

HELEN BARSHAM

# Supporting Children and Young People with Test Anxiety in School

How to Improve Wellbeing and Give Back Control



A **Speechmark** Book



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# SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH TEST ANXIETY IN SCHOOL

This accessible and informative book provides educators with a unique approach to supporting children and young people with test anxiety, combining key research and practical guidance to improve wellbeing and test outcomes.

The book focuses on three core areas for promoting wellbeing: test anxiety theory; 'desirable difficulties'; and self-efficacy theory. Underpinning research is presented in an accessible format and each topic is explored in depth with case studies and reflection points to deepen understanding and bring theory to life. Chapters go on to introduce an innovative, easy-to-implement intervention. The intervention focuses on increasing children's metacognition of their own learning - from how memory works, to knowing how to revise - lowering anxiety around high stakes exams and boosting overall wellbeing and, ultimately, academic success.

Including a wealth of examples and tips for tangibly supporting children and young people's learning outcomes, this book is a crucial read for Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), teachers, and anyone with responsibility for the pastoral care and wellbeing of young people.

**Helen Barsham** has extensive experience working as a head teacher in both primary and secondary settings. She recently completed a Doctorate of Education at the University of Cambridge, which explored pupil wellbeing, metacognition and desirable difficulties, using the 'testing effect' to reduce test anxiety.



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# **SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH TEST ANXIETY IN SCHOOL**

How to Improve Wellbeing and  
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Helen Barsham

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**For Mum**



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Last (but not least), my thanks to my family and friends - especially Mike, Anna, Mimi, Pluto, Rusty and Harry who were all part of this journey.

# PREFACE

In writing this book, I have made it as easy as possible for those of you with busy days, in educational settings, to implement the changes suggested here. This is because I know how precious time is, in education. There never seems to be enough of it. But there is a need for this change. I wanted this to be a 'hands on', 'here you go' approach to helping students with test anxiety. I hope to have provided a book with some theory but, importantly, a book in which there are resources that you are able to 'pick up and run with'.

As an educator for twenty-nine years at the time of writing, I understand the pressures on the various systems in schools. Many suggestions in this book, are just that - ideas that you may be able to use in your specific setting. I am not trying to teach 'granny to suck eggs' at any point and offer this book with due humility to the vast amount of knowledge, experience and love you all have for 'the kids' out there. Feel free to adopt, adapt to your setting but attribute credit where credit is due ...

I completed my doctorate so that I could help students **tangibly** through managing the complex and huge problem that is test anxiety, so I hope you will find this book is a **tangible** resource.

The Interim Curriculum Review has just been published (March 2025). The authors suggest that the primary sector is working. This book is for **primary, secondary and beyond**. However, we're missing a chance here! **Learning how to learn, learning for life** could really happen if you took exams away. Year 6 students are often taught for the Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) exams. You only have to look at the Key Stage 2 and 3 dip literature (how students don't progress when they move to secondary school) to see how the 'blocked' or learned knowledge for tests can drop off over the summer break. It's more than just a length-of-the-holiday problem. It's because Year 6 learning is learning for exams. The awe and wonder of the early years firmly behind them. By the time students get to secondary education, learning habits are harder to break. It makes sense to get primary students into great learning habits rather than not using massed or blocked practice (which is what teaching to exams does). Currently, I believe there is so much 'blocked learning', aided and abetted by General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) requirements that we're missing an opportunity to revolutionise how students learn for life rather than for exams.

Educators, there is also a separate 'user-friendly' guide called 'Manage Test Anxiety' for your students, by Triggerhub publishing, available by searching online.

**Teachers/Parents/Anyone who is interested** - just email me: [helen@fighttestanxiety.com](mailto:helen@fighttestanxiety.com)

*Web: [fighttestanxiety.com](http://fighttestanxiety.com)*

# INTRODUCTION

I have long been concerned with the pressures of high stakes tests on young people. I am not a fan of the current UK system of examinations but have taken many students through this system in both state and independent schools and, not least, navigated my own children through the system.

The problem of feeling anxious about tests, **test anxiety**, is a huge one.

In this book, I look at test anxiety and explain how an intervention using the theories of **self-efficacy** (belief in capability) and **'desirable difficulties'** can be used to reduce test anxiety. I cover the problem of test anxiety and supply the intervention, which is now packaged as a Scheme of Work, and is easily deliverable in schools and colleges. There are three practical resources for rolling out the management of test anxiety in educational settings:

1. The intervention, now cleverly disguised as a possible Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE), or PASTORAL, Scheme of Work, deliverable to all ages in schools (from 9 years to 18 and beyond) **with all the resources**. This does not have to be PSHE/PASTORAL lesson or time but this work seems to fit in neatly in this category or however your setting can work it. **Its aim is to reduce anxiety around exams through creating excellent revision habits**. (See Chapter 6.)
2. A suggestion for a strand of a **School Development Plan** aimed at embedding optimal practice around managing tests. It's no good just delivering a unit of work (in this case it's also an intervention) as a standalone measure. Changes in the way we approach testing in schools and colleges needs to be from the roots up! (See Chapter 9.)
3. A programme for Teacher Training on Desirable Difficulties. (See Chapter 8.)

