

# Getting Started

## HOW THIS BOOK CAN HELP YOU

As you use this book, I will be your performance coach. When people come to me I figure out why they are under-performing and then coach them to achieve better results. If a high school student is scoring low on her SATs, or a graduate student needs to raise his GRE scores, I give them the tools for raising their scores.

Providing *tools* is a vital part of my job as a coach. Think of the book you are holding as a toolbox. It has what you need to fix your problems with testing. In the following pages I will give you the nine essential tools you need to improve your test performance.

But a shiny new toolbox with powerful tools is not enough. You have to know *when* to use them. There's a right moment to use each tool in this book. I will coach you to develop your awareness of that moment. When your awareness is keen, the tools become indispensable. Say you read a question and the answer doesn't come immediately. It looks too hard. You think, "I'll never get this," and you start imagining the worst: *failure*. Once you refine your awareness you'll immediately recognize that your confidence is slipping and you'll use the right tools to recover it. The people who have trouble with tests become more and more anxious and the mounting tension paralyzes them. Awareness is another word for *paying attention*. Imagine driving down a road with signs that say *Danger ahead!* But you don't see them. The

signs become bigger and maybe you see them but don't take them seriously. What happens? You crash. When you read the signs (that's your awareness) and manipulate the car accordingly (those are the tools) you can look forward to a safe, pleasant journey. As your coach, I will work with you throughout this book to cultivate your awareness and to use the tools. You need both. As an old song goes, "You can't have one without the other." If you have the greatest tools but lack the awareness of when to use them, the tools are useless; likewise if you are aware that you need tools but don't have any, you can't change anything. This book will give you both.

## WHAT DO YOU HATE ABOUT TESTS?



*Imagine yourself saying: "I hate tests because..." (which statements apply to you?)*

- 1. They make me nervous.
- 2. No matter how much I prepare I can't do well.
- 3. It's hard for me to study.
- 4. Tests are stupid.
- 5. I throw up every time I have to take a test.
- 6. I believe everyone else is smarter than I am.
- 7. My mind keeps wandering when I am taking a test.
- 8. I don't think tests measure what I really know.
- 9. I can't sleep before a test.
- 10. I am not good at memorizing.
- 11. My parents put too much pressure on me to do well.
- 12. This country is test crazy.
- 13. Tests stress me out.
- 14. If I hit a wall during a test I fall apart and everything goes downhill.
- 15. I don't really care about them but everyone else does.
- 16. After the test I don't remember anything, so what's the point?

- 17. My stomach is in knots every time I take a test.
- 18. My sister/brother/mother/father was really good at taking tests, but I'm not.
- 19. Tests count for too high a percentage of my grade.
- 20. Tests are too impersonal.
- 21. My mind is always racing before a test.
- 22. I never do well on tests.
- 23. Everyone else places too much importance on tests.
- 24. Tests don't give me the chance to show what I really know.
- 25. There's a secret to doing well on tests and I don't know it.

We'll look at what you checked off in a moment. But before we go on I want you to know that there are two ways to use this book: you can work through it chapter-by-chapter, cover-to-cover, or you can troubleshoot.

**Chapter-by-chapter.** You have already started. Keep reading and work through each exercise as you go along. By reading through the entire book, you will receive a comprehensive training in improving your performance on tests. I recommend you use the book this way. You've invested the money; you might as well receive the full return on your investment.

**Troubleshooting.** Maybe you don't have the time to read the whole book. Maybe you are about to take a test and you need help *right now*. In that case, I recommend you carefully read chapters 1-3 and then, referencing the items you checked above, turn to the relevant chapter.

***If this applies to you:***                      ***Go directly to chapter:***

1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21	4
2, 6, 10, 14, 18, 22	5
3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23	6
4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24	7
25	Every chapter

## THE MAJOR ISSUE: TEST STRESS

To obtain anything these days—from a driver’s license to a doctor’s license, from citizenship papers to a college degree—you have to take a test. And standing in the way of passing the test—for many people, from all walks of life—is test stress.

