

Supporting **your** Teen **with** Test Anxiety

Is anxiety getting in the way of your teen's ability to do their best on a test? Do they worry about failing their exams? Experience physical symptoms like a racing heart or upset stomach? Complain of feeling so anxious that they can't remember the material?

Some anxiety can help us prepare and keep us mentally alert, actually improving our performance. But too much anxiety can affect our memory and cause us to make mistakes, reducing our performance.



What's going on?

Your teen's test anxiety could be fueled by:

- Feeling (or being) unprepared
- Memories of doing poorly on tests in the past
- Unhelpful thoughts and worries
- Pressure from family (real or imagined)
- Fear of failure
- Learning challenges



How you can help

Listen. One of the hardest things about being anxious is the feelings of isolation and frustration that can come with it. Give your teen the space they need to share their feelings and their worries. Try not to jump in and fix the problem. Instead, let your teen do most of the talking.

Empathize. Expressing empathy by listening and taking your teen seriously is one of the best ways to help them feel seen and heard – and be more likely to listen to suggestions. But remember: Empathizing with their experience is not the same as agreeing with their behaviour or version of things. For example, you could say:

- "It looks like you have a lot on your mind."
- "That's a lot to juggle all at once."
- "I understand why you have some worries about tomorrow. It's important to you."
- "Tests can be scary. I'm here to help if you need me."

Don't downplay their worries. One of the hardest things for adults to remember is how BIG everything feels in high school. It may be tempting to downplay their worries ("It's not a big deal. It's only worth 10% of your grade!"). But they may have reasons to feel anxious that you are not aware of, like comparing themselves with peers, disappointing others, or fearing judgment or embarrassment.

Reassure but be realistic. Remind your teen that a test is just a chance to show what they know (not what they *don't* know). It is a tool for the teacher to assess students' understanding of the topic. And teachers want students to do well! A test cannot measure all of your teen's many strengths and talents, and it's not a good measure of how or what they will do in the future. After all, many people are very successful in their work without having had high grades in high school.

Learn about test anxiety. There are many good resources on test anxiety and how to deal with it, including:

- [Strategies for Dialing Down Test Anxiety](#) (EASE 8–12 student resource PDF)
- [Test Anxiety](#) (workbook from HeretoHelp.)

Find coping strategies. Everyone has different things that help them calm down and focus, so it might take a few tries to find the strategy that works best for your teen. Spend some time with your teen practising different calming exercises before test day, so if they are anxious on test day, they will know how to calm themselves. For some calming exercises to try, see the EASE at Home 8–12 resource [Helping Your Teen Calm Their Mind and Body](#).

Remind them that attitude is important. Some teens feel they are going to fail before they even enter the classroom. Help your teen become aware of their self-talk (what they are telling themselves). You could ask, "What are you telling yourself about the test?" or "What do you think will happen?" Making a list of their worries and their unhelpful self-talk can help them see things more objectively. For more ideas, see the EASE at Home 8–12 resource [Helping Your Teen Cope with Worries and Unhelpful Thinking](#).

Encourage regular downtime and sleep. Although it's hard for an anxious student to make time for sleep, downtime and sleep are essential for learning and remembering. Not getting enough sleep can affect performance and increase anxiety. To work at their best, our brains need regular breaks throughout the day. A short walk outside, stretching, listening to a guided meditation or music – even looking out the window of the bus or car on the way to school – can help.

Help balance their schedule. Finding balance can be especially hard in high school. Help your teen figure out how much time they will need for studying. Then help them find room in their schedule for that time, which might mean cancelling a few activities. Making some extra time in their schedule can help relieve stress and reduce the need to cram at the last minute. Mapping out a schedule on paper can also help them feel more in control. And don't forget to find downtime in your own schedule as well, so you can set a good example for your teen!

Remind them about supports. If your teen has access to supports or accommodations for tests (like having extra time or being in a quiet private space), ask if they will be using these supports. If they will, discuss how and when they will advocate for themselves.