Test-taking blocks and blues [1]

Dear Alice,

What can you tell me about test-taking and mental block issues?

Answer

Dear Reader,

You've kept up with the reading throughout the semester, gotten high marks on your homework, and feel confident about the material. Then the professor slides the blank exam across the table over to you, and as you write your name and scan the first page, you realize you have no clue how to answer the questions. Welcome to test anxiety.

Test anxiety is a cause of the mental blockage that students experience during tests. It's markedly different from being distracted or being unable to focus on the test for some other identifiable reason, like relationship distress or outside worries. Exam anxiety is a stress response similar to performance anxiety that you might feel during a competitive sport or before entering the stage for a theatrical performance. Such stress responses are related to the release of adrenaline in your system, a hormone that prepares the body for action in response to stress. Sometimes known as fight or flight, this biophysical reaction may affect the individual in a number of ways. Feelings of test anxiety may be accompanied by the following:

- Racing heart beat
- Shortness of breath
- Stomach butterflies or nausea
- Headache
- Shakes
- Sweats
- In severe cases, passing out or vomiting

Not only physical symptoms accompany the feelings of anxiety or worry? negative thoughts are also often present, such as "If I fail this, my life is over," "I am horrible at this subject," "If I don't do well, this means I am stupid or worthless," or "I can't believe that I'm freaking out like this? what's wrong with me?" These physical feelings, emotions, and thoughts may all feed into each other, amplifying the anxiety and making test completion that much harder.
So, what to do about it?

- Research seemed to indicate that a strong grasp of the test material is the best protection. Feeling confident may increase your testing efficacy. So good study skills and habits may go a long way in heading off anxiety.
- Another tip for increasing confidence during a test is to fill in the answers you know best first, if you're allowed to skip around. This may give you a good warm up before answering questions that may be tougher.
- Research also indicated that sleep is a huge factor in preventing testing anxiety. While it may be tempting to pull an all-nighter to study, you may end up sacrificing some of your memory and stress coping skills.
- Relaxation techniques, especially those practiced before you're in the stressful situation, may be useful. Mindfulness activities such as deep breathing, meditation, and visualization may help reduce anxiety levels.
- Try not to stress about the stress? this may be easier said than done, but try to keep it in mind. Some level of stress may actually enhance performance and motivation to study, but try not to let it spiral out of control.
- Monitor negative thoughts and try to replace them with realistic, positive thoughts, like "I studied hard," "I'll do my very best," "I know this material."
- Consider asking for help if it's too much. See a counselor, the teacher, a tutor, or other support people in your life who may be able to help you build your test-taking confidence and skills and who may be able to help you build your relaxation skills.
- Diet and exercise may really help in test anxiety. When your body is operating from a healthy place, you have more resources to put towards the test and coping with the anxiety.

Beating yourself up over mistakes may be a mistake. People with this tendency may have the worst test anxiety. When someone puts pressure on you, especially when that person is you, the stress may be magnified to less-than-useful levels. Try to practice patience and gentleness with yourself, whether it may be your learning style, study habits, or test-taking.

Alice!
Category:
Emotional Health [2]
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Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [10]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [11]
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