

Preparing for High Achievement:

Learning to Cope with Anxious Feelings

BY MAUREEN NEIHART



As students progress along the trajectory of higher achievement, they encounter greater levels of stress. Even strong students can feel anxious when initially confronting the challenge of accelerated content or higher expectations. As competition intensifies and stakes rise, so does stress. That's why learning to cope with anxious feelings is a basic competency for being psychologically prepared for high performance. If students lack the skills they need to manage their stress, they may question their ability to succeed and be tempted to withdraw academically or to disengage from learning.

Stress gets such a bad rap that it's easy to forget that it's not the enemy. We need stress. Heightened anxiety facilitates achievement because it sharpens our focus and keeps us working hard. The goal isn't to eliminate our anxiety, but to make it work more effectively for us. To become good managers of anxiety, students need to learn only three skills. Even the youngest students can master basic competencies necessary for preventing their fears from compromising their achievement if they practice. They simply need to learn to:

- breathe
- relax, and
- keep moving toward the things they fear

Breath keeps a lid on anxiety. Although it doesn't eliminate nervousness altogether, proper breathing technique is highly effective for keeping nervous feelings from escalating into fear or panic. Learning to do controlled, diaphragmatic breathing is a simple skill that students can use in any situation that provokes anxiety: taking a test, speaking before a group, performing before an audience, or even having a difficult conversation. Deep, controlled breathing maintains the right balance of oxygen in the bloodstream and enables people to keep a lid on their anxiety. That's why so many elite performers use breathing techniques as part of their pre-performance routine.

To teach children to breathe properly, have them put one hand on their chest and one hand beneath their belly button. Then ask them to breathe for several seconds. If they're breathing properly, their bottom hand should move out more than their top hand. If the upper

hand moves more, chances are they are breathing only through the upper portions of their lungs and are not getting enough oxygen. Direct them to slow their breathing and to use their diaphragm. In deep, controlled breathing, the diaphragm fully expands, allowing all of the lungs to fill with air. It doesn't matter if you breathe through your nose or your mouth, but it's helpful if the inhalations and exhalations are about the same length.

The second step is learning to relax. Relaxation is the antidote to fear because it's not possible to be relaxed and afraid at the same time. Fear produces tension, while relaxation releases that tension. Relaxation is not optional for high achievement. It's essential. Serious high achievers get really good at it.

There are many ways to learn to relax but the most widely used is a method of alternately tensing and relaxing muscles known as progressive relaxation. Students begin by tightening their hands into fists for five seconds—then slowly relaxing them for ten. They proceed in a similar fashion through all the major muscle groups of their body, first tensing and then releasing their arms, face, neck, shoulders, legs, feet, and back. Books and tapes with scripts for progressive relaxation are readily available at major bookstores and online. It's recommended that students practice twice a day for two weeks to achieve mastery. Once students have mastered relaxation and have good awareness about how they carry stress in their bodies, they can abbreviate the process until they can relax their bodies with just a verbal cue.

Students must keep moving in the direction of the things they fear. The last step in coping with anxious feelings is a critical one. Avoidance is the natural response to the things that scare us, but it leads to greater anxiety. Anxious feelings decrease when we are able to expose ourselves to the things we fear while we remain relaxed. Learning to breathe properly and to keep their bodies relaxed will increase students' confidence and enable them to take steps in the direction of the things that make them anxious.

Parents and teachers must be careful not to rescue children from situations that make them anxious. Learning to cope with anxious feelings is an essential skill for preparing for greater achievement. Some students are more vulnerable to stress than others, but one thing is universal—developing abilities requires a tolerance for stress and anxiety. We don't improve without it. ■

Resources:

- Bourke, E. & Garano, L. (2003). *Coping with anxiety: 10 simple ways to relieve anxiety, fear, and worry*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Merrell, K.W. (2001). *Helping students overcome depression and anxiety: A practical guide*. New York: Guilford Press.

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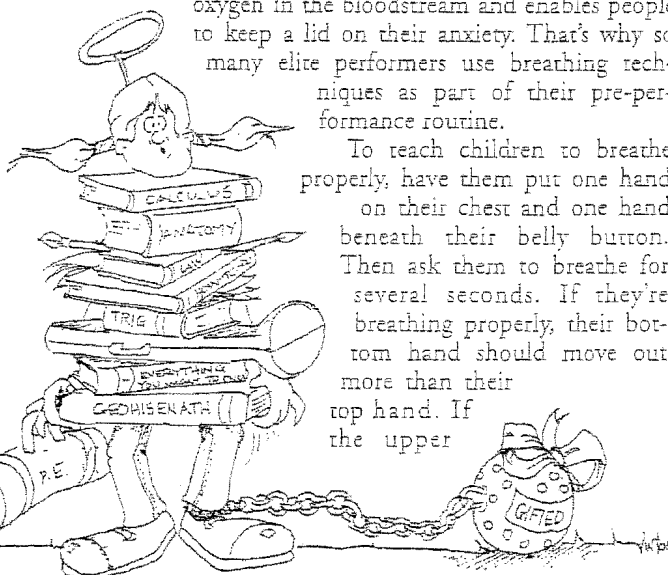


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