

# Easing Test Anxiety

University Academy

Lunch & Learn

Friday, April 5th

Presented by:

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**Objectives**

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) treatment concepts
- CBT as applied to Test Anxiety
- How parents can help
- Possible accommodations
- Questions?

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**Introduction & Credentials**

- Heather L. Smith, Ph.D.
  - Brookside Anxiety Center
    - Brookside, KCMO
    - Specializing in anxiety and family treatment
    - Empirically supported treatment
- I've lived it
  - Timed multiplication tests
  - Trivia anxiety

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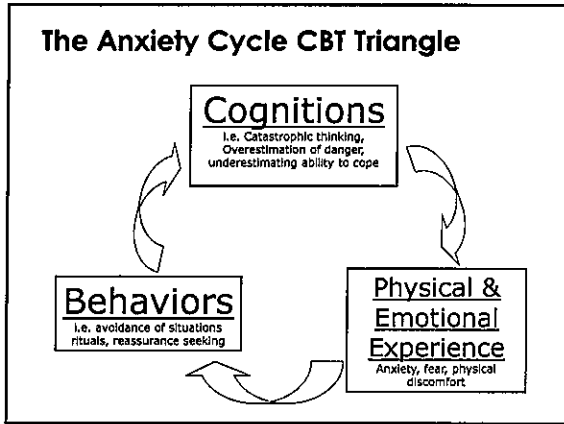
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### Does your child have test anxiety?

- When they take a test, are they distracted with worry or with physical symptoms?
- Does their mind go blank when they are taking tests?
- Does their anxiety seem out of proportion to the testing situation?
- Do their test scores not accurately reflect their knowledge?

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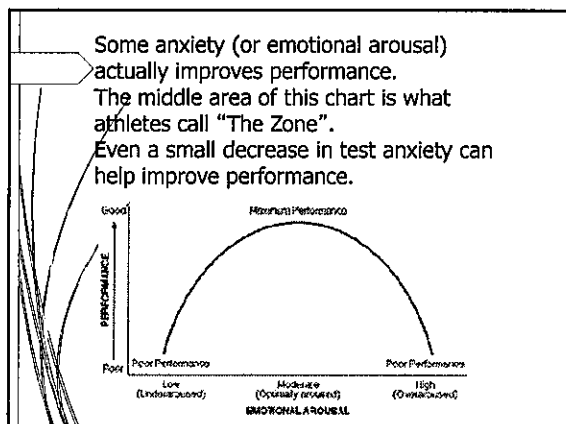
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### Worry (Cognitive Component)

- An intrusive and senseless thought that causes distress, "what if" thinking
- A "mental hiccup"
  - No matter how hard you try to stop it, it keeps coming
- May not seem so bad at first, but the hiccups get harder to live with and impair functioning
- Anxiety is illogical and an anxious brain plays "tricks" on us.

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### Cognitive Processes (the "brain tricks")

- Anxiety disorder symptoms may involve typical thinking patterns, mistakes or cognitive features:
  - overestimation of bad outcomes/threat (*worst case scenarios*)
  - underestimating coping ability (*can't handle it!*)
  - misinterpretation of physical signals or result (*I'll pass out/die, this feeling means it is important or true!*)
- More tuned in to danger cues
- Concentration, attention and memory difficulties may be reported

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### Common Worry Thoughts

▪ I can't remember anything!	▪ What's wrong with me?
▪ I'm so stupid.	▪ What will my friends think?
▪ I don't know this!	▪ I'm a failure.
▪ I didn't study enough!	▪ I hate this!
▪ This isn't fair!	▪ I should know this!
▪ I don't have enough time!	▪ Everyone else is doing better.
▪ I'm going to do terrible!	▪ What if I flunk out of school?
▪ My parent will be upset if I fail!	▪ This will ruin my life!
▪ It's hopeless!	
▪ I can't do it! Just give up!	

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### The Avoidance & Reassurance Trap

- Natural response is to get away from whatever is causing a bad feeling (flight) and/or try to obtain certainty about it not being harmful
- It works! (kind of...). Gets rid of anxiety in the short-term
- In the long run, never learn that:
  - feelings will pass eventually
  - You can continue to function even if uncomfortable
  - anticipatory anxiety/feared outcome most likely worse than real outcome
  - effective self-coping is possible

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### Test Anxiety Behaviors

The things we do or don't do when anxious

- AVOIDANCE and REASSURANCE SEEKING (from self or others) are the most relevant behavioral factors
- Examples
  - Not going to school
  - Excessive studying
  - Freeze response (not taking test)
  - Rushing through so it will be over (often with mistakes)
  - Overthinking responses (often choosing wrong answer or spending too much time on one question)
  - Indecisiveness (often not finishing exam)
  - Rereading afraid they missed something (lose valuable time)
  - Seeking reassurance from parents or teachers

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### Avoidance/Reassurance/Rituals

People believe that anxiety and discomfort will increase forever and they won't be able to handle it.

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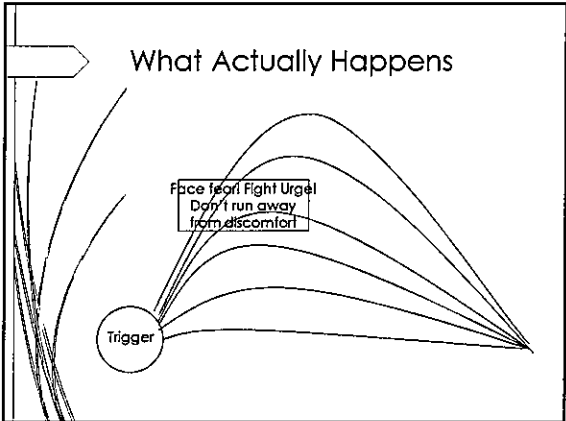
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- What can I do about Test Anxiety?**
- ▶ You can set yourself up for success
  - ▶ You can train your body to relax so that your mind can focus.
  - ▶ You can learn cognitive strategies to get yourself into the "zone" for optimal performance.
  - ▶ You can practice "facing your fear" (exposure)
  - ▶ You can optimize your learning and test-taking skills.

