increase your heart rate and breathing, elevate your blood pressure, put sugar into your bloodstream for fuel and focus your attention on running away or fighting. Unfortunately, neither of those responses will help you take a high-stakes test like the ACT or SAT. The prefrontal cortex, on the other hand, handles planning and goal-setting, and allows you to work for what you want and resist temptations that might throw you off course.

Now, the trouble starts when the amygdala fires up needlessly, in the absence of any real danger. When the amygdala seizes control, your ability to solve problems using the calm and thoughtful approach goes straight out the window. So the key is to lower the level of threat your amygdala detects

and give your thinking center the advantage. One of the best current scientists researching how brains react to stress, Sonia Lupien, has a very clever model for summarizing what causes anxiety in humans – what, she observes, makes people “nuts”:

- **Novelty.** New situations, though often fun, are also generally stressful.
- **Unpredictability.** Not knowing how things will turn out is unnerving.
- **Threat to the ego.** Feeling that your abilities are in doubt is nerve-wracking.
- **Sense of low control.** Feeling a lack

of control or a sense of helplessness is about as bad as it gets.

Being aware of these factors should help you get some perspective and reduce their impact, she says. Here are some ways to minimize your anxiety and maximize your test performance:

#1

Prep for the test by learning how it works.

However you feel about the ACT and SAT, you have to give them this: They are consistent. (Thus the name standardized tests.) So your test will be a heck of a lot like the previous ones. You already may have a feel for what to expect if you sat for the PSAT last year, or the similar preview of the ACT, known as ACT Aspire.

Now you want to work through lots of practice tests, on your own and under conditions that mimic as much as possible the conditions and the stresses of the real thing. Be strict



about time. Do the whole darned test to develop stamina. Take it in a library to add the distractions of other people. As they say in sports, “practice like you’ll play, so you can play like you’ve practiced.”

Research shows that one of the best antidotes for students who suffer from excessive test anxiety is more practice tests. In light of this research, The College Board recently launched a collaboration with Khan Academy to offer a wealth of practice opportunities for the SAT online. Free! Many students approach these tests as if they’re school exams. They are not! Your job is to figure out (and get used to) the ways they differ.

#2

Learn how YOU react to the test.

If you did not do as well as you would have liked on a practice test, ask: Why not? Did you run out of time? If so, where and why? Identify questions that were difficult for you. Did you make silly errors that you can avoid making next time? When you take the test the first time, notice if something about the testing situation affected your concentration. Not getting enough sleep, showing up late or forgetting to bring snacks, for example, can throw you off balance. Recognizing your own patterns as well as those of the tests can help you avoid subpar performance.

#3

Keep the tests in perspective.

Remember: You are not your test score. Knowing the meaning of “laconic” and “lugubrious” does not prove you are smart. Nor does memorizing the rules of logarithms, apostrophes or parallel structure. The ACT and SAT are tests of acquired skills, and you may have some work to do to acquire them. But a low score does not mean you lack intelligence or are a poor learner. Understanding

that distinction should help make the test less stressful.

In her book “Mindset,” psychologist Carol Dweck makes the case for thinking of learning as a way to grow your abilities rather than show how smart you are. Low scores are not a measurement of you, but rather of the material you have not mastered yet.

#4

Get more sleep.

Ever notice how, when you are tired, your mom/friend/teacher/little brother is even more annoying than usual? It’s not your mom/friend/teacher/little brother who’s the problem – it’s you. Your highly sensitive amygdala is getting the upper hand, which makes you much more likely to feel and act stressed. Being well rested when you deal with a challenging situation increases the chances that your prefrontal cortex will stay firmly in charge.

Getting enough sleep also strengthens the brain pathways that help you retrieve information. When you are exhausted, the little guy who goes to pull the answer from the filing cabinet in the back your head, waves you off, yawning, “Sorry! I am on a break. Come back later!” You may be aware that you have learned the material, but your ability to access it becomes compromised, slowing you down or foiling you altogether. In the days leading up to the test, do essential homework, be antisocial, and go to sleep.

#5

Focus on the test process, not the score.

Obsessing about what your score will be is bound to jangle your nerves. As you practice and on the big day, try to laser in on the process of taking the test, the part that you can control. Better technique – not worry – leads to better outcomes. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi found that two requirements of a top performance are “concentration on the task at hand and

loss of self-consciousness.” In other words, to find your groove while prepping and on test day, focus on the job itself and not on your results.

#6

Get the logistics sorted out ahead of time.

Make sure you consult your test registration form or admission ticket for what to bring (photo ID, an acceptable calculator, say) and pack your “test kit” in advance so you can grab it and go. Be clear about where you need to be, and allow plenty of time to arrive early. The stress of running late can take a toll on your sense of control.

#7

Have a plan B.

First of all, remember that you can take the ACT or SAT (or both) again if you don’t like your score – and again. Knowing you have several shots at success should help lower that threat level. And if you still don’t like your score when all is said and done, there are hundreds of “test-optional” colleges that have concluded that they don’t need the tests to make admissions decisions. Seriously! Go to fairtest.org to learn more.

Finally, I like to tell students to get up on test day and locate their swagger. Listen to your favorite music. Wear the clothes that make you feel like all that. Think about the places in your life where you are at your best. Throw your shoulders back and think “Oh, yeah!” We all have strengths that tests do not capture – think about yours. Psychologists have found that when students take a few minutes before a big test to write about the strengths and values that make them who they are, they perform better. Good luck! ●

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Ned Johson is founder of PrepMatters (prepmatters.com) and co-author of “Conquering the SAT: How Parents Can Help Teens Overcome the Pressure and Succeed.”