However, before you skip ahead and access the 'hands on' resources, I think you will get more out of them if you can possibly take the time to read these first few chapters. I know time is precious but an understanding of what test anxiety is and how it is exacerbated by 'fear appeals' is important. Equally so, the information on using cognitive science 'desirable difficulties' to manage test anxiety thereby increasing self-efficacy in test taking. Chances are, you will find useful points that you can apply to other aspects of your roles as educators in these chapters too.

Furthermore, I encourage you, as educators, to take a look at **how feedback around tests is managed in your setting**. This is important.

Occasionally, I step onto a mini-soapbox with my beliefs about the current test-taking regimes in the education system in the UK. I hope I have kept my '**soapbox**' focus to just this theme and fairly minimal. I signpost when I am about to step on it!

The **golden thread** of the book is understanding how we need to **give control back** to the students who are anxious about taking tests and how we can do this in an educational setting. The theories of **test anxiety, retrieval practice (in this book retrieval practice with a difference - see NB)** as it is **not** used for subject content recall (as per the teaching standards) but **recall of a wellbeing strategy** and **self-efficacy theory** are explained. I argue that by understanding how the brain learns and particularly how memory works for tests, we can give students back 'control'.

Throughout, I have often used the words **school, college** and **educational setting**. If you don't belong in one of these categories, it does not mean that the information in this book is not relevant to you. Testing and anxiety and anxiety about testing can happen at any stage of life and in any career (think driving tests), so it may well be that learning how memory works is useful in giving confidence outside of the educational context. I have also used the words **high-stakes tests**, and **tests** and **exams** interchangeably and to mean more or less the same thing - important evaluative assessments that have a *lot* riding on them in terms of outcomes.

**NB:** I want to make one point very clearly, hence placing it here. Although the intervention (Scheme of Work) shared with you in this book (see Chapter 6) uses the principles of retrieval practice or the testing effect, I used retrieval practice to recall positive thinking: **your testing routes are well-oiled** and **study, test, test, test** is best. There is a great volume of research 'out there' dedicated to retrieval practice of content needed for tests. Great! I have drawn on this research but 'tweaked' the principle to create a pastoral intervention. I applied the tenets of retrieval practice or recall to a wellbeing strategy to create a mantra for students who are anxious about taking tests. **This book is about retrieval practice for wellbeing** and about finding solutions to help give control back to students in the often nerve-wracking situations of exams.

At the beginning of each chapter is a summary of what is covered and some key terms. At the end of the chapter, I have isolated some 'takeaways' and set you some (optional) retrieval practice homework! In addition, where possible I have given some realistic scenarios so that you can apply what you have read to the issue. These might be useful for Continuing Professional Development (CPD). In doing this, the information in this book is elaborated and cued into your memory more easily! I have also put important summaries into **In a Nutshell** boxes and, when I need to drive home a point, I use a **Nitty Gritty** box.

So: feel free to ignore the '**soapbox**'; use the **Nutshells** for key information to remember; and keep in mind that **Nitty Gritty** is important for the students (and the world!). At the end of Chapters 1 to 5 I also include a **memory hotspot**, just a little extra information about memory for fun!

# CHAPTER OVERVIEWS/ TAKEAWAY RESOURCES

These provide a summary of chapter content followed by the key terms used in the chapters. (A key term appears in bold the first time it is included in the chapter text itself.) In Chapters 4, 6, 8 and 9 plus Appendix A and Appendix B, you will also find resources that you can reproduce for your students to complete or for your own use.

**Chapter 1: What is Test Anxiety?** is an overview of test anxiety and the issue of giving students back control in testing situations. I have suggested some practical preliminary steps in **changing a culture** where 'tests' are in control rather than students and teachers! *An initial parent engagement event is suggested and wording suggested.*

**Chapter 2: Fear Appeals** discusses the research into '**Fear Appeals**', what they are and how to avoid and use them. It all requires a close look at your own everyday practice.

**Chapter 3: Using Desirable Difficulties to Give Back Control** is a long chapter as we get to the real recipe for reducing test anxiety through revision skills. I go into '**retrieval practice**' and the wider brush of '**desirable difficulties**'; **knowledge biases** are touched upon, as are **metacognition of learning** and the important issue of **feedback**. *Metacognition of learning resource and optimal testing/revision schedule.*

**Chapter 4: Self-efficacy in Test Taking** delves briefly into **self-efficacy theory** and the **golden thread** again of how we can give students back control.

**Chapter 5: Intervening in Test Anxiety** is a preliminary to the intervention itself and explains why writing tasks feature in the intervention and some other 'bits and pieces' that I wasn't sure where to place in this book.

