

# Overcoming Test Anxiety

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We are a test-addicted society. As information and social complexity increase, human ingenuity devises increasing numbers of tests with which to promote, retard, admit, exclude, reward, license, label, honor, advance, permit, categorize, discriminate for and against a wide variety of people for a wide variety of schools, skills, occupations and professions. We test mental abilities and motor skills; we test for emotional stability and emotional difficulties; we test for learning abilities and learning deficits.

Obviously, tests have significant outcomes in terms of goal-oriented expectations: IQ ratings; job placement; promotions; training programs; school, college, and university admissions; license to drive a car, or to practice a trade or profession. In fact, the consequences of tests are so important that it is in the self-interest of people to learn to do their best.

Test anxiety (Mander & Sarason, 1952), or the specific anticipatory anxiety in test-taking situations, is extremely widespread, resulting in real-life consequences such as poor grades, dropping out of school, and a general inability to achieve goals which are realistically attainable. Research relating anxiety to learning and performance has tended to confirm that high test anxiety disrupts and disorganizes performance (Sarason, 1963; Paul & Eriksen, 1964; Spielberger, 1966; Whitmaier, 1974). Spielberger reports that academic failure was four times as great among high-anxious intelligent individuals as for low-anxious students of comparable ability.

Test anxiety is more commonly experienced by high-anxious individuals – that is, by those people who have an innate or learned dispositional tendency to perceive a wide variety of events as threatening. However, not all highly anxious people become test-anxious. Some use their anxiety to heighten motivation and facilitate concentration on the task at hand (Alpert & Haber, 1960). Others “psych” themselves up to the point of emotional and intellectual debilitation, to the detriment of their performance.

Test anxiety is generally experienced as an inability to think clearly in spite of adequate preparation, and is usually independent of a realistic appraisal of one’s ability. Time and time again, teachers and counselors have heard students complain that they have studied, knew their work well, but “fell apart” when taking the test. They either block completely or answer inadequately, and so are unable to achieve goals which are well within their competence. Blocking may be a method of coping with stress, attendant upon the perceived threat of harm which the individual anticipates as the inevitable outcome of the test. The fear of some consequence of the test is an overriding component of the behavior repertory of the test-anxious individuals. What is it that they dread?

There is evidence that test-anxious individuals actively rehearse negative self-evaluations which compete for attention during the test situations (I. Sarason, 1973; Mandler & Watson, 1966; Wine, 1971; Meichenbaum, 1972, 1974). These include expressions of lowered self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy, fear of negative consequences such as failure; negative self-evaluation in relation to one’s own previously established standards; self-blame for perceived shortcomings; social evaluations in relation to one’s estimate of how others are doing. These self-monitoring, negative ruminations, such as “How am I doing?”, “I can’t make it!”, “I’m no good”, intrude during the test and interfere with a proper focus upon the task at hand. And negative predictions such as, “I’ll never make it”, “It will be awful,” actively accompany pre-test preparations.

Since real-life outcome of tests is indeed important, test-anxious individuals generally cling to the belief that the perceived importance of the outcome is what determines their anxiety. “Of course I get anxious. After all, what will happen if I don’t pass?” Well, what will happen if you don’t pass?

It is the purpose of this paper to examine test anxiety within the framework of Rational-Emotive Therapy (Ellis, 1962, 1973), and to offer suggestions and specific techniques to reduce tension and improve performance in a wide variety of anxiety-arousing test situations.

RET specifies the irrational thoughts, the irrational demands, and the catastrophic predictions which distort the view that test-anxious people take of the test situation. It helps people identify the self-talk or internal sentences which generate anxiety and activate self-defeating behaviors. It offers a unifying theory which integrates the experimental data of test-anxiety research, and the clinical observations of students who report that they “know the work and fail the test.”

In general, the arguments presented here will be that:

1. Test anxiety is evoked and maintained by irrational beliefs and irrational demands.
2. The perceived threat of harm stems from the anticipated inability to satisfy these irrational demands, and the catastrophizing of the consequences
3. The catastrophic consequences is primarily to one’s feeling of self-worth, which is irrationally equated with the test outcome.
4. Irrational beliefs, irrational demands and catastrophic predictions are over-learned responses (habits) which are rehearsed before and during a test.
5. Blocking on a test is an avoidance mechanism which is monetarily anxiety-reducing, but serves to maintain both the anxiety and the irrational belief system.
6. Since irrational, self-defeating beliefs are learned habits, they can be unlearned.
7. New, self-enhancing beliefs and behaviors can be learned

## **IRRATIONAL BELIEFS WHICH MAINTAIN TEST ANXIETY**

### **Fear of Failure**

The value system of our society is permeated with the belief in the desirability of achievement. Certainly, a person who achieves optimally experiences considerable rewards and satisfactions in life. Yet, many people who wholeheartedly subscribed to the achievement ethic become so anxious in the face of a test that they underperform and so defeat themselves (Atkinson, 1964; I. Sarason & Mandler, 1952). Since not all highly motivated people are test-anxious, a basic difference between the two is in the irrational demand, “I **must** succeed!”

