

PART 2: THINK ABOUT THINKING

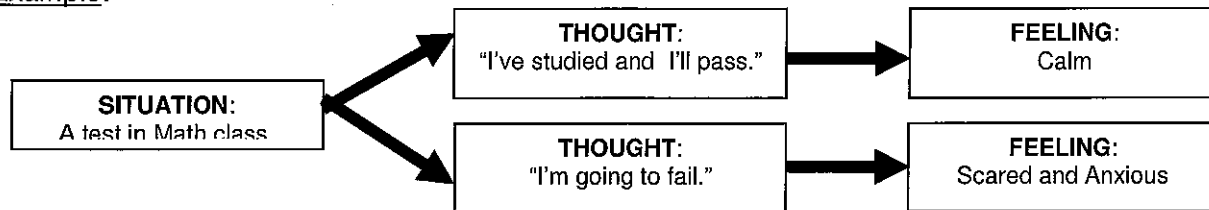
REALISTIC THINKING FOR TEST ANXIETY!

Realistic thinking means looking at all aspects of a situation (the positive, the negative and the neutral) before making conclusions. In other words, realistic thinking means looking at yourself, others, and the world in a *balanced* and *fair* way.

Step 1: Pay attention to your self-talk

Thoughts are the things that we say to ourselves without speaking out loud (self-talk). We all have our own way of thinking about things, and how we think has a big effect on how we feel. When we think that something bad will happen – such as failing a test – we feel anxious. For example, imagine you have a test in Math class. If you think you are going to fail, you will feel scared and anxious. But, if you think you can pass, you will feel calm.

Example:



Often we are unaware of our thoughts, but because they have such a big impact on how we feel, it is important to start paying attention to what we are saying to ourselves.

Step 2: Identify thoughts that lead to feelings of anxiety

It can take some time and practice to identify the specific thoughts that make you anxious, so here are some tips. Pay attention to your shifts in anxiety, no matter how small. When you notice yourself getting more anxious, that is the time to ask yourself:

- 'What am I thinking right now?'
- 'What is making me feel anxious?'
- 'What am I worried will happen?'
- 'What bad thing do I expect to happen?'

Step 3: Challenge your 'anxious' thinking

Thinking something doesn't mean it's true or that it will happen. For example, thinking that you will fail a test doesn't mean you will actually fail. Often, our thoughts are just guesses and not actual facts. Therefore, it is helpful to challenge your anxious thoughts because they can make you feel like something bad will definitely happen, even when it is highly unlikely.

Sometimes, our anxiety is the result of falling into **thinking traps**. Thinking traps are unfair or overly negative ways of seeing things. Use the chart on the following page and consider which thinking traps contribute to your own anxiety.

THINKING TRAPS & TEST ANXIETY

THINKING TRAP	EXAMPLE re: tests & school performance
<p>Fortune-telling: This is when we predict that things will turn out badly. But, in reality, we cannot predict the future because we don't have a magic ball!</p>	<p><i>"I know I'll mess up."</i></p> <p><i>"I'll never be able to pass math."</i></p>
<p>Black-and-white thinking: This is when we only look at situations in terms of extremes: things are either good or bad, a success or a failure. But, in reality, most events call for a more 'moderate' explanation. For example, missing one class assignment does not mean you have failed the entire course ~ you just need to get caught up in class and/or complete the next assignment.</p>	<p><i>"If I don't get a good mark, I'll totally fail."</i></p> <p><i>"I planned to study 6 hours and I know I only studied for 4 and a half. Now there's no way I can pass!"</i></p>
<p>Mind-reading: This trap happens when we believe that we know what others are thinking and we assume that they are thinking the worst of us. The problem is that no one can read minds, so we don't really know what others are thinking!</p>	<p><i>"Everyone will think I'm stupid."</i></p> <p><i>"The teacher doesn't like me."</i></p>
<p>Over-generalization: This is when we use words like 'always' or 'never' to describe situations or events. This type of thinking is not helpful because it does not take all situations into account. For example, sometimes we make mistakes, but we don't always make mistakes.</p>	<p><i>"I always fail school work."</i></p> <p><i>"I never pass tests."</i></p>
<p>Labeling: Sometimes we talk to ourselves in mean ways and use a single negative word to describe ourselves. This kind of thinking is unhelpful and unfair. We are too complex to be summed up in a single word!</p>	<p><i>"I'm dumb."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm a loser."</i></p>
<p>Over-estimating danger: This is when we believe that something that is unlikely to happen is actually right around the corner. It's not hard to see how this type of thinking can maintain your anxiety. For example, how can you not feel scared if you think that you could have a heart attack at any time?</p>	<p><i>"I'm going crazy."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm dying."</i></p> <p><i>"I will throw up."</i></p>
<p>Filtering: This happens when we only pay attention to the bad things that happen, but ignore all the good things. This prevents us from looking at all aspects of a situation and drawing a more balanced conclusion.</p>	<p><i>Believing you got a bad mark on a test because you left 3 questions blank, even though you know you did all of the other 32 questions on the paper.</i></p>
<p>Catastrophizing: This is when we imagine that the worst possible thing is about to happen, and predict that we won't be able to cope with the outcome. But, the imagined worst-case scenario usually never happens and even if it did, we are most likely able to cope with it.</p>	<p><i>"I'll freak out and everyone will sit and watch me. No one will help."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm going to look like such an idiot! The other kids will laugh and I'll die from embarrassment."</i></p>
<p>Should statements: This is when you tell yourself how you "should", "must", or "ought" to feel and behave. However, this is NOT how you actually feel or behave. The result is that you are constantly anxious and disappointed with yourself and/or with others around you.</p>	<p><i>"I should stop worrying about my tests."</i></p> <p><i>"I should never make mistakes in my schoolwork."</i></p>