**Chapter 6: Intervention: Giving Back Control - Reducing Test Anxiety - How To Do It** is the **intervention**, the **Schemes of Work for all age groups** and the accompanying resources. Grab it and go!

**Chapter 7: Learning and Metacognition** focuses on the problem of blocked practice, metacognition and judgements of learning.

**Chapter 8: The Dream for Education: On the Soapbox** is where I let my hair down for a bit and discuss my dream for education. **Chunks of text for a PowerPoint for training teachers/parents on 'Desirable Difficulties' are included.**

**Chapter 9: School Development Plan to Give Students Back Control for Taking Exams** is what it is.

**Chapter 10: In Conclusion** is where I leave you!

# 1 What is Test Anxiety?

## What to Expect

*This chapter includes a brief history of test anxiety and how test anxiety can affect students. It explains that we need to give back control to the students. The chapter includes how to find out which students are high in test anxiety by conducting research in the classroom; using questionnaires; and how to involve parents and train teachers around the subject of test anxiety. The initial parent event that is needed is covered.*

## Key Terms

**desirable difficulties:** interleaving, spacing, the testing effect, moving room to room

**fear appeals:** see Chapter 2, but basically when someone scares you about exams by reminding you of the possible consequences

**intervention:** what we do/did to increase control, reduce worry and manage test anxiety

**perceived control:** how much control a student feels they have over the exam

**self-efficacy:** belief in capability

**self-knowledge beliefs:** in this context, how a student rates their ability to take tests

**state and trait anxiety:** state from current context, trait more likely inherited.

**test anxiety:** feeling anxious about taking tests

**transactional:** how students draw in anxiety from test-taking situations

**worry/worrying:** a cognitive process

We live in an evaluative society. Students must take high stakes tests to access options in life: from SATs (Statutory Assessment Tests) in the UK in Year 6 (10-11-year-olds) to GCSEs (General Certificate in Education) at 16 years of age that determine 16-18-year-olds' education paths, and then A levels or other pathways at 18 years old that may determine

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university entrance. In independent schools, scholarship papers are taken aged 11 or 13 years to determine, scholarship status, which may result in fee reductions or access to some free tuition.

All of these high stakes tests listed can cause anxiety in some students (and their teachers, peers and parents).

In the years since the lockdowns (a result of the global pandemic in 2020-2021), schools have struggled increasingly to get some students to attend school. These students still have the same high stakes tests to take at the end of various key stages of learning. (These stages are: KS2 up to 11 years; KS3 up to 14 years; KS4 up to 16 years; and KS5 up to 18 years.)

KS2 students may sit SATs or other senior school entrance exams and scholarships. KS4 generally covers GCSEs or BTEch exams, and KS5 is predominantly A levels, some International Baccalaureate (IB) and a plethora of medical, veterinary, Oxbridge and other tests for university entry.

The topic of increase in anxiety levels for the school age group, especially teenagers, is rarely out of the news. Yet, schools do not have specific programmes for managing **test anxiety**. Aiming to give students more control over their feelings about taking high stakes tests should be explicitly taught as part of the PSHE/Pastoral curriculum in schools and colleges. Teaching students how to learn so that they can control their test anxiety is kind, helpful and useful. The **intervention** (see the PSHE/Pastoral Scheme of Work in Chapter 6) is for *all* students, not just test-anxious ones - all students' wellbeing can benefit.

### A Brief History of Test Anxiety

When I began to research test anxiety, I did not realize what a vast topic I was stepping into. As you may expect, there is a huge array of psychological theories that have underpinned and evolved behind test anxiety theory: attentional, motivational, expectancy and arousal theories (Zeidner, 1998). Concepts include 'evaluation anxiety', 'negative self-beliefs' and 'skills deficits' (Zeidner and Matthews, 2005). There are different 'models' of test anxiety and different constructs. Where does test anxiety come from? Is it a cognitive, physiological or behavioural problem or a mixture? Can test anxiety be good for you?

The first thing I did in my research was to identify the model or construct of test anxiety that I felt could reasonably apply to most of the students I knew who were anxious about taking tests. I mainly concentrated on cognitive test anxiety, commonly known as **worrying** about exams. And I focused on **self-knowledge beliefs**, which may include: feelings of not being able to 'do' the exams; not being able to pass the exams; a lack of belief in ability to be able to get through the exams. Fear of failure! Zeidner and Matthews (2005) model of 'self-referent executive function' is my 'go to' test anxiety construct as detailed in Figure 1.1. My plan of attack to reduce feelings of worry, give back control and reduce test anxiety was focused on the self-knowledge beliefs box.

Some students are naturally more anxious than others. This is a result of proximal (near) and distal (more distant) factors (Zeidner, 1998). Zeidner (2014) highlights the school environment as a major proximal factor. For example, this can be the physical context of