

Test Anxiety

Test Anxiety and Performance Anxiety are intimately related. Performance Anxiety is a feeling someone might have in any situation where performance really counts or when the pressure is on to do well. A person might experience performance anxiety when he or she is about to try out for the school play, sing a solo on stage, get into position at the pitcher's mound, take a test in biology class, step onto the diving board in a diving meet, give a presentation in front of the class, or go into an important interview. In reality, this kind of anxiety is normal. It decreases with practice and experience, but initially it can be pretty bothersome. At IMSA we have one day each year where students present their Student Inquiry Research projects to the whole school and the general public. We call the day "IMSAloquium." They are assigned a classroom where parents, fellow students and outside professionals come to hear about their study. They have 10 minutes to present with 5 minutes for questions! And there has to be a Power Point to go along with it... and a professionally printed poster describing the methods, process, and outcome of their research. And they get evaluated by two members of the staff and faculty who know nothing about the project they are presenting. No pressure there!!! But it is still performance anxiety. It's kind of fun to see the kids squirm a

little because you know they are preparing for their future and it's starting right here in front of our eyes.

Anxiety only becomes a problem when it *interferes* with performance. *Interference* means not being able to sing the solo because fear overwhelms you, freezing up in front of the class and forgetting what you wanted to say, remembering the answers to the exam after you finish the test you just failed. It is when the anxiety interferes with performance in a major way that it becomes pathological for the individual.

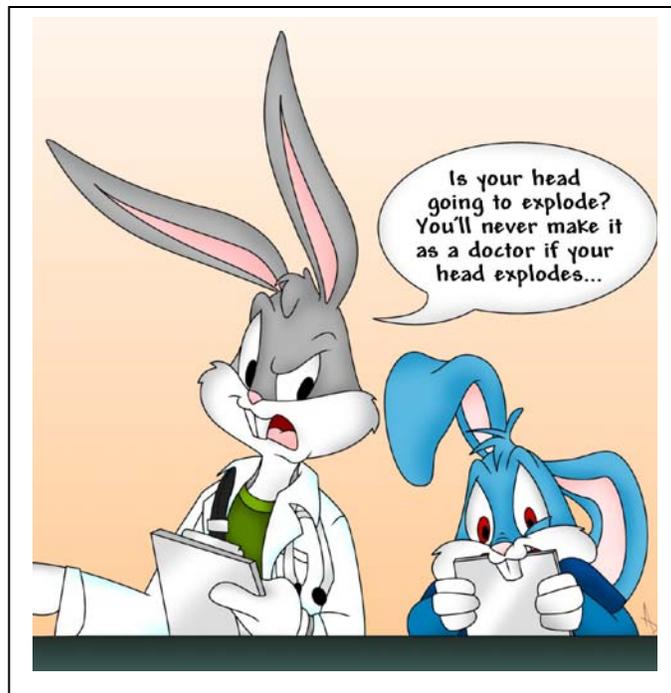


Test anxiety is a somewhat different kind of animal for talented and gifted students, especially at IMSA. It is not just about performance. It can actually be about who you are as a person! From day one IMSA kids are told they are in the top 10% of the students in the state of Illinois. They have tremendous opportunities at IMSA that are not available in their home schools and it is assumed that they will take advantage of them. The math is advanced, the papers are more complex and the

teaching style is different. All of this translates into higher expectations for the student. The student might hear it said, in a very polite and matter-of-fact way, “if you’re not willing to put in the effort, ask for help and take advantage of the opportunities here, perhaps you should consider if IMSA is the right place for you.” This is not in any way a threat. It is just a reality check from staff and faculty who know what it takes to be a student here and they want to be part of the student’s success by challenging them to get out of their comfort zone. Trust me. The faculty understands performance and test anxiety and is eager to help the student manage it. They like doing that. It’s fun for them to see kids grow and resolve these kinds of issues. They’re actually passionate about it!

However, for talented and gifted students at IMSA, test anxiety can mean many different things. Students here often have very high expectations for themselves, sometimes unrealistically high expectations. In their mind, getting anything less than an “A” on a test is unacceptable. It may also be unacceptable to their parents. Yet IMSA is a place where students get their first “B” or even a “C” on an assignment or exam. This can translate into feelings of personal failure and despair where the student feels unworthy, useless, and somehow inferior. Students also compare themselves to other students. When you compare yourself to the best of the best, the playing field becomes a little more level. In the public school system there is a wider variety of abilities and talents to compare themselves to. At IMSA that range is much narrower. Students often assume that *many other* students are brighter than they are, understand material faster than they do, and earn *easy A's* on tests. This not only puts pressure on the student to study harder, but it also generates higher test anxiety.