Students with whom I have discussed test anxiety have uniformly been startled when I have asked, “Why **must** you succeed?” They consider the question irrelevant and trivial, because they believe the need for achievement is axiomatic. “Do you mean to tell me that it makes no difference whether I pass or not?” I try to persuade them that it is highly desirable, and in their own self-interest to do their best, but that “I must succeed” implies a demand whose corollary is “I can’t stand it if I don’t...because...”

Is the treat due to a realistic appraisal of the real-life consequences of failure? If it is, then one can simply work harder to prepare adequately; or one can change goals to make them more consonant with one’s ability and interests.

Or is the threat due to the self-evaluative consequences of failure to achieve? If the latter is true – and according to RET it is – then let us examine the consequences of the demand, “I must succeed”

## **Self-downing**

“I must succeed” implies that there is an absolute criterion of performance by which I, as a person, must be judged. If I fall short of this standard of achievement, I am an unworthy person. “If I fail on this task, then I am a failure.”

A “failure” is, by definition, a person whose consistent achievement is a high competence in the art of failing. That being the case, test-anxious people make a prediction that they will continue to do that which they know best – namely, to fail. Since predictions tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies, their anxiety will continue; their irrational demands for success will be salvaged; and their self-defeating behavior will be maintained. They will prove to themselves that (a) their anxiety was justified; (b) they are unworthy people. They have catastrophized the possible consequences of failure (“and it is awful”) to the most cherished aspect of their value system: self-worth.

But, is there really such a person as a “failure?” Or are there only individuals who have a self-defeating tendency to perform less than optimally on tests? Is one’s worth as an individual measurable in terms of a score on a test?

What about people who achieved an A in English and consistently get a C in math? Is their worth as a person an average of the two scores? Or are they individuals who do well in English and who will undoubtedly not make Math Honor Society? Or supposed they perform poorly on both. How then do they rate as people? Simply as one who has neither the talent nor the inclination to star in academic work.

What about their self-worth? Self-worth is inherent in being human. It is not negotiable

It is difficult to convince test-anxious persons to separate outcome on a test from self-worth. In order to do so, it is necessary to entertain the notion, “Even if I fail, I am still a worthwhile person.”

Now that is not, as some people believe, a prescription for coping out – or a justification for not trying. It does mean that if one gives up the irrational demand, “I must succeed,” and the irrational belief that, “If I don’t succeed, I am not a worthwhile person,” then one is free to substitute the sensible, sane and rational, “It would be desirable and in my best interest to do my best.”

## **Perfectionism**

There are people who absolutely, and at all times, must be perfect. They must always be at the head of the class; they must absolutely get into the best college; they must always come in first at the finish line. They are constantly concerned with maintaining a shining image. Anything less than that is viewed by them as failure. While fear of failure is an underlying motive in the test anxiety of perfectionistic people, the definition of failure, to them, is generally anything less than perfect: “I might make a mistake and that would be awful.” Perfectionism often accounts for the coping out and dropping out of intelligent and capable students.

Perfectionistic demands can seldom be met, even by the most exacting of students. If they are not met, the individual reacts with guilt and self-recriminations: “I should have been able to do it! What a dummy I am.” The fear of falling short of unrealistic standards often results in such high anxiety that people prefer the certainty of failure by nonperformance to the possibility of error. “Better not try than to risk a mistake.” At the

same time, they catastrophize their feelings of guilt at not having succeeded into self-downing: "...and therefore I am a worthless person."

## **Need for Approval**

Assuming that test-anxious individuals are willing to give up the demand that they absolutely must succeed, and to accept the idea that if they fail they are persons who have failed but still are worthwhile persons, they will triumphantly answer, "All right, so I fail and I drop out, and I accept myself as a human and fallible person who has failed. But should others accept me? What about my parents who have done so much to put me through school? What will they think of me? How can I face my friends?"

There are two irrational notions in the above statement:

1. "Because I accept myself as a person who can fail, it necessarily follows that I must and will fail." On the contrary, people who accept the possibility of failure without self-downing decrease their anxiety and thereby increase the probability of doing their best.
2. "I must at all times win the approval of others. Unless others approve of me, I am not a worthwhile person.

It is admittedly desirable to be loved and approved by some people some of the time. It is not necessary – or possible – to win the approval of any people any of the time. It is **preferable** to enjoy good relations with friends and family. But that is not the same as dire necessity. For necessity places an irrational **demand**. "They must love me and approve of me. If I don't succeed, they won't love me. If they don't love me, I am not a worthwhile person."

