Many girls experience intense test anxiety despite strong performance in class, on homework, and even on tests. Girls suffer from test anxiety more than boys do\(^1\), perhaps because girls have been found to feel more threatened in situations where they are being evaluated.\(^2\) Test anxiety comes with real consequences: girls dread assessments, doubt their ability, and ultimately underperform on tests. Even when compared to boys who suffer from test anxiety, research finds that girls experience higher levels of test anxiety and that their scores suffer more.\(^3\)

Test anxiety often manifests in uncomfortable symptoms as a racing heart, trouble concentrating, and difficulty recalling and applying relevant material. When girls experience these symptoms they often turn to ineffective test-taking techniques: they give up and start filling in answers randomly, or they exert too much energy on the test by anxiously double-checking and changing answers. Either way, their scores go down.
Effective study strategies allow girls to engage with the material instead of simply reviewing what they’ve learned.

CAUSES OF TEST ANXIETY

MISINTERPRETING NORMAL ANXIETY
A certain amount of anxiety is normal and helpful at key moments. In testing situations, mild anxiety has been found to increase motivation and improve test results. Test scores only drop when anxiety becomes too intense and panic symptoms — racing heart, negative thoughts, and “brain freeze” — take over.

NORMALIZING ANXIETY
Rather than treating all anxiety as harmful, girls benefit from knowing that some anxiety should be expected and can actually enhance performance. Help your daughter to appreciate that being a little bit nervous will help her “get her game on” so that she can go in and “beat the test.”

STEREOTYPE THREAT
A phenomenon known as stereotype threat can trigger anxiety in situations where girls worry that their test performance might confirm a negative stereotype. For example, girls sometimes underperform on math tests simply because they are worried that their scores might support the inaccurate idea that they are weaker than boys at math. Individuals experiencing stereotype threat become anxious in performance situations. Their anxiety can manifest in increased blood pressure, “brain freeze,” or giving up on the test or second guessing answers. When girls are unaware of the phenomenon of stereotype threat, they blame themselves for their anxiety (e.g., “This test is too hard for me.” or “I must not be as prepared as I thought I was!”). As their anxiety goes up, their test performance goes down.

REDUCING THE EFFECTS OF STEREOTYPE THREAT
Interventions that teach girls about the concept of stereotype threat can shield girls from its negative effects. Providing girls with situational (as opposed to stereotype-based) explanations for the anxiety they experience in test situations may also reduce the negative effects of stereotype threat. For example, teachers and parents can offer explanations such as “You may feel nervous because you are taking the test in a classroom you don’t usually use.” Finally, offering positive stereotypes, such as “Girls get better grades than boys,” or providing examples of high-achieving women can also reduce the effects of stereotype threat.

INEFFECTIVE STUDY SKILLS
Test anxiety can result from inadequate test preparation. Girls may spend hours studying for tests, but their common strategy of re-reading their notes and texts is actually inefficient and ineffective.

STUDYING MORE EFFECTIVELY
Effective study strategies allow girls to engage with the material instead of simply reviewing what they’ve learned. Girls can move from unhelpful passive studying techniques to effective active techniques by taking practice tests that mimic the test they’re preparing for (e.g., practice writing an essay for and essay test, practice doing math problems for a math test), asking a parent to quiz her on test material, writing and answering her own practice questions that require her to retrieve information from memory, or discussing the material with a friend. Research also finds that girls benefit when they break study sessions into shorter sessions over several days or weeks leading up to the test and mix different types of problems together, rather than working on one type of problem repeatedly (a practice known as “interleaving”).

COPING WITH TEST ANXIETY
Coping skills can be used to address the irrational thoughts that accompany test anxiety (e.g., “I don’t know what I’m doing!” “I’m going to fail this test.”) and to manage the physical effects of nervousness. Interventions targeting self-efficacy — a girl’s sense of confidence and preparedness for the test — can curb test anxiety. Just before and during a test, girls may benefit from using what psychologists call “self-talk” to tell themselves, “I know how to solve these problems,” or “I am prepared for this test.” Girls can also use relaxation techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and visualization to reduce anxiety. Ideally, girls should practice these skills before the test at a time when they are calm, so they are able to use the skills effectively during testing situations.


RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

@ ONLINE RESOURCES

CRG RESEARCH BRIEF ON STEREOTYPE THREAT
This CRG research monograph summarizes important information about stereotype threat, including why it occurs and how to help combat its negative effects.

GIRL VS. TEST
In this Education Week article, CRG Director Dr. Lisa Damour describes how healthy aggression can be a girl’s best friend when it comes to taking tests.

BOOK

SMART BUT SCATTERED
Written by psychologist Dr. Peg Dawson and neuropsychologist Dr. Richard Guare, this guide introduces parents to executive skills, such as organization and emotional control, that can be harnessed to maximize students’ performance and reduce school-related anxiety.

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

GIRLS, STRESS, AND WELL-BEING
Researchers from Boston College and Boston University collaborated with Laurel School’s Center for Research on Girls to study the factors that contribute to and alleviate stress in high-achieving girls.

RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS

@ ONLINE RESOURCE

ETS GUIDE TO REDUCING TEST ANXIETY
This guide produced by ETS, the testing company responsible for the GRE and Praxis Test Series, is designed to help students identify signs of test anxiety and utilize effective test-taking techniques and strategies to manage anxiety during assessments.

BOOK

SCHOOL MADE EASIER
Written by Dr. Wendy Moss, a clinical psychologist, and Robin DeLuca-Acconi, a licensed clinical social worker, School Made Easier (for children ages 8-13) is designed to help students understand test anxiety, develop better study and organizational habits, and learn techniques to manage academic stress.

RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS

@ ONLINE RESOURCE

CRG GUIDE FOR TEACHERS: SHIELDING STUDENTS FROM STEREOTYPE THREAT
This CRG research summary presents important information to help teachers understand and address stereotype threat in the classroom.