Stress is a kind of pressure, strain and demand. A low amount of stress is not a problem, and in fact, some stress is a necessary and helpful part of life. However, when the amount of stress overwhelms your ability to cope, you feel tense, frustrated, overwhelmed, and often fatigued. Test stress presents its own brand of discomfort. Before, during, and after a test, a very specific dynamic occurs for each individual.

When you are sitting in a classroom during the final countdown before the test is handed out, a number of things are running through your mind. First and foremost, you feel pressured to perform well; you are bringing all of your studying and knowledge to bear at this one time and place, and you have to make a success of it. You know that in a matter of minutes you will have to practice instant recall and quick reasoning. You must answer all these questions in a limited period of time. You realize that forcing your mind to act in a speedy way will hurt your performance. In the past, that tension prompted you to provide the wrong answers, to leave answers out, and to fail to understand some of the questions. You are quite aware, as you look around, that you’re in direct competition with everyone else in the room, and you feel isolated in your own anxiety. There is a vague sense of the consequences that await you if you fail: the blow to your self-image, and the negative impact on your future and on your confidence when you take other tests down the line.

And this is only a description of what is happening in the room. What about before the test? Whether you are in high school, college or graduate school, you will never find yourself with an unlimited amount of time to memorize, or even fully comprehend, all the material given to you, and sometimes it just seems like too much for your inner hard drive to hold. I’ve heard people say, “There’s just no more storage space.” The sad thing is that sometimes you actually begin to enjoy the material; you want to grasp it at a deeper level and find the answers to real questions. But there’s no time for that. You can only keep shoveling in the information.

Of course when you are preparing for a test, you can’t put the rest of your life on hold. You still have to answer the phone, walk the dog, do the laundry, and occasionally eat. I say “occasionally” because it is not uncommon for test stress to make people lose their appetite, not to mention sleep. Others sleep too much because the very tension of having to perform at their best makes them want to drop out or zone out as a way to find some relief. When you are in the midst of test anxiety, you know

that you've been through it many times before, yet it never seems to get any better. Each time you face the pressure, it seems like the end of the world. And each time, you feel like you're the only one who suffers this way. *Other people probably think this is a breeze. I'll never understand this material. No one else finds it so hard.* The negative thoughts can snowball into outright panic.

Maybe when the test is over, you're finally treated to a welcome sense of relief, but that may last only a few seconds. Most people walk out of the classroom obsessing over their performance. *Question twenty-three. Did I read that right? Did it mean something completely different than what I thought?* This is a useless activity, of course, and it just reinforces your sense of helplessness because you can't go back and re-do it. Your assessment is probably not even accurate because most people don't really remember their answers very well. Anxiety distracts them.

Nevertheless, in your mind you play and replay taking the test, wishing in vain that you could do it again and do it better. Nervously, you ask others how they did, but because people tend to either over-rate or under-rate their performance, you never get an accurate picture. Next you start damage control. You begin to strategize how you'll do things differently next time. You'll start studying sooner, and unplug the phone, and be nicer to the teacher, and improve your study habits, and pray to God, and give money to charity. Maybe you're one of those people who wail to anyone who will listen to how poorly you did so you can gain sympathy and understanding. Some people, when they go home after a test, feel so bad that they just shut down. In their isolation, catastrophic thoughts flood in. They start planning for the worst. *I'll just have to drop out of school. There's nothing else I can do. Then I'll have to move to another state because I'll never be able to pass the state exam here.*

Does any of this sound like you? If so, you are one of millions who go through this drama on a daily basis. And test taking is on the rise. Every year, Americans take more and more tests: SATs, APs, GREs, MCATs, LSATs, standardized state exams for children, and professional licensing exams for adults. The list goes on. Testing is steadily and relentlessly covering more ground and becoming a more popular way to assess who should be "accepted"—who will be offered jobs, promotions and licenses, and who will be granted entrance to a good college or grad school. More and more, tests are used as a determinant of salaries, a measure of your ability and ultimately your position in the world.

