

# De-Stress the Test - Tools for Students

created by Dr. Kristen Race, Ph.D., founder of Mindful Life



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## Before the Test

### Help Students Develop Process Oriented Goals

Most kids and adults tend to think in outcome oriented ways (i.e. what score you received on a test or whether you won or lost a game). While students may work incredibly hard, they still may not achieve the score they were hoping for on a reading assessment. Children who are more focused on the outcome than the process tend to display less task persistence (they give up sooner), less task enjoyment, more low-ability attributions (felt badly about themselves when they didn't get it correct), and worse task performance.

**Children who focus on the process are more persistent, they don't beat themselves up if they make a mistake, and, ultimately, they perform better.**

### Examples of Process Oriented Goals include:

I am going to take my time and read each question carefully.

I am going to double check my work after I am finished.

### Explain the Stress Response

When our brain is in a state of stress it becomes difficult for us to use our Prefrontal Cortex, the part of our brain that helps us stay focused, solve problems and make good choices. When we begin to feel stress and anxiety in our body there are some steps we can take (see "before the test" suggestions) to calm the stress response so that we can think clearly and perform our best.

Explain that it is natural to feel stress at times, but when the stress feels overwhelming there are steps students can take to help their mind and body calm down.

[Click here for an easy stress response explanation for kids](#)

## On Testing Days

### Get Fresh Air & Exercise Before the Test

Encourage students to arrive to school early, spend some time playing on the playground, getting some fresh air and exercise. If students walk to school, encourage them to take a moment to listen to the sounds that they hear or look for something they have never noticed before.

### Increase Focus and Awareness

To increase focus and awareness, just before the assessment begins, ask students to close their eyes and bring their awareness to their breathing, then ask them to bring their awareness to the sounds that they hear, then open their eyes and bring their awareness to the things that they see.

### Manage Stress During the Assessment

Encourage finger breathing during the assessment if their hands get tired or they begin to feel stressed or nervous. To practice finger breathing: Align finger tips of both hands touching; inhale: fingers expand as if blowing up a balloon; with each exhalation fingers contract as if they are squeezing out every last drop of air. Take as many finger breaths as you need to feel calm.

## After the Test

Encourage students to share one mistake they learned from today and don't forget to share one of your own. This process helps students view mistake as opportunities for growth. Try a Happiness Circle. Students sit crossed legged in a circle so that their knees are touching. Have place their right hand under their neighbors left hand. One at a time they say a word that makes them happy as they bring their right hand across their body placing it on their neighbors right hand. Go around as many times as you want! You can also prompt them to pass "something they are proud of today" around the circle.

For more mindfulness tools for parents, students and teachers, visit [mindfullifetoday.com](http://mindfullifetoday.com)

# De-Stress the Test - Tools for Teachers

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## For Administrators & Teachers

We know that stress is contagious. When the neurons related to stress and anxiety light up in our brains, our students' brains reflect that stress and anxiety as well. Assessment periods are stressful for schools, so we have to take extra good care of ourselves, for our own wellness and our students' wellness as well.

### Read for Six Minutes

A study out of the University of Sussex showed that subjects only needed to read silently for six minutes to slow down heart rate, ease tension in the muscles and reduce stress levels.

### Move During the Work Day

A recent study indicated that walking around the building/classroom/office for two minutes three times an hour is more beneficial in reversing health effects of a sedentary lifestyle than spending an hour at the gym after work. Dr. James Levine, Mayo Clinic. Wear a pedometer to motivate you to move more, or [try the sundance with your students](#) a few times a day.

### Calm the Stress Response

Bring your attention to the feeling of your feet on the ground. Sit up straight, put both feet on the floor and notice the touch of the soles of the feet, the weight of your legs pushing down on the floor and whatever other sensations there are to be noticed. Just a few moments of this will bring your mind and body together in the moment, helping you to focus and de-stress.

### Purposeful Pausing

Create purposeful pauses. Take a moment to bring your attention to whatever seemingly mundane task or feeling/sensation you are experiencing. Recognize small, daily moments that engage your senses and generally make you feel a sense of pleasure (i.e. eating, walking, talking with a colleague) then pay extremely close attention to them.

### Manage Transitions for Work-Life Balance

At times it can be difficult to avoid carrying the stress of the workday into our home lives. However, by implementing simple rituals we can put boundaries in place that help us transition from work to home. Research shows that a feeling of competence at the end of the workday can improve mood and support work-life balance. Before leaving work, instead of focusing on your unfinished to-do list, consider writing down all your accomplishments both big and small. Visualize putting all your work concerns into a cardboard box and closing the lid until the next work day.

### Make If-Then Plans

Recent studies show that if-then plans can help us to control our emotional responses to situations in which we feel fear, sadness, fatigue, or self-doubt. Simply decide what kind of response you would like to have instead of feeling stress and make a plan that links your desired response to the situation. For instance, "If I see lots of emails in my Inbox, then I will stay calm and relaxed," or, "If an angry parent calls then I will keep a cool head."

### Laugh More

Laughter relaxes the whole body. A good, hearty laugh relieves physical tension and stress, leaving your muscles relaxed for up to 45 minutes after. Laughter decreases levels of cortisol (the stress hormone) in our brain and increases levels of dopamine (the pleasure hormone). During a faculty meeting encourage staff to share a funny video to everyone or a humorous story. Share a short, humorous (but appropriate) video via email on testing days. Laugh with your colleagues and your students.

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