



# Combating test anxiety

## SUMMARY

These two authors explain how mindfulness techniques can be used to decrease test anxiety. Relaxation, deep breathing, and visualization are easy methods to master and can be used by students and adults of all ages.

## *Neuroscience teaches*

us that emotions strongly influence learning. While positive emotions help to foster motivation and encourage interaction, negative emotions can promote avoidance and limit learning efficiency. How often, for example, have we heard a parent or teacher say, “If she really wants to do it she can.”

Luckily, our emotions are not carved in stone. Our social-emotional development is influenced in large part by how we deal with life’s stressors. A little bit of test anxiety, for example, can serve to keep us alert during an exam.

Excessive anxiety, on the other hand, can be crippling — sending us into fight or flight mode, reducing memory, and stifling learning efficiency.

We trust that the suggestions offered below will assist in the development of positive social-emotional skills that will help assure success for all our students.

## **Teach Students to: Self Talk in a Constructive Way**

Attitudes and beliefs help determine how we react. One way to combat anxiety is through what is called “self-talk.” It is essential to avoid use of negative cue words or negative self-talk and to concentrate on more positive phrases.

Irrational beliefs (beliefs not based on the facts or reality) contribute to strong emotional reactions and negative behaviors.

Negative self-talk before and during tests can cause students to lose confidence and give up on tests. Silently shouting “Stop!” or “Stop thinking about that,” interrupts negative self-talk and the worry response before it can cause high anxiety.

After eliminating the negative thoughts, immediately replace them with positive

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self-talk or relaxation. Positive self-talk can build confidence and decrease test anxiety.

Negative: “No matter what I do, I will not pass this test,” becomes:

Positive: “I studied all of the material, I will do fine on this test.”

Negative: “I am no good at math, so why should I try?” becomes:

Positive: “I’ve worked hard and I will try my best on this test.”

### **Teach Students to: Release Muscle Tension**

1. Put your feet flat on the floor.
2. With your hands, grab underneath the chair.
3. Push down with your feet and pull up on your chair at the same time for about five seconds.
4. Relax for five to 10 seconds.
5. Repeat the procedure two or three times.
6. Relax all your muscles except for the ones that are actually used to take the test.

### **Teach Students to: Visualize a Calming Scene**

1. Close and cover your eyes using the center of the palms of your hands.
2. Prevent your hands from touching your eyes by resting the lower parts of your palms on your cheekbones and placing your fingers on your forehead. Your eyeballs must not be touched, rubbed or handled.
3. Think of some real or imaginary relaxing scene. Mentally visualize this scene. Picture it as if you were actually there.
4. Visualize this scene for one to two minutes.

### **Teach Students to: Relax Through Deep Breathing**

1. Sit straight up in a chair in a good posture position.
2. Slowly inhale through the nose.
3. First fill the lower section of the lungs and work up to the upper part of your lungs.
4. Breathe out through your mouth.

### **Teach Students to: Practice Long Term Relaxation**

An effective long-term relaxation technique is cue-controlled relaxation response. This involves the repetition of cue words, such as: “I am relaxed,” “I can get through this,” or “Tests don’t scare me.”

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#### REFERENCES

You’ll find more information on test anxiety from these authors on NYSUT’s website: <http://www.nysut.org/resources/all-listing/2012/august/for-parents-tips-for-combating-test-anxiety>