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- The Physical Zone**
- ▶ Keep your body and brain healthy and fit with
    - ▶ Adequate Sleep
    - ▶ Proper Diet
    - ▶ Avoiding caffeine, alcohol, & recreational drugs
    - ▶ Exercise
  - ▶ Use a **REGULAR** relaxation strategies to release daily stress and tension
  - ▶ Plan something relaxing for night before
  - ▶ Plan something fun and celebratory for night after

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**Relaxation strategies**

- Breathing
- Progressive Muscle relaxation
- Mental grounding
  - Name game
  - ABC game
- Mindfulness
  - 5 senses

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**Cognitive Strategies**

- Challenge "brain tricks"
- Key questions
  - What is the worst that can happen? How likely is that? How would you cope if that did happen?
  - Be a detective. What is the evidence?
  - How much will this matter a month from now? 1 year? 10 years?
  - What would a superhero (role model) think and do?
  - What would you tell your best friend?
  - What is the most helpful way to think? Are you making this harder on yourself?

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**Realistic & Positive Thoughts**

Instead of...	Try this!
I always do poorly on tests	I have a really good study plan this time
I'm really shaky on one subject	I don't need to know everything about every topic. But if I start now, I can brush up on weak areas.
If I don't pass, I'm a failure	I'm going to pass, but if I don't I will bounce back
If I don't pass, I'm stupid	Standardized tests in school measure what I've been TAUGHT and NOT how smart you are
I'm the last one finished, I'm slow and stupid.	I'm proud I focused and took my time

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**Exposure**

- Take practice tests
  - Practice tests
    - Set up as realistic as possible
    - Practice test taking strategies
  - Practice being timed
  - Practice "going with your gut" and being decisive
    - Continuous story, Quick decisions, First word

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**Test taking strategies (1)**

- Positive self talk (fighting spirit)
  - "I got this!" "Bring it!" "Let me show you what I know!"
- Allow and accept that you will be anxious
  - "Yep, I'm nervous. That's ok, some anxiety helps"
  - Feelings are not facts
- Defuse from thoughts
  - Notice anxious thoughts and label them as such
    - "I am having a thought that I might fail"
  - Don't believe everything you think
- Build your roadmap
  - Review test before answering
  - Get an idea of how many questions & what types so you can use time wisely

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**Test taking strategies (2)**

- Don't get hung up, go with your gut
  - If don't know answer in a few minutes, pick one and circle it (go back if time)
- Cross out ruled out answers
- Tackle any questions right away that you definitely know
- Try a "brain dump"
  - Jot down quick notes right away to reference if needed
  - Only do this if you can quickly "dump" all the info before diving in!
- Strategies may be test specific, ask a teacher
- Need to practice these strategies!

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**Studying**  
The What, When, Where & How

- **What:**
  - Necessary materials (class notes, quizzes, handouts, HW assignments)
  - Identify key concepts/terms and work from there
- **When:**
  - Peak times of alertness
  - When you have enough time and you are not rushed
  - Spread studying out instead of cramming
- **Where:**
  - Designate a study area
  - Quiet, low-traffic, free from distractions
- **How:**
  - Take breaks: Work for 30-50 minutes before taking a 5-10 minute break. Take a longer break (20-30 minutes) if you are working for more than 2 hours.
  - Start review with class notes instead of text book (more succinct; go to text to clarify)
  - Formats: group study, flashcards, online quizzes, teach someone else, quiz each other

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**Tackling Studying Procrastination**

- Do the worst first! Get that dreaded task out of the way first thing.
- Get on a roll! If you are energized from tackling one task, use that momentum to tackle another
- Just 5 minutes approach: Tell yourself that you will work on that task for "just 5 minutes." If at the end of 5 minutes you think you can do another 5, go for it!
- Reward yourself! Putting off creating that study guide? Have a reward waiting for yourself at the finish line!
  - Sandwich approach
- Pomodoro technique
  - 25 min study sessions followed by brief break (5-10 min)
  - Use timer/checkmark or gold star

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**What can parents do?**

- Consider your own thoughts
  - Helpful?
  - Distorted?
- Messages (direct and indirect)
  - How did you do? What did you get on your math test? Would a tutor help?
- Process vs. Outcome
- Seek treatment

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**Possible Accommodations**

- Should be temporary – the goal is to face fear and conquer anxiety
- Unlimited time
- Built in coping breaks
- Quiet or isolated testing space
- Alternative methods of assessment
- Keeping score from child

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**Key Points to Remember**

- Anxiety symptoms are uncomfortable, but they are **not** dangerous
- Treatment goals are to improve functioning by effectively *managing* anxiety, not *removing* it
- Anxiety disorders are considered chronic, neurobiological conditions, but typically have an excellent response to appropriate treatment

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**Questions?**

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816-678-0661
- Resources
  - [www.brooksideanxiety.com](http://www.brooksideanxiety.com)
  - [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)
  - <https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/support/counseling-and-psychological-services/index.php?q=managing-test-anxiety>
  - <http://www.hagerstowncc.edu/sites/default/files/documents/11-test-anxiety-tips.pdf>

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