To feed our cultural obsession with taking more tests and receiving higher scores, a worldwide, multi-billion industry has emerged that promotes and sells books, CDs, websites and personal coaches, all to help people prepare to take tests. Test preparation is truly a growth industry. It is literally booming.

Unfortunately, far from reducing test stress, the test prep industry makes it worse because all of the materials sold do not help people with the stress involved in taking

tests, they only help with memorization. Books, courses, coaches and websites are all directed at one thing: *results*. The industry simply has overlooked the whole *process* of making the journey, from the initial stages of studying through the taking of the test, more satisfying and empowering. The big test preparation companies like Kaplan, Princeton Review and the College Board don't give the test taker tools to make the process less punishing and anxiety provoking.

Why is this important? Because when you take a test, the way you feel about yourself inside the exam room and how able you are to stay grounded and present, largely determine how successful you will be. Understand that the *quality* of the experience of test taking directly affects the *results*.

The reason for this is simple: stress affects performance. This is well known in many fields, especially in sports. Athletes need a certain amount of stress to charge

them up so they can perform at their best. But if the stress crosses a certain line—either too much stress or too little—it starts hurting their ability to do well. This concept is known as the “zone of optimal functioning.”

**This book  
is about you, and  
the tools you need  
to perform at your  
best.**

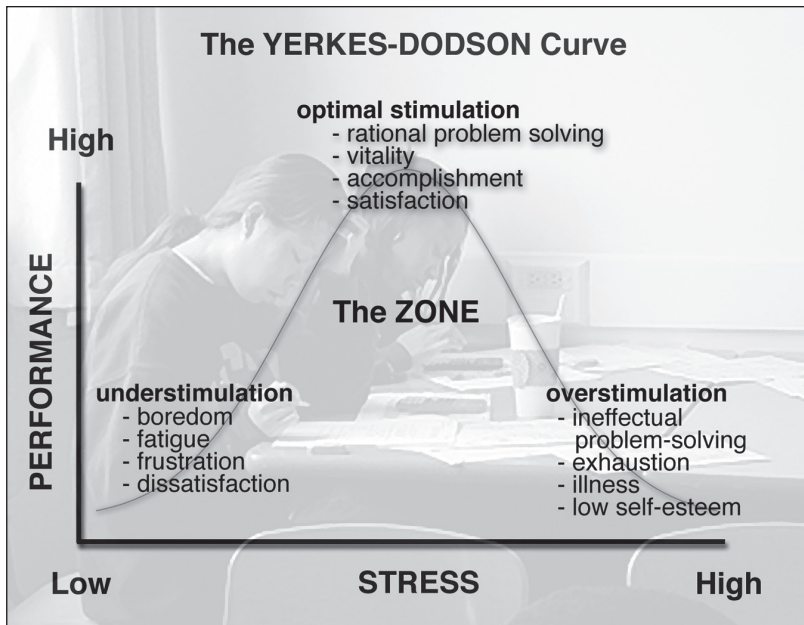
The amount of stress needed to produce optimal performance, the amount considered healthful, is different for each person. Some people have to feel extremely worked up to jump-start themselves to perform well. Others will feel jangled and nervous with that much stress, and it will destroy their concentration. For each person there is a zone of optimal functioning where the level of stress is just right. They are stimulated just enough to be creative and energized, to solve problems rationally, and to achieve a sense of self-satisfaction in their performance. Their adrenaline is not pumping too hard, nor are they lethargic, so they are able to progress at a good rate.

This book is designed to show you how to find and stay in your zone of optimal functioning. Through reading the examples and doing the exercises, you will learn how to control stress rather than let it control you. While it's unrealistic to think you won't have any stress when you're taking a test, you need to know how to keep your stress at an optimal level so that it charges you up and keeps you at the top of your game rather than wears you out and runs you into the ground.