Is one's self-worth the mirrored reflection in other people's eyes? And is one's grade its price tag?

People who give up this irrational notion can, with less anxiety and more freedom, devote themselves to the task at hand, knowing that the outcome can only affect the immediate goal, not their self-worth or human relations. If other people make their love or friendship contingent upon their success, then that, in fact, reflects on them.

## **Blocking and Low Frustration Tolerance**

When people who are adequately prepared block on a test, they sense a loss of control, and experience a moment of panic (Mandler & Watson, 1996). They know that they know the answer, but feel helpless to find it. They experience frustration and anger. They say to themselves, "This should not happen to me! I should be able to answer this question! It is terrible that I can't do it! What is the matter with me?" If they become unable to cope with their feeling of frustration, they become too rigid to search for appropriate answers and alternative solutions. The result is blanking and withdrawal.

These individuals momentarily escape from the frustrating situation; they feel less threatened; their anxiety is reduced – temporarily. And they have strengthened a phobic avoidance response to tests.

## **Anxiety about Test Anxiety**

This is double trouble. The next time test-phobic individuals face a test, they not only become anxious about making it, they become anxious about getting anxious. "I know I'll be nervous. I always get nervous. I can't help it."

The moment people say, “I can’t help it,” they institutionalize helplessness, hopelessness, and self-pity – and guarantee failure. The result is further self-downing and depression.

## HOW TO OVERCOME TEST ANXIETY

There are two basic self-defeating notions which one had better give up in order to learn to overcome test anxiety:

1. “I have always been anxious when taking tests; therefore I will always be anxious.”

This implies that one has no control over one’s behavior. This is not true. While human beings are, to a considerable extent, molded by genetic predisposition and previous experience, we are not simply creatures of blind fate. Excessive anxiety is generated and maintained by irrational beliefs and demands. These can be changed.

It is hard work to change ingrained habits. It takes a great deal of effort, and a great deal of practice. After all, the test-anxious individuals have spent many years practicing irrational habits of thought. They have practiced them every time they anticipate a test. They practice them every time they allow ruminations to intrude upon their attention to the tasks at hand. To give them up requires a decision to change. To change is conscious, deliberate work.

2. To give up test anxiety means to give up caring about the outcome.

Frequently students ask, “Do you really mean that it is better to take an attitude of ‘What’s the difference! It really doesn’t matter what I do on the test!’”

No, that’s not what I mean. There may indeed be objective detrimental consequences of poor performance. This fact leads some people to cling to the catastrophic view of these consequences and to go on confusing the reality with the irrational. It behooves people to learn to distinguish between concern, interest, wish to succeed, on the one hand; and fearfulness, guilt and self-downing, on the other.

Assuming that you sincerely wish to change your self-defeating behaviors, what can you do?

### **Actively Challenge Your Irrational Belief System, Using the ABC Model of Rational Emotive Therapy**

Suppose that you are facing a test. You feel anxious. You don’t concentrate on your work. You then, if you are like most of us, say that you are anxious because you are facing a test.

Is that logical? Can a test do anything to you? Can a test make you anxious? No! *Only you can make you anxious*

*You make yourself anxious by what you say to yourself.* You say: A(activating event), “I am taking a test”; C (consequence), “Therefore I am anxious.” But between A and C are your internal self-sentences B, which include such irrational beliefs as: “How terrible if I don’t pass. How awful if I fail. I absolutely must pass. If I don’t I will be a pretty stupid and worthless person.”

These statements at B are your irrational belief system: they activate and maintain your test anxiety. You can actively challenge your irrational belief system by asking: “Why is it awful if I make a mistake? Why am I worthless if I fail? Where is the evidence that this is so?”

There is no evidence. There are only self-defeating demands and beliefs which you can wisely learn to give up.

### **Sincerely Convince Yourself That You Are Not Your Test Score**

A test outcome is not a measure of your worth as a person. If you fail, you are not a failure. If you have a headache, you are a person who is temporarily in pain and inconvenienced by having a headache. You never are a headache. And you can seek a remedy. If you fail a test, you are a person who is temporarily inconvenienced and properly concerned about having failed. You can seek a remedy.

### **Actively Work on Distinguishing Between Demands and Preferences**

If people insist that they must pass, must be perfect, or must please their parents, or must do as well as their friends, they are setting up a cycle of anxiety, catastrophizing, poor performance, self-downing, and anxiety. If instead of “I absolutely must...” they deliberately substitute, “It would be better to...,” they establish the precondition for productive work. This requires practice.

One technique which has been found helpful is to write out reminder cards with appropriate statements on them, such as: “I will try to do well,” “I would like to succeed,” “Failure is neither a sin nor a crime,” “I am human, therefore fallible.” Place these cards in strategic places where you will be most likely to see them in the course of the day: in your pockets or purse, on your bathroom mirror, in your notebooks. Repeat the sentences as often as possible.

