



Test Anxiety

A Reading A-Z Level V Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,278



Connections

Writing

Think of a time when you experienced anxiety. Did good stress or bad stress lead to your anxiety? How did you handle the situation? Write a letter to a friend describing your experience.



Art

Design a poster for your classmates describing how you can prepare for tests and prevent test anxiety.



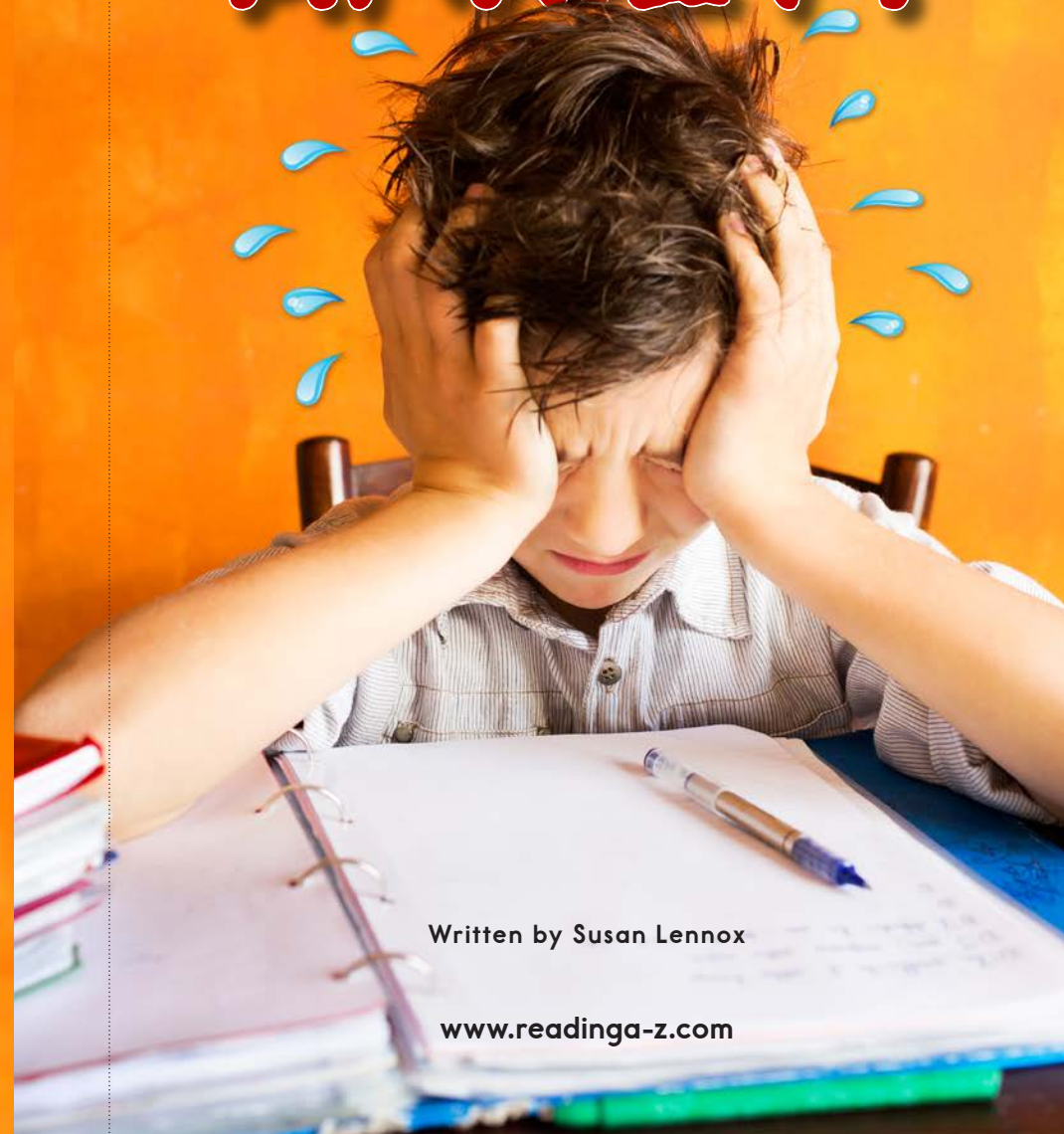
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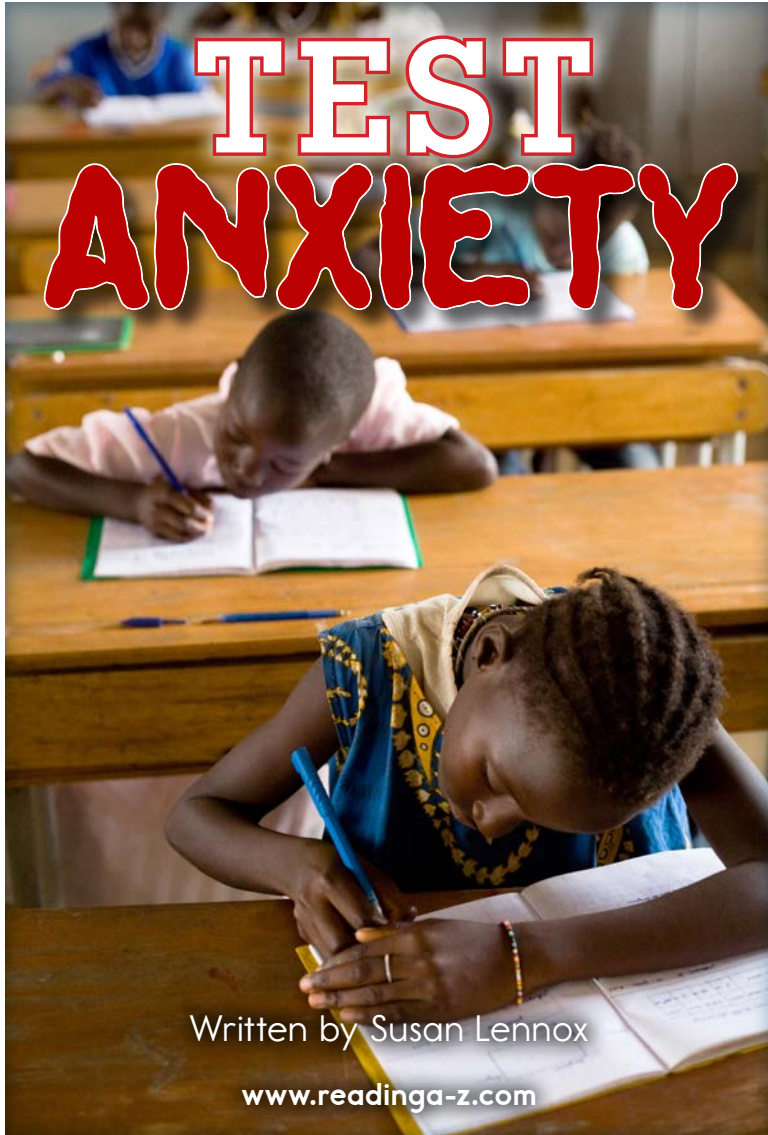
LEVELED BOOK • V

