

Is being flexible rather than tough the best way to conquer academic test anxiety for university students?

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Test anxiety is experienced by approximately one third of university students and often compromises academic achievement. Existing test anxiety research has focused on the role of self-efficacy and perfectionism. Research in performance domains such as music and sport recognise mental toughness, decentering and psychological flexibility as features of performance-based anxiety. Importantly, people who have high levels of mental toughness, psychological flexibility and take a decentered approach have better performance and wellbeing outcomes in these related domains (Clarke et al., 2020; Fresco et al., 2007; Gucciardi et al, 2008). These constructs have been neglected thus far in our understanding of test anxiety yet may similarly provide students with the resilience to cope with the rising pressure of academic excellence.

Our poster summarizes a mixed-method study where 493 university students responded to an anonymous online questionnaire detailing their experiences with test taking and the impact of mental toughness, psychological flexibility, and decentering on academic anxiety. Only psychological flexibility strongly predicted test anxiety. Mental toughness was negatively correlated with test anxiety but surprisingly did not demonstrate predictive power in the multiple regression model, suggesting that mental toughness may not be the core construct that influences test anxiety over and above other mental characteristics. Decentering showed no effect in this context. Additionally, this study qualitatively explored students' experience with elevated test anxiety where participant descriptions were thematically analysed for thoughts, feelings and behaviours associated with test anxiety. Students endorsed study-based coping strategies despite recognising the psychological and emotional aspects of test anxiety, potentially in the absence of knowing more effective mental skills.

Our findings suggest that psychological flexibility may be the key to decreasing test anxiety over mental toughness. Improving psychological flexibility may combat the rigid and restrictive thought and behavioural patterns that accompany test anxiety. We highlight the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy-based strategies that could be implemented in both clinical and psychoeducational arenas to develop psychological flexibility and conquer test anxiety in university students.

References

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