



Overcoming Test Anxiety: How youth workers can help kids cope

Webinar presented by the Indiana Youth Institute
February 24, 2010

Fear v. Anxiety v. Panic

Fear = cognitive and physiological reaction to actual threat

Panic = fear so strong that one can't think, plan, or reason

Anxiety = fear without the threat to safety; threat is to ego or sense of psychological safety

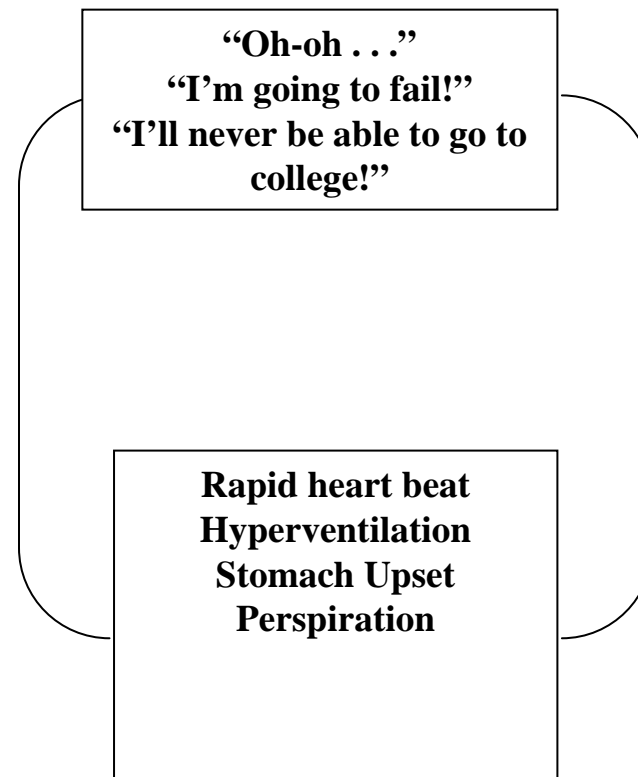
Anxiety and Performance

- Anxiety aids performance when:
 - A sudden burst of energy is required
 - Cognitive activity is not paramount
- Anxiety impairs performance when:
 - The task calls for mental acuity
 - Concentration; memory; higher-level thinking
- What does this describe?
 - Test-taking!!!

Anxiety Dynamics

- Anxiety is all about the *future*.
- One's *thoughts* about the test cause anxiety.
- Anxiety is maintained by the interaction of the *physiological* and the *cognitive*.

Cognitive & Physiological Interplay



Attacking the Cognitive Component

- Anxiety-creating thoughts involve:
- Irrational Thinking
 - Thinking that is not rational, logical, objective, or fact-based.
- Catastrophizing
 - Negative future-projection

Examples of Irrational Thinking

- **“I must be exceedingly competent at all that I do (and I couldn’t stand it if I’m not).”**
- **“I cannot do less than perfect (or I won’t be able to stand it).”**
- **“If I do poorly, I am a failure (and I wouldn’t be able to stand it).”**
- **“My entire future depends on how I do on this test.”**
- **“I will have little worth if I perform poorly.”**
- **“I stink at taking tests.”**
- **“I am stupid”**

Exercise #1

- **Thought**

- “I am stupid.”

-

- “I *can't stand* to not do well.”

- “I will have little worth if I do poorly.”

- ‘If I do poorly, I’m a failure.’

- **Dispute**

“I’m not stupid. I’m really struggling right now with these math concepts—they are not coming easily to me. But if I plug away I can do better.”

“I really don’t like it, but I can stand it, for sure.”

“My worth as a human being does not turn on how well I do on a geometry test.”

“If I do poorly, I do poorly on this test. That hardly makes me a failure across the board.”

Exercise #2

- **If the *truth* is:** then **the *dispute* is:**
- “I’m not very good at math” “Yeah, math is not your strong subject. You just need to get through this required math so you can get to the classes you shine in.”
- “Most kids are better at math than me” “Many, but not all, do better in math. What are your strong subjects?”
- “I freeze when I see a math problem.” “That’s been your habit in the past. However, we’re looking at new ways of doing things.”

Attacking the Physiological Component

- Where you have *nervous* tension (anxiety), you have *muscle* tension.
- Anxiety cannot exist in the absence muscle tension.
- Therefore, if you reduce muscle tension, you reduce anxiety.
- Here are two approaches to relaxation
 - Deep Muscle Progressive Relaxation
 - The Relaxation Response

Deep Muscle Progressive Relaxation

- We require a baseline amount of muscle tension to remain erect.
- When anxious, that tension elevates.
- DMPR temporarily (for 7 seconds) increases that tension.
- The body responds by dropping muscle tension below the baseline amount, producing relaxation.

Exercise #3

Deep Muscle Progressive Relaxation

- **Hands, fingers, wrists, forearms:** Make a fist
- **Biceps:** Make a muscle
- **Triceps:** With arm at 90-degree angle, press wrist onto hard surface
- **Upper face:** Raise eyebrows
- **Middle face:** “Squinch” eyes, nose, and cheeks
- **Lower face:** Clench jaw
- **Upper torso:** Pull shoulders back, trying to touch scapulae
- **Abdomen:** Touch navel to spine
- **Thighs:** Sitting with knees at 90-degree angle, press foot on floor
- **Lower leg #1:** Touch toes to shin
- **Lower leg #2:** Point foot straight out

The Relaxation Response

- **Breath down into your diaphragm**
 - Upon inhaling, your abdomen should rise
 - When exhaling, your abdomen should fall
 - Hear, feel, and picture your breath as it enters and leaves your lungs
 - Empty your mind
- **Upon exhaling, say your mantra.**
- **When your mind strays, forgive yourself with an “oh, well” and resume.**

Test-Taking Tips: General Concepts

- Survey the entire test before beginning; this will give you a sense of how to budget your time.
- Start with the easiest problems.
- Do the problems with the greatest point value first.
- If you don't know an answer, skip it and come back to it. Don't let yourself get stuck on it. Sometimes later questions will suggest an answer to this question.

Test-Taking Tips

Multiple Choice

- Read the question before looking at the answer.
- If you can, come up with the answer before reading the choices.
- Eliminate all answers you know aren't right.
- Read all choices before making your selection.
- If there is no penalty for guessing, take a guess after eliminating those answers you know are not correct.
- Don't keep on changing your answer—often your first instinct is correct.

Test Taking Tips: True/False

- Most tests have more *true*s than *false*s.
- Read each statement carefully, looking for qualifiers and keywords.
- Guess if there is no penalty for a wrong answer.
- Words like *never*, *always*, and *every* suggest the statement must always be true; therefore, this suggests a “false” answer.
- Words like *usually*, *sometimes*, and *generally* typically suggest a “true” answer.
- If any part of a statement is false, then the whole statement is false.
- Because a part of a statement is true doesn’t mean the whole statement is true.

Test Taking Tips: Essay Questions

- Make an outline to organize your thoughts. This both *takes* time and *saves* time.
- Avoid introductions or conclusions.
- Avoid opinions unless requested.
- Budget your time beforehand; if you have four essays to write in an hour, allow fifteen minutes for each.