TEST ANXIETY



Written by Susan Lennox

www.readinga-z.com



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www.readinga-z.com

Focus Question

What is anxiety, and what can people do to cope with it?

Words to Know

amygdala	jitters
anxiety	metacognition
endangered	motivator
fatigue	overwhelming
fight-or-flight	pressure
hormones	stress

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Correlation

LEVEL V

Fountas & Pinnell	R
Reading Recovery	40
DRA	40

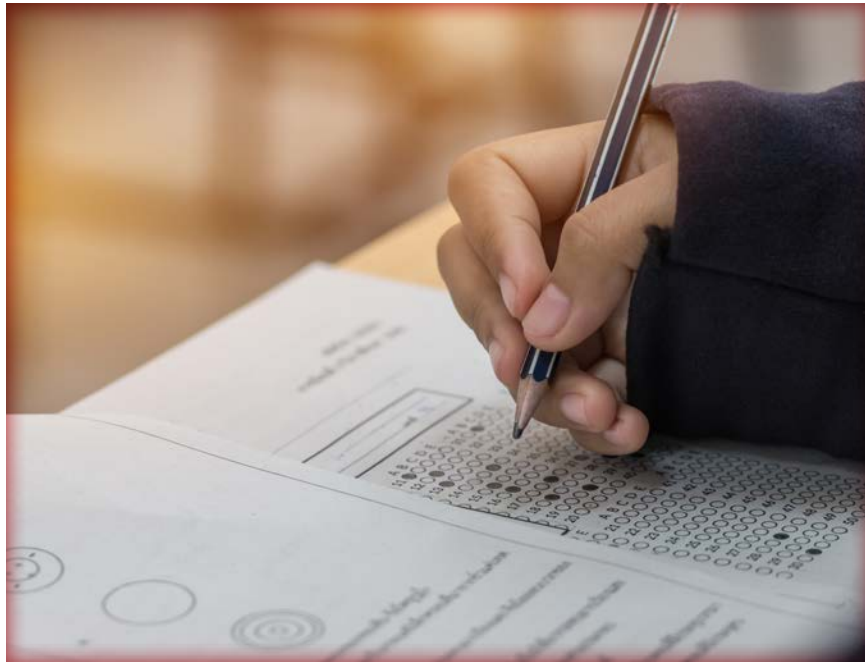


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Stage fright is also known as performance anxiety.

