TESTING AND TEST ANXIETY

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Whether or not you agree with standardized tests as a valid assessment tool for student performance, they are here and it doesn’t look like they will be going anywhere for a while. In fact, it seems that the public is leaning more towards these types of tests than they ever have before. What does this mean for us and for us and for our students? Well, basically it means more stress.

We are stressed out because, for many of us, our jobs are directly affected by how well our students perform on these tests. Some of us feel the need to “teach to the test” while others take a “back to the basics” approach with students.

One factor that is not often discussed, though, is student test anxiety. I believe that low student scores are often the result of fear and frustration rather than lack of knowledge. This is especially true of our “bubble” students, or the students who are on the verge of a passing score.

Just imagine yourself in their place. You know how to work multiplication on word problems. You’ve done it a hundred times in class and most of the time you pass with an average grade. Then a test is placed in front of you. You are told that this is a very important test, and that how well you score will determine what you have and have not
learned. You might even be told that will effect whether or not you go up to the next grade level. Now you are getting nervous and your palms are sweating. You have butterflies in your stomach. You think that you can do this, but you aren’t quite sure. The more you think about it, the more nervous you get. Suddenly all you can think about is how nervous and/or scared you are. The teacher announces that it is time to open the test booklet. You see the first question and your mind goes blank.

How many of you have experienced this same sensation? I know I have, both as a student and as an adult. This is test anxiety. It is a fear that causes your brain to downshift (see Triune Brain) to a lower “gear”. When going through test anxiety, it is virtually impossible to concentrate on working through individual test questions.

One way that we can help students is by explaining the concept of test anxiety to our students. Let them know that this is perfectly normal and that it happens to most people. Next, explain to them the concepts of the Triune Brain. Help them understand how their fear is keeping them from using the “thinking” part of their brain.

References:

testing & anxiety - mealy, donna L., and timothy R. host 1992. coping with test anxiety