

Test-taking blocks and blues ^[1]

Dear Alice,

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

Answer

Dear Reader,

Feeling anxious around tests is common, so it's no wonder that it affects the academic performance of millions of students worldwide every year! One explanation for this is the presence of a 'mental block' — an unofficial and informal term, albeit an accurate description of what many students encounter — in which a person experiences a psychological wall in their mind that stops them from moving forward, potentially making them lose motivation. Mental blocks are often associated with test anxiety, or feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and negative physiological reactions that occur when a person's abilities are being tested, but often occur during other activities as well (such as while doing homework or crafting an email). Despite often being used interchangeably or spoken about in tandem, they're two different experiences. Fortunately, there are steps that can be taken to address both. So, if you're feeling stuck between a block and a hard place, read on for more information and test-taking tips!

Anecdotally, having a mental block has been described as experiencing a psychological wall that makes it difficult to move past a certain point and can deplete the motivation to complete a task. Mental blocks are theorized to be the brain's way of signaling that it needs a break. Of course, that isn't always a realistic option, particularly when taking a test. That said, there are ways to prevent and address mental blocks. For example, practicing meditation to increase mindfulness and give the brain a chance to rest and reset itself; going outdoors, which has shown to improve cognitive functioning; dividing a project into smaller, more doable parts to increase confidence and reduce frustration; or listening to music, which can spur creativity.

Mental blocks are associated with test anxiety, which is markedly different from being distracted or being unable to focus on the test for some other identifiable reason. There are two main components of test anxiety: emotionality and worry. Emotionality involves the physiological and affective aspects of test anxiety; physiological stress responses are related to the body's release of adrenaline, a hormone that prepares the body for action in response to stress. In these

moments, people may experience an increased state of arousal with sweating, palpitations, trembling, or nausea, among other symptoms. Affective aspects involve feelings of insecurity and helplessness and may prompt thoughts such as, "I'm horrible at this subject." The physical feelings, emotions, and thoughts associated with emotionality may feed into one another, amplifying the anxiety and making test completion that much harder. The worry component of test anxiety involves cognitive and motivational aspects; test-takers often have thoughts regarding consequences of potential failure and experience tendencies to act on their worries, for example, by avoiding an exam.

There are a number of ways test anxiety presents itself, all of which have the potential to reduce the capacity of working memory. This happens when the functions in the brain are diverted to address the anxiety, thus impeding focus and concentration in preparation for and during the exam. The good news? When put into distasteful situations, some people are able to unconsciously and spontaneously regulate their emotional experience. So, the more someone is able to build up their repertoire of emotional regulation strategies, the better prepared they may be to deal with test anxiety. A number of different types of therapies can do that. Some focus on thinking patterns and overall awareness of the mind and body. For example, they may encourage people to change their thinking patterns by challenging negative or dysfunctional thoughts with positive or more logical arguments and by focusing on those positive thoughts. Other therapies may focus more the test situation itself. It may include exposing them to different aspects of test situations, training them to deal with that situation, and providing an opportunity to practice relaxation techniques. They may also ask them to introduce the worst case scenario and introduce new ideas that may increase anxiety in the testing circumstance in order to help them learn to cope and become desensitized to those fears.

While many therapies have been shown to improve levels of test anxiety, it's not clear if there's an improvement in performance levels. Not to mention, accessing therapy isn't always a realistic or affordable option. Whether or not therapy is an option, the following skills can easily be practiced at home to assist with test anxiety:

- **Examining thought processes:** Studies show that students who are motivated by external demands (such as needing a good grade to pass a class) are more anxious than students who are more motivated by internal interests (such as wanting to learn more). Though it's easier said than done, shifting thought processes and attitudes to focus more on wanting to learn may help alleviate feelings of anxiety.
- **Engaging in inquiry-based stress reduction:** By answering some questions to explore the causes of the stressful thoughts and anxiety, individuals are able to then find evidence to counter those thoughts. As a result, there may be shift in the emotional response associated with such situations.
- **Doing expressive writing:** This technique requires about 20 minutes of writing per day, preferably in the evening, about positive aspects of the day. Expressing positive emotions in writing helps reframe events, shift attention, and improve emotional-regulation ability.

While the strategies already listed help with test anxiety, there are additional strategies to address general challenges when taking tests. Students can experience challenges in any phase of a test: before, during, and after. Luckily, there are ways to address all three:

Before the exam: Effective study skills and habits can reduce test anxiety by increasing confidence in the knowledge of test material. Perhaps utilizing review sessions or meeting with teachers or professors before the exam, if they're willing, may provide further clarification or validation. It's also critical to practice healthy habits to ensure bodies and brains are functioning optimally. While it may be tempting to pull an all-nighter to study, this may end up sacrificing memory and coping skills, so getting a good night's rest is critical. Other habits such as eating healthfully and getting regular physical activity, can also be helpful. On the day of the exam, consider arriving early to avoid any anxiety related to being late, and be sure to listen to last minute instructions from the instructor.

During the exam: It's good to carefully read test directions and plan how you'll use the time by estimating how much time is needed to finish each section. As for answering the questions, starting with the easiest section to build up confidence, then moving on from more difficult questions is an approach that works for many. Although it's tempting, try to avoid watching for patterns and making decisions based on those patterns (this is especially true with multiple-choice responses). Try to monitor negative thoughts throughout the test taking experience, and if they pop up replace them with realistic, positive thoughts. If these strategies don't seem to help, consider doing mindfulness exercises such as deep breathing or visualization right there, pen or pencil in hand!

After the exam: After getting the test back, consider reviewing your answers and looking for patterns – on what kind of questions did you perform better? Not as well? What kind of studying is necessary for that type of question? Is there a trend related to your testing strengths and weaknesses? Teachers or professors may offer insight into scoring methods and study recommendations. Still anxious? Consulting with a tutor or counselor may help build test-taking confidence and skills, and increasing levels of comfort with relaxation strategies may also help address anxiety in the moment.

Whether people frequently experience test-taking anxiety or are a new kid on the block when it comes to testing challenges, there are several options out there to try!

Alice!

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