Introduction

For most entertainers, waiting to go onstage is part of the thrill of performing. They may feel excited and even a little bit nervous. Their **jitters** subside, however, as soon as they step into the spotlight.

Some performers, though, feel much more than just jitters. They may start to sweat and grow short of breath. Their hearts race, and they become frozen with fear, unable to go onstage. This terrible **anxiety** is called *stage fright*.

Students may experience something similar to stage fright when faced with an exam. They may become so fearful that they can't focus or think. They may even feel sick. This is known as test anxiety, and, like stage fright, it can stop people in their tracks. Fortunately, students can do things to overcome their fears and do well on tests.



Helplessness and disappointment are common signs of test anxiety.

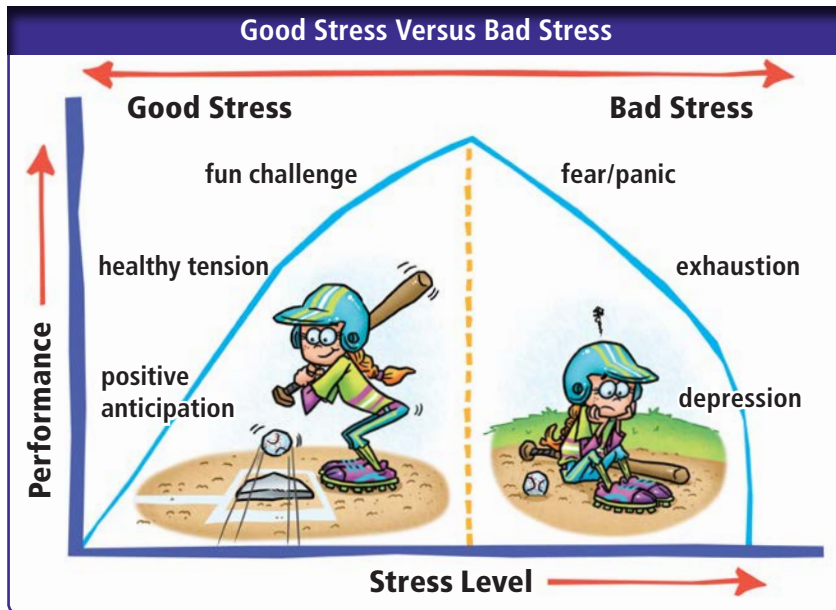
What Is Anxiety?

Everyone feels anxious at one time or another. That's not necessarily a bad thing. Anxiety is uncomfortable, but it has a purpose. This natural reaction is designed to help us survive.

Anxiety comes about when we are threatened or under **stress**. There are two types of stress—good stress and bad stress. Good stress occurs when a person faces a challenge and has the ability to deal with that challenge. When a student is given homework and has enough time and resources to complete it, that is good stress. Good stress can be a **motivator** to get something done.



Anticipating something unpleasant or scary can create unnecessary anxiety.



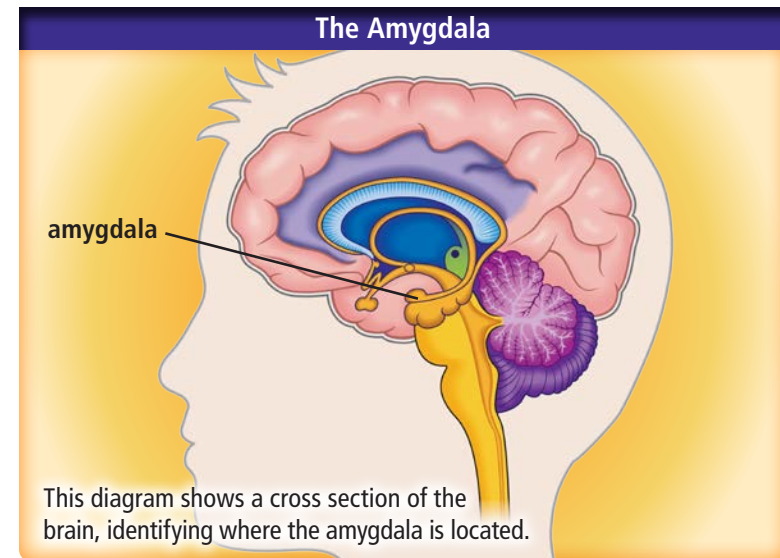
Both good and bad forms of stress are necessary for healthy emotional balance.

