

Reducing Test Anxiety

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Tests: For some, credentialing examinations are a way to measure a candidate's level of competence in a particular profession. For others, examinations may create stressful situations. Most people experience some level of anxiety during an examination. However, when anxiety begins to affect examination performance it becomes problematic. Classic test anxiety refers to various physiological and emotional responses to tension or stress resulting from apprehension for an upcoming examination. This state of distress and uneasiness is often marked by physical symptoms such as muscle tension, headaches, stomachaches, fever blisters, etc. Anxiety is very common, but can result in real-life consequences such as poor examination performance and general inability to achieve personal goals which are realistically attainable.

Many credentialing candidates experience test anxiety as the inability to think clearly in spite of adequate preparation. This may prevent or inhibit successful performance on the examination regardless of the candidate's true ability. Test anxiety often makes a person feel that his or her mind has gone blank. Ironically, the mind is not actually blank at all, but is being flooded with all kinds of worries. Candidates suffering from test anxiety are not only unsure of the answer to an examination question, but they begin to question their general level of competence, "if I fail this examination, I won't be able to practice in my chosen profession."

Test anxiety may also lead to extreme nervousness that can cause difficulties reading and understanding examination questions, organizing thoughts, retrieving key words and concepts when choosing responses and ultimately, doing poorly on an examination. The effects of test anxiety vary widely in nature and severity from one individual to the next. Some individuals are mildly affected by anxiety, and may only experience one or two of the symptoms. Others, however, may experience symptoms of anxiety so severe that they are greatly incapacitated.

People with test anxiety are typically conscientious individuals who work hard and have high expectations of themselves. A little worry is usually good for test-takers because it keeps them alert and task-oriented. Excessive worry, on the other hand, can be very debilitating for examination candidates as it leads to mental blocks and other problems. The condition may begin with inadequate

performance on a particular examination, which creates a general fear of the testing situation and hampers future performance. In some cases, test anxiety can be reduced or eliminated by working on test-taking skills, such as strategies for answering different types of questions, and self-timed tests. Taking practice examinations such as those offered by the NBRC can help diffuse test anxiety by enabling the candidate to become more comfortable with the testing situation.

The NBRC's examinations are job-related. Therefore, there is no substitute for knowledge of the material, gained from respiratory therapy education and, for advanced examinations, experience in practice. A sound knowledge base helps avoid test anxiety by providing confidence that the person is knowledgeable of the material. However, assuming that a candidate's knowledge base is sound, here are a few suggestions that may further reduce test anxiety:

1 *Prepare Ahead of Time.* Examination candidates can reduce the effects of test anxiety by making the most of available preparation time. Candidates may begin by reviewing the examination content outline and determining their areas of strength and weakness. Taking stock of strengths and weaknesses helps to identify the areas not to worry about, and the ones that will demand extra attention and effort. Self-Assessment Examinations (SAEs) help identify strengths and may help boost confidence. Also knowing weak areas helps focus study. The NBRC SAEs are developed based on the current content outlines and are available for purchase online in web-based format at www.nbrc.org. If a candidate is well prepared, confidence of the material improves. Preparing ahead of time also eliminates last minute studying. When information is stored in memory all at once, it is not stored properly and may be very difficult to retrieve.

2 *Tackle the Weak Content Areas.* More practice with tough material will make it more familiar and less scary. Candidates will feel more confident during the examination because they have dealt directly with the areas of the test that bring about the most stress. Facing weak areas head-on builds confidence because candidates know that they have actively strengthened the chances for passing the examination. If confusion still arises after thorough

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preparation, get help from your respiratory therapy education program, colleagues, supervisors and others who know the material.

3 *Create a Study Plan Ahead of Time.* The best test takers do less preparation as the test approaches. Candidates should reduce their study schedule and take it easy so they will be relaxed and ready on the day of the examination. It is important that examination candidates take some time off, especially the night before the examination. By that time, if the candidate has prepared well, information for the examination will be firmly stored in memory. “Cramming” at the last minute is usually not an effective approach and may actually cloud one’s mind, creating confusion and anxiety.

4 *Be Prepared for the Examination Day.* To reduce the chance of last minute tension and nervousness, candidates should have everything laid out in advance. Most important, candidates should know where the examination assessment center is located and map the easiest, quickest way to get there. If all the small details are taken care of prior to the examination, there are fewer chances of increasing anxiety due to unexpected events. Plan to leave early, avoiding concerns related to traffic, mechanical trouble, etc. since unplanned events can increase general test anxiety. If possible, visit the assessment center in advance or practice driving to the location because familiarity generates comfort and confidence.

5 *Practice Taking the Test on the Computer.* Don’t let computer fears create unnecessary anxiety. The NBRC provides practice examinations using the actual testing software for candidates to use in preparing for the credentialing examinations. The practice examinations are accessible from the NBRC website at www.nbrc.org. To eliminate any possible concern about how to take the test via computer, use the practice examination to prepare for the real examination.

In the actual testing environment, over 98% of the NBRC candidates rate the software “easy to use,” so computer anxiety should not be an issue for most individuals.

6 *Get a Good Night’s Sleep.* Finally, and most importantly, get plenty of rest. It is in the candidate’s best interests to save up physical and mental resources for the examination. A good night’s sleep the night before the examination is imperative.

Candidates often blame test anxiety for poor performance on examinations. However, poor performance is most frequently a lack of preparedness for a test or a weak knowledge base of the test content rather than classic test anxiety. Relaxing and keeping control of stress are crucial parts to successful test taking. The best way, time and place to relax are dependent on each person. However, these are just a few things examination candidates can do to reduce tension and increase feelings of confidence. Test anxiety usually dissipates with practice and preparation and generally should not prevent those with appropriate job knowledge from being successful on the day of the examination. So, if you are a future credentialing candidate, use these suggestions, prepare well, and relax before taking your examination. Best wishes for your success in achieving the credential you desire! ■

