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Stress and Test Anxiety

The Parent Corner is a professional publication with the goal of providing Jericho parents with practical tools and effective strategies that can serve to strengthen family ties and protect our children from harm and unnecessary stress. Last month we talked about Mindful Parenting. This skill involves being present in the moment, understanding your child's particular strengths and current limitations and the Five Core Principles of Mindful Parenting.

TOOLBOX SKILLS
★ Mindfulness
★ Managing Test Anxiety
★ Relaxation Skills
★ Positive Affirmations
★ Cost Benefit Stress Analysis
★ Minimizing Overgeneralizations
★ Serenity, Courage and Wisdom

This month, we turn our attention to the topic of Stress and Test Anxiety. Although a low level of stress before an exam can actually be helpful and motivate one to excel, test anxiety often becomes an overwhelming and debilitating phenomenon. A recent poll at the Benson-Henry Institute in Massachusetts documented that 27 percent of teenagers nationwide, experience significant stress on a regular basis.

Most teen surveys show that academic pressures—racking up a high grade-point average, scoring well on college entrance exams and gaining admission to selective colleges—are a main cause of stress. Left unchecked, stress can lead to academic dishonesty, depression, drug use and other destructive behavior". Yet, Rana Chudnofsky, the director of Benson-Henry Institute, suggests yet another source of teen stress, namely *constant multitasking craziness*. According to Chudnofsky, "students are doing homework at the same time that they are on Facebook, at the same time that they are Instant Messaging."

Clinically speaking, test anxiety is a form of performance anxiety. As such, students can develop various cognitive, behavioral and physiological responses to the pressure they feel before, during and after an examination.



Primary Characteristic of Anxiety

Cognitive	Behavioral	Physiological
Concentration problems	Motor restlessness	Tics
Worry	Fidgets	Recurrent, localized pain
Attention problems	Task avoidance	Rapid heart rate
Oversensitivity	Rapid speech	Flushing of the skin
Difficulty solving problems	Perfectionism	Perspiration
Memory problems	Irritability	Sleeping problems
Cognitive dysfunctions	Withdrawal	Headaches & Muscle tension

Ways for Students to Reduce Test Anxiety

(Excerpts taken from: M.D. Mayo Clinic, The University of Dallas's Counseling Department, and How to Study.com, Studenthacks.com)

Before the Test



- Prepare systematically. You'll feel more relaxed if you know you've studied and practiced the material that will be on the test. It can help to develop a consistent pre-test routine. It may also help to go to study groups or involve others in your study sessions
- Talk to your teacher. It's always a good idea to make sure you understand what's going to be on the test and know exactly how to prepare. In addition, if you let your teacher know that you feel anxious when you take tests, he or she may have suggestions to help you succeed.
- Get plenty of sleep. Sleep is directly related to academic performance. Preteens and teenagers especially need to get regular, solid sleep
- Use good study techniques to gain cognitive mastery of the material that will be covered on the test. This mastery will help you to approach the test with confidence rather than have excessive anxiety.
- Spread review of class material over several days rather than cramming.
- Learn relaxation techniques. There are a number of things you can do right before and during the test to help you stay calm and confident. Examples include deep-breathing exercises and visualizations.
- Maintain a positive attitude as you study. Think about doing well, not failing. Think of the test as an opportunity to show how much you have learned

During the Test

- Stay relaxed during the test. Taking slow, deep breaths can help. Focus on positive self-statements such as “I can do this.”
- Don't worry about other students finishing the test before you do. Take the time that you need to do your best.
- Take a moment to scan through the whole test. You'll notice there will be many questions you immediately know the answers to. After you finish scanning, start going through the test, answering first all the questions you can answer quickly. If you know it, answer the question and move on. If you need some time to answer, then move to the next question. The key is to answer what you know right away. By doing this, you'll feel more confident that you're getting a bunch of questions answered before anyone else. You will then have the remaining test time to work on the more difficult questions.



After the Test

- Once you finish the test and hand it in, forget about it temporarily. There is nothing more you can do until the graded test is returned to you. Turn your attention and effort to new assignments and tests.
- Get some exercise. Exercise regularly, but especially after an exam to release any unwanted tension.
- When the graded test is returned to you, analyze it to see how you could have done better. Learn from your mistakes and from what you did well. Apply this knowledge when you take the next test.

Ways for Parents to Reduce Test Anxiety



- Ensure that your approval of your teen is not based solely on their performance.
 - Encourage your teen to talk about what he or she is going through, and be willing to listen.
 - Test anxiety may improve by addressing and adjusting for an underlying condition that interferes with the ability to learn, focus or concentrate. Examples include attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or dyslexia.
- If you notice a great deal of stress, start by talking to your child's guidance counselor. Depending on the severity of the situation, your child may need professional assistance.

Finally, let's all remember that in order for children to grow into healthy young adults, we must be willing to challenge our definitions of success. No two students are alike. We all shine under different lights. Help your child find hers.