Bad stress happens when a person faces a challenge that seems impossible or **overwhelming**. Even if a challenge isn't truly impossible, it can cause bad stress in a person who lacks confidence.

Good stress and bad stress cause different levels of anxiety. Good stress causes just enough worry to get someone to focus on a task and do it well. Bad stress, however, does just the opposite. Instead of helping someone to focus, bad stress may make a person panic. A panicky person feels overwhelmed and can't think or focus clearly. This kind of anxiety may show up as stage fright in a performer or test anxiety in a student.

Yes, It's All in Your Head

Stress, both good and bad, usually comes from a source outside the body. Anxiety, though, is all in your head. It begins in a part of the brain called the **amygdala** (uh-MIG-duh-luh).



This diagram shows a cross section of the brain, identifying where the amygdala is located.

The brain constantly processes information sent from the five senses. When that information suggests that a threat is at hand, the amygdala goes into action. It sends messages to glands that release chemicals known as stress **hormones**. The hormones instantly put the body in a threatened state. Breathing and heart rate increase. Blood flows to muscles and away from problem-solving areas of the brain. Those muscles tense, ready to do battle with danger or run from it.

This is called the **fight-or-flight** response; it helped early humans survive in dangerous situations. This reaction was useful when prehistoric people faced physical threats that **endangered** their lives, such as hungry beasts. In modern times, however, most people don't worry about running away from hungry beasts. Instead, we fret about the demands of school or work. Will we get a good grade? Will we finish our assignment on time? These are stressful concerns, but they are not life-threatening events.

Freeze? Fight? Or Flight?

The fight-or-flight response was first described in the early twentieth century by an American doctor named Walter Bradford Cannon. He studied how animals responded to a threat. The first impulse was to freeze, or remain perfectly still. This would keep a predator from noticing the animal. If freezing didn't work, the animal would get ready to either fight or run away. These responses came to be known as *freeze*, *fight*, or *flight*. Cannon's research led him to wonder if humans responded similarly. It turns out they do. The fight-or-flight response is controlled by the most primitive parts of the brain. It is instantaneous and almost impossible to control.



Walter Bradford Cannon



Unfortunately, human biology has not caught up with modern times. Whether or not stress is life-threatening, our brains and bodies react the way they have for thousands of years. The fight-or-flight response kicks in. Performers with stage fright freeze, ready to flee from the spotlight. A student faced with a difficult test may react just as our ancestors did when faced with danger. Blood rushes to muscles, the heart pounds, and breathing rate increases.

For anyone suffering from test anxiety, this stress response hurts more than it helps. Test takers need to think clearly, not prepare to fight off a threat. They need more blood flowing to their brains, not their muscles—but their bodies don't know that. No wonder it can be so hard for them to focus!

Beating Back Anxiety

Does this mean that anyone suffering from test anxiety is doomed to fail? Not at all! Students can deal with anxiety and do well on exams in different ways.

Prepare and Organize

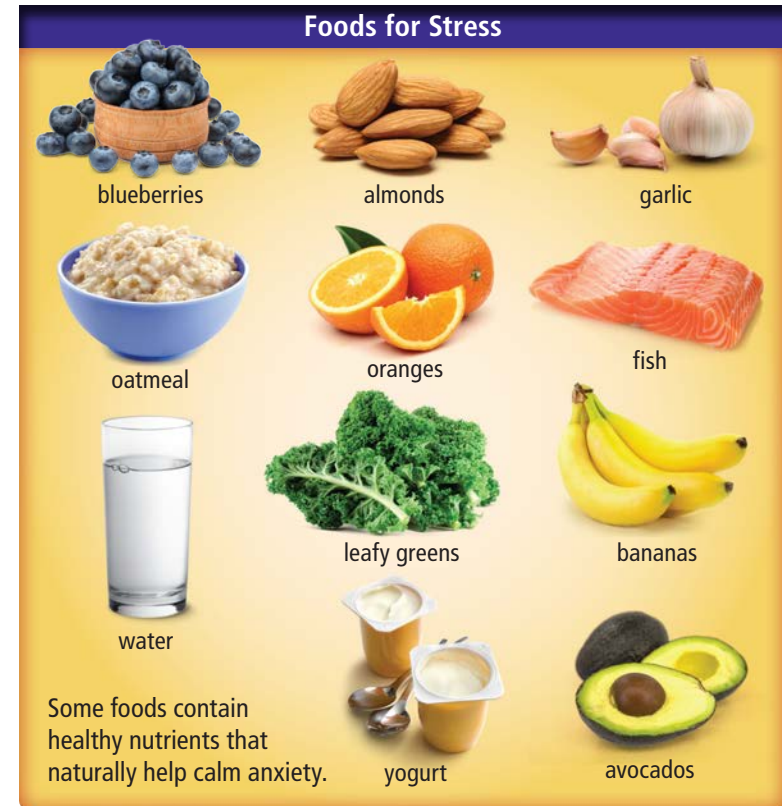
The first step involves keeping good stress from turning into bad stress. The best way to do this is to prepare the mind and the body. Instead of treating a test as an overwhelming challenge, you can use it as a motivator to learn. Prepare by making sure you understand what you will be tested on. You can organize this material into a study plan for the days before the test. Try taking practice quizzes to get used to what taking the actual test will be like. This will help you have the tools needed to answer test questions and do well.



