

Managing Test Anxiety, by Kristine Feggstad, LPC, Mental Health Counselor, UW-Sheboygan

As a college mental health counselor, I see many students each semester who experience test anxiety. People who experience this type of anxiety describe such symptoms as racing heartbeat, rapid breathing, sweating, racing thoughts, gastrointestinal distress, etc. They become so flooded with anxiety and stress in a test situation they find their mind goes blank and they are unable to retrieve information or learned material. Those with significant test anxiety may achieve lower test scores, a lower grade point average and lower self-esteem in addition to the higher stress levels and the physical symptoms. In a larger context, their opportunities may be limited by their inability to perform at their best during testing situations.

There are some basic strategies that are quite well known among professionals who treat test anxiety: get plenty of sleep before a test (sleep improves cognitive functioning overall), eat well (plenty of protein), allow plenty of time to arrive at test site/room and avoid individuals who talk a lot before the exam.

Recent research suggests there are genetic, chemical differences between those who experience high test anxiety and those who do not. "Worriers" are individuals who face high stress situations and can become flooded with anxiety to such a degree that it negatively affects their performance. "Warriors" are those individuals who seem to take on competitive situations with a heightened, focused state of performance. One major difference between these two groups is the way they interpret physical changes that occur when anxious or stressed; a worrier may think negatively and worry about how they will compare with others; a warrior will get more energized and focused.

Giving "worriers" better cognitive (i.e. thinking) tools for handling stress and anxiety is one strategy that has shown promise. Identifying what thoughts they may experience and giving them new scripts or thoughts to consider can help them interpret their own physical symptoms as readiness for testing or something that can improve performance rather than inhibit it. Worriers will also need more practice in high anxiety situations, to be able to experience and handle pressure in multiple situations. This is why individuals with test anxiety should never start to *avoid* test situations; but rather, prepare for and practice testing over and over. It also highlights something many anxious students may not want to hear; it is even more important for them to prepare well and to prepare well in advance for testing situations.

There has been research on learning that points to the benefits of learning new information in shorter, spread out intervals for best retention. Testing actually helps solidify this learning in our memories and ideally we should view testing as a friend to learning.