### **Practice Thought-stopping**

Intrusive thoughts, such as, “I know I can’t pass,” “This is awful,” “I can’t stand it,” “I’m no good,” can, with practice, be stopped.

Learn to become aware of these self-defeating negative thoughts when you prepare for an exam. Say “Stop!” whenever these thoughts intrude upon your studying. Substitute a positive thought which counters the negative one: “It is not terrible to fail, only inconvenient,” “I am human and fallible. A mistake is not awful,” “I am a person. My worth cannot be graded.” Then turn your attention to your work.

Intensive thought-stopping rehearsals in advance of a test will not only minimize the buildup of excessive anxiety, but will teach you to stop your catastrophizing intrusions during a test.

### **Rational-Emotive Imagery**

Now that you have challenged your inappropriate and irrational thoughts, you can further help yourself by deliberately learning to change your feelings.

As vividly as you can, imagine yourself in a test situation. NO experience your anxiety. Feel your pulse quickening, your blood pressure rising, heart beating. You are near panic. Listen to your thoughts. They are the self-downing irrational ones you have been in the habit of rehearsing. Say “Stop.” Counter these negative thoughts with the positive ones you have been practicing. Deliberately change your feelings to one of calm. Now look over the test. Imagine yourself remaining calm, concerned and interested. Hold that scene! Imagine answering the test to the best of your ability. You do not permit intrusive thoughts to enter your head. You pay attention to the test questions. You continue to feel calm and appropriately concerned. You finish the test. You feel good.

This is Rational-Emotive Imagery, or REI (Maultsby, 1971). It is a method of autoconditioning – that is, of replacing phobic self-induced anxiety responses with appropriate, task-facilitating feelings. REI, to be effective, requires daily, diligent practice in sessions of five to fifteen minutes. Eventually you will be able to imagine the scene without experiencing the initial anxiety. You will find out that when a real test looms, you will be able to change your anticipation from one of heightened anxiety to one of increased confidence.

### **Self-reinforcement**

It is a good idea to reward yourself for practicing your new behaviors. You can do this by selecting activities which you enjoy, such as watching TV, playing records, eating your favorite dessert, reading your favorite paper, magazine or book, or talking on the phone to your favorite friend. Decide that you will not indulge in any of these activities until after you have practiced your ABC challenge, rehearsed your positive sentences, and practiced thought-stopping and REI for fifteen minutes. This takes discipline. Change requires disciplined effort.

### **Overcoming Blocking**

Blocking occurs at the moment when anxiety overwhelms you, panic substitutes for reason, and frustration and anger block the flow of thought.

Suppose that, after all your practice, your old self-defeating tendency to block recurs. What then? Instead of giving in to the impulse to throw in the sponge, spend a moment relaxing and rehearsing positive statements to counter the catastrophic ones you usually rehearse: “I will not compare myself to anyone,” “I would like to do well, but I will survive if I don’t,” “Let me see what I can do instead of concentrating on what I can’t,” “If I fail I can always try again.” Try to keep your mind open and receptive, rather than rigid and closed.

Having calmed yourself, you can then rationally decide to leave the question which stumped you, continue with the exam, and come back to that item later. In this way, the tendency to block will not interfere with the rest of the test. You increase the probability of passing by doing what you know best first. Your anxiety level has dropped considerably, you have reinforced yourself by doing what you can, and you are now able, with less anxiety, to face the more difficult items.

### **Accepting Anxiety**

Having practiced changing your irrational demands and beliefs to rational preferences, having given up equating a test outcome with your self-worth, having practiced thought-stopping to get rid of irrational intrusions, having mastered REI to change your self-defeating emotions to self-enhancing ones, you now say, “But I am still anxious!”

Well, what’s so awful and terrible about getting anxious. Anxiety is part of the human condition. Some people are more easily aroused than others. No one is ever free of it. But you don’t have to catastrophize about it.

It’s wise to accept anxiety and to utilize it to generate fruitful activity. Some very anxious people even do very well on tests. They seem to be able to command their resources, work hard toward their goal, and having accomplished it, experience a pleasurable reduction of anxiety. They have mastered the requirements of the task so that the material is well within their competence. They do not permit catastrophizing intrusions to diminish their performance. They have, in other words, learned productive habits, so can you.

## Imperfection and Uncertainty

Imperfection and uncertainty are part of living. Anyone who demands perfection and certainty cuts himself off from the zestful experience of reaching for new challenges.

Nothing is ever certain – not even banishing test anxiety for all time to come. Your test anxiety may recur; you may block again on a test; you may again, from time to time, feel inadequate and worthless. That's not a catastrophe, only unfortunate. Try again!

Learn to experience each test as an exciting challenge – not a doomsday trap!

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