# Understanding Test Anxiety

## WHAT IS TEST ANXIETY AND WHY CAN IT OCCUR?

- Test anxiety is a type of performance anxiety that causes excessive stress before or during exams, which can interfere with a student's ability to recall information and think clearly (Cassady & Johnson, 2002).
- It often develops from a combination of fear of failure, lack of preparation, or a history of poor testing experiences.
- Negative thoughts, high expectations, or pressure to perform well can trigger anxiety, even when a student knows the material.

## HOW DO STRESS AND TEST ANXIETY RELATE TO EACH OTHER?

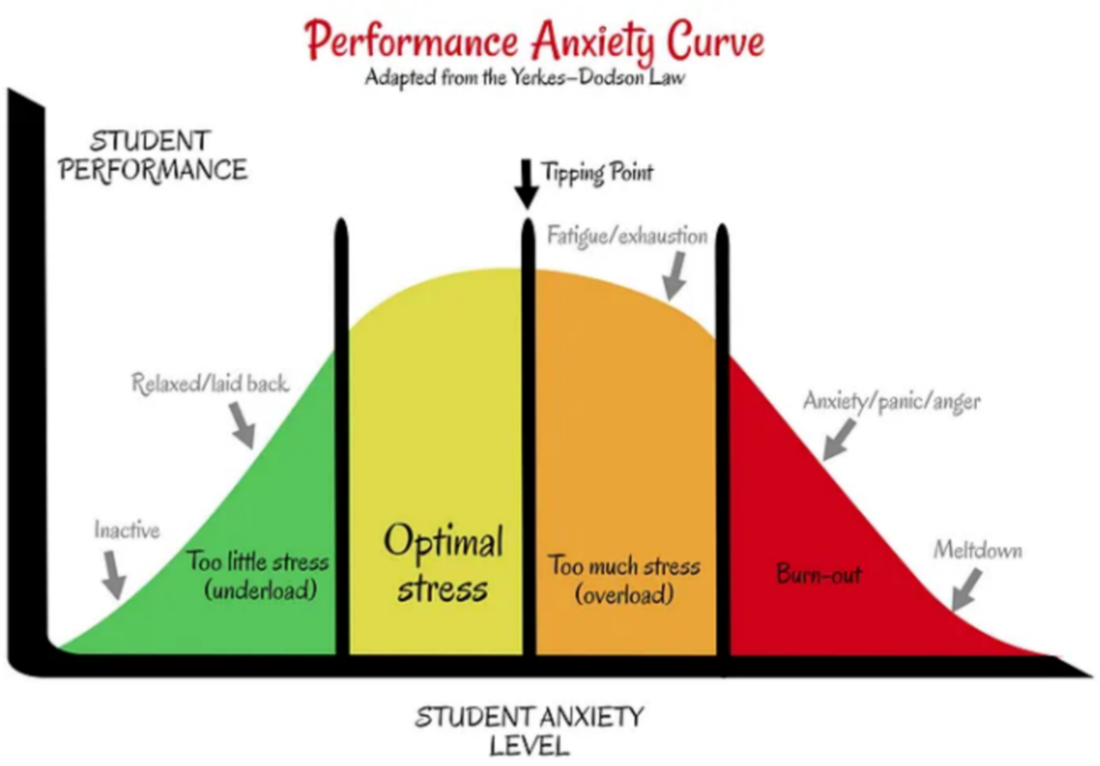
- Test anxiety is a specific form of academic stress, and both can activate the body's stress response shown by raising heart rate, tensing muscles, and impairing memory (Misra & McKean, 2000).
- High stress levels can intensify test anxiety, making it harder to focus or stay calm during an exam.
- Long-term academic stress can create a cycle where students begin to fear tests more over time, increasing avoidance or procrastination.

## PERFORMANCE ANXIETY CURVE

This graph shows the performance anxiety curve, which illustrates how stress can impact your ability to perform. A moderate level of stress, known as optimal stress, can improve focus, energy, and motivation, helping you stay alert and productive. This is often referred to as eustress, or optimal stress.

However, when stress levels become too high or last too long, it can lead to distress, where anxiety, confusion, and fatigue start to interfere with performance. If this continues without relief or support, it can result in burnout, where motivation drops and exhaustion takes over.

Understanding this curve can help you recognize when stress is helping you and when it may be time to slow down or reach out for support.




## WHAT SYMPTOMS CAN OCCUR DUE TO TEXT ANXIETY?

- Physical symptoms like headaches, nausea, rapid heartbeat, or sweating can show up before or during a test.
- Cognitive symptoms include racing thoughts, trouble concentrating, or blanking out on material you studied.
- Emotional symptoms may involve feelings of fear, helplessness, or frustration.
- Behavioral symptoms can include avoiding tests, procrastinating, or giving up during the exam.

## HOW DO I OVERCOME TEST ANXIETY?

- Prepare early and regularly by using study tools like planners, review guides, and practice tests to build confidence and reduce last-minute stress.
- Use calming techniques such as deep breathing, positive self-talk, or grounding exercises before and during the exam.
- Challenge negative thoughts by reminding yourself of past successes and focusing on effort, not perfection.
- Build academic buoyancy, or the ability to bounce back from everyday academic setbacks like bad grades, tough assignments, or high-pressure exams.

Understanding and building academic buoyancy can help you stay steady when challenges show up. Turn to the next page to explore how this concept can support your long-term academic success.

## WHAT ARE THE 5 C'S OF ACADEMIC BUOYANCY? (Martin & Marsh 2008)

**Composure**
**(Low Anxiety)**

The ability to stay calm and steady under pressure, especially during tests or stressful deadlines.

**Confidence**
**(self efficacy)**

The ability to believe in your capacity to learn, grow, and succeed—even when challenges arise.

**Commitment**
**(persistence)**

The ability to stay focused on your academic goals and follow through, even when motivation is low.

**Control**
**(low uncertain control)**

The ability to recognize what you can influence—like your effort, attitude, and response to setbacks.

**Coordination**
**(planning)**

The ability to manage your time, tasks, and study habits in an organized and effective way.

## TIPS TO REDUCE TEST ANXIETY AND ACHIEVE ACADEMIC BUOYANCY:

**Before the Exam:**

- Create a realistic study plan that breaks down material over several days.
- Practice with sample questions or past exams to build familiarity and reduce fear.
- Use positive self-talk like "I've prepared for this" or "I can handle this challenge."
- Visualize success by imagining yourself calmly working through the test.
- Get good sleep and fuel your body with food and water—not just caffeine.
- Pack your materials (ID, pens, calculator, etc.) the night before to reduce day-of stress.

**During the Exam:**

- Take a few deep breaths before starting to center yourself.
- Read instructions carefully and scan the entire test to plan your time.
- Tackle easier questions first to build confidence and momentum.
- Use calming strategies if anxiety rises (pause, breathe, stretch your hands).
- Avoid comparing yourself to others—focus on your own process.
- Remind yourself: "I'm doing my best, and that is enough right now."

**After the Exam:**

- Take time to decompress, regardless of how you feel it went.
- Avoid obsessing over mistakes—acknowledge effort over outcome.
- Reflect on what worked and what didn't to improve your next study plan.
- Celebrate your resilience, not just your grade.
- If things didn't go well, talk to your professor or an academic coach for feedback.
- Use the experience as a learning tool—not a definition of your ability.

**1. Which strategy from this worksheet do you want to try during your next exam, and why?**

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**2. How can you build your academic buoyancy this semester when challenges come up?**

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