## **STRESS AND PERFORMANCE**

The relationship between stress and performance is one of the most thoroughly researched phenomena in the field of psychology. A hundred years ago two

psychologists were the first to study it and produced the “Yerkes-Dodson Curve,” which looks like this:



As you can see, when your stress escalates to the point of discomfort, your effectiveness diminishes. When there’s too much stress, you leave “the optimal zone.” The result is your problem-solving skills contract and your self-esteem and confidence decline. You have trouble staying focused so you feel tense, sometimes to the point of feeling sick or exhausted. At this point, your temper is short, fuses blow and your performance goes down the tubes. This relationship between stress and performance holds true whether you are performing in a play, or playing a baseball game, or delivering a speech. And it kicks in every time you have to take a test. What is a test if not a performance? To most people, a *performance* suggests something that happens on a stage or an athletic field. But its definition is broader than that. A performance is “the act of carrying out something; an execution or an action.” That’s what an academic test is: it’s more than learning the material. It is the act of carrying out, showing, and proving what you know. Performance involves learning how to be fully present in the moment, right there at test time. It doesn’t matter how well you tested last week, or how well you will do tomorrow; the only thing that counts is how you perform *now*. This state of *performing at your best in the present moment* is well known to athletes, stage performers, surgeons and many many others who must bring their knowledge, training and experience to bear *right now*.

As far as tests go, knowing and performing are not the same thing. Knowing refers to the comprehension of content. Performing refers to what you *do* with what you know. The primary complaint I hear from my clients is that they study hard to learn what they're supposed to know, yet they cannot perform when it's time to take the test. The bottom line is that you have to *know* the material and you have to *deliver* the material you know.

Because stress has a direct impact on your performance, it is essential that you learn how to recognize it and reduce it. Make sure that the level of stress you experience when taking a test is not destructive. This is the key to your success. But the test-prep industry doesn't tell you that. The myth they perpetuate is that the only way to achieve higher scores is to learn more stuff. Yet knowing more stuff is not enough. You have to perform well. Up till now, no one has devised a clear, simple, and powerful method to teach people to do that.

I am a performance coach. My job is not to teach people how to memorize more, study better, or cram in more information. My job is to show you how to carry on in a test environment so that nothing impedes your performance. *My focus is on performance under pressure.* I will teach you to recognize stress when it starts building and then use specific tools to reduce it, on the spot. That's the way you can stay in your "zone" and perform better every time. My clients include a wide range of "performers." I coach high school kids taking SATs, young adults taking LSATs MCATs, DATs, GREs and finals, graduate students defending their doctoral dissertations, and lawyers taking the bar. I also coach musicians, athletes and actors—people who face performance tests on a daily basis. I coach professionals in technical jobs, doctors, dentists, lawyers and nurses. I also coach creative people: writers and actors who have gone on to win major awards and prizes.

In working with these people, I have seen again and again how stress affects performance. Sadly, I've watched the adventure of learning turn into a paralysis of shame when a bright high school student crumbles under the weight of intense competition and forgot what she knew on her calculus AP. I have seen a mountain of time, energy and money bite the dust when an intelligent young lawyer fails the bar exam after his fourth try and gives up hope. I've seen how the fear of rejection made it impossible for a singer to share her gift with an audience.

On the other hand, I have also seen how people can overcome their handicaps. I watched a student's low SAT scores rise dramatically once he learned how to calm down during the test. I saw the utter joy of a rower when she finally learned how to focus her energy throughout the entire race. I was particularly moved when I watched the parents of a student I was coaching learn to build their son's self-esteem instead of tear it down, by relaxing their completely unrealistic expectations of him. Happily, everyone watched his SAT II scores improve.

