

# Tackling test anxiety may help prevent more severe problems

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Showing students how to cope with test anxiety might also help them to handle their built-up angst and fretfulness about other issues. The results of a new study by Carl Weems of the University of New Orleans show that anxiety intervention programs that focus on academic matters fit well into the demands of the school routine, and do not carry the same stigma among youth as general anxiety programs do. The research group was among the first to study the effects of Hurricane Katrina on community mental health and anxiety among youths, and the paper appears in *Prevention Science*, the official journal of the Society for Prevention Research, published by Springer.

Weems says that anxiety problems are among the most common emotional difficulties youths experience, and are often linked to exposure to disasters. If not addressed these feelings could lead to academic difficulties, the increased risk of developing depressive or anxiety disorders, and substance use problems in adulthood. It is, however, an issue that often falls under the radar in school settings. Therefore Weems and his team turned their attention to teaching students how to handle test anxiety, as such nervousness is one way in which anxieties commonly manifest among school-aged youth.

The article highlights the results of initial tests among students from grades three to 12 in five public schools in the gulf south region of the United States. The research was conducted between three and six years after Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. A group-administered, test-anxiety-reduction intervention was presented to 325 youths between the ages of eight- and 17-years-old who experienced elevated test anxiety. The intervention – through which the learners were taught behavioral strategies such as relaxation techniques – was conducted as part of each school's counseling curriculum.

The wider age group who received the intervention found it to be useful, felt glad they had participated and effectively learned the intervention content. Overall, the program was associated with decreases in test anxiety, anxiety disorder and depression symptoms, and especially helped the older students to feel more in control. In turn, decreases in test anxiety were linked with changes in symptoms of depression and anxiety , such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The results suggest high participant satisfaction with the program.

"Test anxiety interventions may be a practical strategy for conducting emotion-focused prevention and intervention efforts because of a natural fit within the ecology of the school setting," believes Weems. He cautions that school-based [test anxiety](#) interventions should not be

considered a first line approach to treating severe [anxiety disorders](#) such as PTSD, but could be employed preventatively to teach students how to handle anxious emotions and internalizing problems more generally.

**More information:** Weems, C. F. et al (2014). Fitting Anxious Emotion-Focused Intervention into the Ecology of Schools: Results from a Test Anxiety Program Evaluation, *Prevention Science*. [DOI: 10.1007/s11121-014-0491-1](#)

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