Working with a study partner is a good way to prepare for a test.

It's also a good idea to get a study partner. Working with a positive partner can help foster the right attitude needed to succeed and avoid bad stress.

Preparing the body means making sure to avoid being overtired or hungry on test day. **Fatigue** can lead to memory loss, which can make it hard to remember what you've studied. Getting a good night's rest and eating healthy food will help you be at your physical and mental best!



Tune In

The next step is tuning in to your body and recognizing the signs of anxiety before it happens.

Metacognition can help you achieve this. Metacognition is self-awareness of what the mind and body are up to in the moment. One way to think of it is by placing yourself on a “mental balcony” and evaluating yourself as if observing from above. Do you start to shift in your seat when you get to a difficult question? Does your mind go blank or wander when you get to a word you don’t know? Recognizing your own stress signals can help you figure out how to keep from experiencing increased anxiety.

Relax and Refocus

Test takers who feel anxiety coming on can apply certain strategies to beat it back. Remember, anxiety results from the body’s natural reaction to stress. If you reduce stress, you will reduce anxiety. If you get stuck on a question, don’t fret over it. Skip it and go to one you can answer. Shifting from bad stress to good stress reduces anxiety and keeps you going. You can go back to the tough questions later. But don’t put too much **pressure** on yourself. There will likely be a few questions you can’t answer. Remember that the goal is to do your best, not to be perfect.



Take a moment to breathe deeply and close your eyes to help you relax.

Students who find themselves freezing up when writing should jot words or doodles on a piece of scrap paper. It doesn’t matter what you write. The idea is to do something. Action fights anxiety. Writing something—anything—will help you break the block. Before you know it, ideas will come and you’ll be able to successfully craft your answer.

If you find yourself really panicked, take a moment to step back. Stop and close your eyes. Take deep, slow breaths and think of a peaceful place to calm yourself down. As you relax, remind yourself that you have prepared and that all will be well.

Conclusion

Test anxiety can be scary and frustrating, but you can beat it back. Remember, we all experience anxiety at times. It can hit people not only when taking a test, but in other stressful situations, too. Whether you're taking a test, performing, or competing, you can apply anxiety-reducing strategies to keep cool. Using stress as a motivator instead of an obstacle can keep you from getting overly anxious. Coping with anxiety effectively will help you be your best for the test and for any other challenges you face!



The more prepared you are, the more confident you will be!

Glossary

- amygdala** (*n.*) an area of the brain that processes emotions (p. 8)
- anxiety** (*n.*) the state of being worried or nervous (p. 4)
- endangered** (*v.*) put someone or something in a harmful or dangerous situation (p. 9)
- fatigue** (*n.*) tiredness or weariness from mental or physical activity (p. 12)
- fight-or-flight** (*adj.*) of or relating to a physical response to stress or danger that results in staying and defending oneself or running away (p. 9)
- hormones** (*n.*) chemicals that change the way the body grows and develops (p. 8)
- jitters** (*n.*) a feeling of nervousness or uneasiness (p. 4)
- metacognition** (*n.*) an awareness and understanding of one's own thinking and learning process (p. 13)
- motivator** (*n.*) someone or something that gives a person a reason to do, think, or feel something (p. 6)
- overwhelming** (*adj.*) causing someone to be overcome with feelings or thoughts (p. 7)
- pressure** (*n.*) a state of stress, nervousness, or urgency because of too much to do or high expectations (p. 13)
- stress** (*n.*) a state of physical or emotional tension; worry (p. 6)