When people come to me for performance coaching, my first thought is: What does this person need to perform at his or her best? Of course they have to learn the subject matter—I never make light of that—but as we have seen, that is only part of the picture. Subject matter is always changing. You might have a test on algebra, chemistry, law, history, medieval literature or some combination of them when finals come along. But there is one thing that doesn't change, one constant at the center of every test, no matter what the subject, no matter what the setting. That constant is *you*, the individual. It might be a driving test or a diving test. Whatever the test is for, you are the one who is taking it. The question you have to ask yourself is: "What can I learn about myself that will help me perform better in any situation? How can I take control of this process?" Unfortunately, neither the school system, nor the test prep books, nor the courses, address you as the test taker. They address only the object of study, not the subject. The common use of the word *subject* is the material being studied, but in reality, the subject is you.

When I say, "the constant is you," I mean that *you* are what is certain and continual in all of your test situations.

Certainty refers to something that stays the same in spite of outer conditions. Imagine what it would be like to have this certainty in yourself when you take a test, the firm faith that you will succeed under any circumstances. You might feel rushed, you might be tired, or you might be under extreme pressure to achieve a high score. You might break a pencil or lose your place. During an oral exam you might be answering questions facing people who look at you like you know nothing. Whatever the challenge, whatever the environment, performance coaching can teach you how to be constant in yourself so you can perform at your best.

**You can  
use the tools on  
any test, any time,  
anywhere.**

## **LIFE IS A TEST**

While I was writing this, there was a knock on my door. It was Joe Rizzo, an older man who came to fix our chimney. He asked me what I do for a living, and I told him simply that I coach people who take tests. He shook his head. "Life is hard," he said, pointing his finger and jabbing it into the air. "Hard. You have to work for everything. You know what the problem is today? Everyone wants his tummy rubbed. They want things done for them. Whatever you get in life, you have to work hard for. *Life* is a test."

He's right. Life *is* a test.

Everything I have written about so far has been about tests in an exam room

with an instructor and other students. But as you might have gleaned by now, what I've been saying is also applicable to all of the challenges life throws at you. Over the years, clients invariably have told me that they've been able to apply the performance tools I taught them not only to school tests, but also to life's tests. No matter what kind of job you have or what age you are, you are confronted with new obstacles every day. You have to overcome them, and you're often expected to do that with sterling results. That is a test. Will you or won't you perform well? The added bonus to the tools in this book is that you can take them with you wherever you go.

Just as in the exam room, the content of life's little tests vary. You might have to ask someone on a date, give a speech, fire an employee, or host an important function. Once again, the constant is you. You're the one who has to perform. So although you may have picked up this book to get by on classroom tests, you will be able to take what you learn here out into the world because many of these lessons apply as well to life as they do to school.

Have you ever wondered what the purpose of your life is? Common answers are "success," "happiness" or "satisfaction." While these are all worthwhile goals, isn't it more accurate to say: *The purpose of your life is to face every challenge, every test, as a chance for you to become the person you are meant to be. Life is a test for you to become your highest self.*

When you want a flower to grow in your garden, you go to the nursery and buy a packet of seeds. You can see exactly what you're going to end up with because there is a beautiful color picture of the fully-grown flower on the front of the packet. But when you open it, what do you find? Tiny black lumps that look like mouse droppings. Does that discourage you? No, because you know what these seeds are meant to become. You set up the environment for the seeds to grow. You prepare the soil. You plant the seed, and then make sure you give it the right amount of sunlight and water. When that tiny seedling finally sprouts, it is delicate, and you protect it and care for it until it grows into the flower it is meant to be.

I believe that somewhere inside you there is a seed packet with your picture on it, a picture of the fully realized you. It's not easy to grow this flower. There are challenges all along the way. But when you face them, you learn from them and you grow with them. Through this process, you grow into the flower in full bloom. Flowers cannot become fully realized unless they push their way up through the soil and compete for sun and space with other plants. Our conditions aren't much different. We have to find our way in the world, and all along we face tests of physical illness, mental troubles, financial reversals, unfulfilled expectations and loss.

