



HEALTHY TEST ENVIRONMENTS

Managing Test Anxiety is About More than “Toughing it Out”

A healthy testing season is less about “toughing it out” and more about predictable routines, clear communication, and realistic expectations. Below are practical strategies you can share with students, caregivers, and school staff.

For Students: Strategies to Ease Test Anxiety

You can frame these as “tools in your pocket” rather than “fixes” for anxiety.

Before the test

- **Name what you’re feeling.**

Encourage students to notice and label their state (“nervous,” “amped up,” “worried about finishing”) and pair it with a coping plan (“When I feel ____, I will ____.”).

- **Practice a simple breathing or grounding routine.**

Teach one short sequence they can use at their desk, such as:

- Box breathing: inhale 4, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4 (repeat 3–4 times).
- 5–4–3–2–1: name 5 things they see, 4 feel, 3 hear, 2 smell, 1 they like about themselves.

- **Use “self-talk scripts.”**

Help students write 2–3 statements they can quietly say to themselves, for example:

- “I don’t have to be perfect; I just need to try my best.”
- “I can skip and come back if I’m stuck.”
- “I’ve handled hard things before; I can do this too.”

During the test

- **Use the “pause button.”**
Give explicit permission to pause for 30–60 seconds if they feel panic rising: put pencil down, two slow breaths, gentle shoulder roll, then re-engage.
- **Break the test into mini-chunks.**
Coach students to focus on “the next 5 questions” or “the next page” instead of the entire test; mentally check off chunks as they go.
- **Have a simple “stuck plan.”**
Teach a standard routine when they hit a hard item:
 1. Re-read the question
 2. Eliminate obviously wrong answers
 3. Make a reasonable choice
 4. Flag it to review if allowed.
- **Use quiet sensory supports where permitted.**
For students who benefit: small fidgets used below the desk, a discreet visual “calm card,” or silent movement (pressing feet into the floor, isometrics with hands).

After the test

- Debrief the process, not just the score.
Ask: “Which strategy helped most? When did you feel yourself getting stressed, and what did you do?”
 - Normalize mixed feelings.
Reinforce that feeling tired, relieved, or unsure about performance is typical, and that one test does not define their worth or future.
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For Caregivers: Setting Kids Up for Success

Family messaging and routines can significantly buffer testing stress.

The night before

- **Prioritize sleep over cramming.**
Help children stick to a consistent bedtime and calming evening routine (screen wind-down, predictable rituals), rather than “one more practice test.”
- Prep logistics to reduce morning stress.
Lay out clothes, pack backpacks, and confirm transport plans to avoid last-minute panic.

The morning of

- **Offer a stable, low-pressure start.**
 - Aim for a simple, familiar breakfast that sits well.
 - Build in 5–10 extra minutes so the morning isn't rushed.

- **Use balanced language about the test.**

Avoid both extremes of “This is the most important test of your life” and “This doesn't matter at all.”

Try: “This is one way your school sees what you've learned and what they still need to teach. Your job is to try your best; the grown-ups will use the information to help.”

Ongoing conversations

- **Focus on effort, not outcome.**

Praise strategies and persistence (“You kept working even when it felt hard,” “You used your break plan”) rather than predicted scores.

- **Watch for signs of overwhelming anxiety.**

Notice changes in sleep, appetite, stomachaches, headaches, avoidance talk (“I can't go to school on test day”). Share concerns with school staff if patterns persist.

- **Model healthy coping.**

Talk aloud about your own manageable stress (“I have a big presentation; I'm nervous, so I'm going to practice and go to bed on time”) to normalize anxiety as something we work with, not erase.

- **Clarify misconceptions.**

Some students secretly believe, “If I do badly, I'll fail this grade,” or “My teacher will be mad at me.” Inviting those worries into the open helps you correct them.

For School Staff: Building Healthy Testing Environments

The way adults frame and structure testing can either escalate or moderate student stress.

Climate and messaging

- **De-intensify the narrative.**

Avoid war-like language (“crush the test,” “high stakes,” “our scores are on the line”).

Emphasize:

- “This is one snapshot of your learning, not your whole story.”
- “The test helps us understand what we need to do better as a school.”

- **Separate student worth from test results.**

Explicitly state that scores don't change how adults feel about students or their opportunities to learn.

Classroom environment

- **Create a calm, predictable space.**

- Clear visual clutter around seating.
- Comfortable, consistent seating where possible.
- Clear, posted "testing day schedule" (arrival, test block, break, what happens after).

- **Plan intentional movement and sensory regulation.**

- Short movement or stretching before testing.
- Built-in breaks in longer sessions (within testing rules).
- Quiet, non-disruptive regulation options for students who need them.

Instructional and relational supports

- **Teach test-taking skills as skills, not as pressure.**

Integrate brief, explicit instruction on:

- Reading directions carefully.
- Skipping/flagging and returning to hard items.
- Managing time (e.g., mentally dividing the test period).

- **Normalize anxiety and offer scripts.**

Share that it is common to feel nervous and model simple self-talk students can use.

- **Ensure students know their supports.**

Clarify any accommodations (extended time, quiet setting, breaks, assistive tech) *in advance*, and practice how they will look so test day is not the first time.

Systems and communication

- **Align staff language.**

Provide a brief script for classroom teachers, specialists, and support staff so students hear consistent, balanced messages about testing.

- **Protect basic needs.**

Coordinate schedules so students aren't testing hungry, excessively late in the day, or after highly dysregulating events when avoidable.

- **Plan for students with higher needs.**

- Identify students with significant anxiety or behavioral vulnerabilities ahead of time.
- Coordinate who will check in with them before and after, where they'll test, and what the plan is if they become overwhelmed.

Bringing It Together

A “healthy test environment” is **less about decorations or slogans and more about:**

- **Clear, predictable routines.**
- **Realistic, compassionate adult messages.**
- **Concrete tools students can actually use when stress shows up.**

Quick Resources for Healthy Testing Environments

As Wisconsin’s students enter “testing season,” schools and families can work together to make assessment days feel predictable, human-centered, and emotionally safe rather than stressful. The resources below offer ready-to-use strategies for students, educators, and caregivers to reduce test anxiety and build healthy testing routines across our Wisconsin school communities

For Students (Grades 3–12)

- **Child Mind Institute** – [“Test Anxiety Strategies and Study Tips for Kids”](#)
Practical tips on coping skills, realistic self-talk, and study routines students can try right away.
- **Fairfax County Public Schools** – [“Ten Tips to Ease Test Anxiety”](#)
Short, student-friendly ideas (breathing, positive self-talk, planning ahead) perfect for classroom posters or announcements.

For School Staff

- **Edutopia** – [“Helping Students Beat Test Anxiety”](#)
Concrete classroom strategies to normalize nerves, reduce pressure, and structure calmer test days.
- [“A School Counselor’s Guide to Helping Students with Test Anxiety”](#) (Soliant) Guidance counselors and support staff can use as a playbook for small groups, 1:1 support, and staff PD.

For Caregivers

- **Kids Mental Health Foundation** – [“Helping Kids with Test Anxiety”](#)
Parent-friendly tips for home routines, validating feelings, and practicing calming strategies.

- **PrairieCare** – [“Understanding Teen Testing Anxiety: A Practical Guide for Parents”](#) Especially helpful for caregivers of teens, with concrete examples and language to use before, during, and after tests.