[General rule of thumb: IMSA students are in the top 10% of all the students in the state of Illinois, but only a very few understand material quickly and have very little anxiety. Everybody else has to study more, work harder, ask for help, and manage all kinds of anxious feelings: i.e.: you are not alone grasshopper!!]



How to deal with Test Anxiety (Taken from *Study Guides and Strategies.com*)

Start out by understanding that there are no easy answers or single formulas for eliminating the anxiety. This is a highly individual thing (although not very complex) and should be based on your needs and particular stresses.

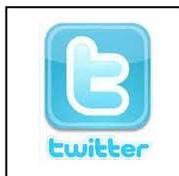
General preparation and building confidence

- Review your personal situation and skills
 - How do approach taking tests in general?
 - What are the feelings you have had in the past?
 - When did the test anxiety start? In what class?
 - Is there some skill you know you are lacking?
 - What have you tried already? What succeeded / failed?

- See the IMSA Learning Strategies Specialist: She can help you review your test-taking style and help you identify changes you can make.

- Develop effective study habits and strategies.
 - Re-reading material and trying to memorize it in general is only effective for a few. Most students have to write study questions, form an outline, or write key facts on note cards and so on.
 - You can meet with the Learning Strategies Specialist in the writing center. She can help you analyze how to make your studying more effective.
 - Learning how to study is a skill that is developed over time. You are not a failure if you have underdeveloped study habits!! You just need to learn something more effective.

- Manage your time. Here are the main things that contribute to IMSA students not managing their time well:



- Are re these forms of entertainment, ways to manage stress, or time wasters? The answer is D: all of the above. Students in high school and college waste many hours a day engaging in social communications, playing video games or watching anime. They can even do this in class on their laptops and I-Phones! The only real solution is self-discipline. Resident Counselors and parents cannot monitor the student's use of internet media very effectively. Many a student at IMSA has stayed up until midnight playing a multi-player video game, only to discover that they have a history paper due tomorrow and have to start working on it at 1 AM. Obviously, that can create all kinds of other problems for the student.

WARNING: If you can avoid getting caught up in these things, you will be so much happier!



- ▣ Organize the material to be studied and learned.
 - Take a step-by-step approach to build a strategy. This helps you not get overwhelmed.
 - Your usual ways of organizing material may not work in the IMSA environment. Be open to trying new ways and ask others for ideas. At IMSA there is simply more material to organize so it is easy to get overwhelmed at first.
- ▣ Control your feelings about outside pressures.
 - Try not to focus on success or failure. Just focus on the test.
 - Focusing on what grade you want to get while taking a test is only an anxiety generating distraction.

- Yes, you will graduate. This one test has nothing to do with graduation.
- All the other students are not smarter than you are. They are not all getting automatic A's on this test. They have had to study just like you did.
- Try not to think about competing against others while taking the test. Compete against *yourself* to succeed. You do this by knowing your own strengths and weaknesses with the material *before* taking the test.
- Review your performance on past tests. What worked for you and what did not? You can improve and learn from these experiences.
- When the test comes back and you did not do as well as you thought you should, it is normal to panic or feel depressed. Meet with the teacher and find out what happened (it is usually something small like basic arithmetic mistakes or not reading the directions correctly). Knowing these things can help you improve for the next time.



Don't be afraid to find out you are doing it wrong. How else will you know what to do right the next time? If you cannot solve it yourself (and most IMSA students try this first!) get a consultation! (Fancy word for "help").



📅 On the day of the test

- Get a good night's sleep
- Don't go to the exam with an empty stomach.
- Avoid cramming just before the exam.
- Get to the exam early.
- Avoid speaking with fellow students who are not prepared or are expressing negativity and fear.
- Take a small snack with you. Avoid sugar. It can aggravate anxious feelings.

📅 During the test

- Write down any formulas you had to memorize on a piece of scratch paper. That way you will not have to worry about recalling them later.
- Read the directions carefully.
- Change positions frequently while sitting.
- Stretch.
- If you go blank, skip the question and go onto the next one.
- Don't panic when students start handing in their papers. There is no reward for being the first one done!!!
- Expect *some* anxiety in an unknown situation. It provides energy to think.

Let your teacher know if you struggle with test anxiety (just not the hour *before* the test!). They usually have resources that will help you!

“Anxiety is the essential condition of intellectual and artistic creation”

Charles Frankel