Though we cannot choose most of the tests we face in life, we can choose how we're going to face them. Are we going to have a miserable experience, crumble under the pressure, run away, or avoid challenges altogether? Or are we going to find

the strength and inner resources to rise to the challenges and fully actualize our potential? That's the term psychologists use for becoming the person you are meant to be. Facing tests in the right way will give you this opportunity. When you face the tests of life, learn from them and grow with them, you become that person. The tests of life require you to call on the inner resources residing deep inside you. By doing that, you come to know yourself and to develop your innate capacities. That is what we mean by actualizing your potential, and being tested presents you with the opportunities to do it. Tests are like a challenging teacher or friend; if you maintain a good relationship with them, many of your best qualities will emerge.

Fortunately, we don't have to reinvent the wheel here. There are exquisite role models who have preceded us and can show us how to face the vicissitudes of life in a meaningful way. These are the teachers and masters, saints and sages, the divinely inspired women and men who dedicated their lives to finding meaning and purpose through their struggles. Jesus on the cross, Buddha under the bodhi tree, Moses in the desert, Mohammed in the cave. Each faced the tests that life handed them, and they mastered the ability to learn and grow and become fully realized beings. We may not all be sages and saints, but we all face tests on a regular basis, and some of them are severe and daunting. Do we have the strength to overcome, the fortitude to persevere, the humor to see things in a lighter way? With these capacities, it is possible to do more than just get by. We can do something inspiring with our lives. Great beings create a memorable path through life's tests. Because ultimately, that's what life is—a path with tests at every bend in the road. And every test is there to help us grow and to fully become the people we are meant to be.

## **ONE MORE THOUGHT**

You may have noticed that the title of this book isn't *Dr. B's Bag of Magic Tricks*. There's no kit with a top hat and a wand that you wave over your head and then *Presto!* You can now sail through tests without studying and without concentrating. My job as a coach is to show you what to do. Your job is to do it. For some people, that's not an easy thing. It isn't that the information is hard or the message indirect. The material presented here is very direct and clear. The problem is that they don't particularly want to work for a solution to their problem. They want someone else to solve their problems for them. Perhaps they're hoping this book will do it.

Over the years, I have discovered that there are two groups of people: those who are ready to work for change and those who want a quick fix. The latter often come into my office cramped with anxiety over an upcoming test. After the first session, they are filled with hope and enthusiasm. They come to the second session all

pumped up saying, “This is great, I get it.” But several weeks later they call or email, moaning in a most painful way, “Oh, Dr. B, I’m still so stressed out! I haven’t done any of the exercises you gave me. Do you have any more tips?”

Yes, I do have lots of “tips,” but what good will they do if the person won’t follow them anymore than they worked with my original tips? If you want the results, you have to follow the coaching. Ultimately, you have to become your own coach. There’s no way around it. And if you do, the rewards are great. I have watched high school seniors raise their SAT scores by 200 to 300 points. I’ve seen doctors ace strenuous licensing exams. Outside the classroom, I’ve watched as athletes win games and musicians succeed in auditions. And in the other arenas of life that we don’t ordinarily call a test environment, people who practice being calm, confident and focused overcome challenges and become their personal best.

**Learn to be  
your own coach.  
Practice being calm,  
confident and  
focused.**

In facing the challenges, they learn life’s most important lesson: be present. You know that phrase they use at raffles? “You have to be present to win.” The same is true of life. Only by being present can we develop the awareness that we’re veering off track, and then get back on track. How many times in your life have you had to admit that you *screwed up* because you didn’t *show up*?

There is a real correlation between awareness and excellence, but awareness doesn’t happen accidentally. Usually, our minds are wandering far from home, leap-frogging from the past into the future, oblivious to what’s in front of us. To cultivate awareness and achieve your highest potential, you have to train yourself.

Taking tests in a classroom, much as we may hate it, actually has a silver lining. It trains us to bring our awareness to bear on the present moment and to practice being calm, confident and focused. When you learn how to master yourself in the tense environment of test taking, you will feel empowered to take those skills out of the classroom and into the rest of your life. You will have taught yourself to be strong, responsible and embodied when confronted with a difficult and challenging task. You can use that knowledge anywhere you go.

As long as you are willing to do the work to become a successful test taker, I can coach you through the process.