PART 3: COPING WITH TEST ANXIETY

Use the **THINKING TRAPS & TEST ANXIETY FORM** to help you identify the traps into which you might have fallen.

Here are some questions to ask yourself to help challenge your negative thoughts or self-talk:

- ❑ Am I falling into a thinking trap (for example, catastrophizing or mind-reading)?
- ❑ What is the evidence that this thought is true? What is the evidence that this thought is not true?
- ❑ What would I tell a friend if he or she had that thought?
- ❑ Am I confusing a "possibility" with a "probability"? It may be possible, but is it likely?
- ❑ Am I 100% sure that _____ will happen?
- ❑ How many times has _____ happened before?
- ❑ Is _____ really so important that my future depends upon it?
- ❑ What is the worst that could happen?
- ❑ Is this a hassle or a horror?
- ❑ If it did happen, what can I do to cope or handle it?

Here's an example to help you challenging your negative thinking:

You have an important math test tomorrow and have been feeling quite anxious about it. You may think : *"I'm going to fail the test tomorrow!"*

To challenge this thought, you can ask yourself the following questions:

- ❑ **Am I falling into a thinking trap?**
Yes, I have fallen into the trap of fortune-telling, predicting things will turn out badly before the event even takes place. But I still think I'm going to fail.
- ❑ **Am I basing my judgment on the way I 'feel' instead of the 'facts'?**
I might feel like I'm going to fail, but there is no evidence to support it. I'm prepared for the test, and I have passed other tests at school before.
- ❑ **Am I 100% sure that I will fail?**
No, but what if I do this time?
- ❑ **Well, what's the worst that could happen? If the worst did happen, what could I do to cope with it?**
The worst that could happen is I do fail the test. It'll be disappointing, but it won't be the end of the world. I can go for extra help to find out what went wrong, and ask my teacher if there is anything I can do to improve my mark.

REALISTIC THINKING & TEST ANXIETY FORM

Use copies of this **REALISTIC THINKING & TEST ANXIETY FORM** to regularly write down thoughts that make you anxious. Use the **THINKING TRAPS & TEST ANXIETY FORM** along with this handout to help you replace your anxious thoughts with more realistic ones.

SITUATION or TRIGGER	"ANXIOUS" or "WORRIED" thoughts	REALISTIC THOUGHTS
Math test tomorrow	I'm not good at math and I'm terrible at tests. I'm going to fail. I'll never pass Math!	I will study tonight and try my best tomorrow. I am fortune-telling and I don't know for sure that I will fail. I passed the last test. I have done fine on the homework assignments, so I will probably pass Math even if I don't do that well on this test.

HELPFUL REALISTIC THINKING TIPS

Tip #1: **COPING STATEMENTS**

Try coming up with statements that remind you how you can cope with a situation.

For example: *"If I get anxious, I will try some calm breathing."
"I just need to do my best."
"People cannot tell when I'm feeling anxious."
"This has happened before and I know how to handle it."
"My anxiety won't last forever ."*

Tip #2: **POSITIVE SELF-STATEMENTS**

Regularly practice being 'kind' to yourself (say positive things about yourself), rather than being overly self-critical.

For example: Instead of saying *"I will fail."*, say something like ...
*"I know I can do this."
"Everyone experiences anxiety. I can handle this."
"I'm not a loser if I have trouble with a test. Lots of students struggle with tests."
"I'm strong enough to do this test. I will do my best."*

Tip #3: **ALTERNATIVE BALANCED STATEMENTS BASED ON CHALLENGING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS**

Once you've looked at the evidence or recognized that you've fallen into a thinking trap, come up with a more balanced thought based on facts, not feelings.

For example: When you are facing a math test, a more balanced thought could be:
"There is a chance that I will not pass the math test tomorrow. But, not passing a math test does not mean I will fail the entire class. Even if I don't pass the test, it doesn't mean I will never graduate from high school. I have passed many school assignments and tests before."