Reducing Test Anxiety for Oral Exams

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Background & Purpose

Primary board certification in the specialty of anesthesiology requires passing a standardized oral examination (SOE) after passage of two prior written exams. Examinees answer guided guestions over two 35-minute sessions that assess knowledge, judgement, and adaptability to changing clinical scenarios.¹ The national failure rate for the 2018 SOE was 11%.²

Oral exam anxiety is present at a much higher rate than written test anxiety.^{3,4} Studies from the general surgery education literature suggest that confidence in one's communication skills, regular oral exam practice, and learning to control anxiety may have significant roles in improving oral exam passage rates.^{5,6,7} Information about more formal, guided training for the SOE apart from occasional mock oral exams is lacking in the specialty of anesthesiology.

Methods

A monthly oral board review curriculum was implemented for the Emory Anesthesiology residency program covering all general and subspecialty topics tested on the SOE. Group mock oral exams tailored to each class's experience level occurred monthly along with periodic lectures about improving oral presentation skills and confidence. Residents also participated in multiple individual mock oral exams to mimic SOE conditions.

The Westside Test Anxiety Scale (WTAS) is a validated ten-item questionnaire that screens for test-anxiety impairments.⁸ Upper-level anesthesiology residents (PGY-3s and PGY-4s) were asked to assess their SOE test-taking anxiety using the WTAS both before and after implementation of the curriculum. Post-curriculum, residents were also asked to rate the usefulness of the curriculum using a 5-point Likert scale.

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With a low response rate, the study was underpowered for drawing significant conclusions. Despite no significant differences in WTAS scores pre- and post-curriculum, residents rated the usefulness of the curriculum an average of 3.9 on a 5-point Likert scale suggesting the curriculum still had utility for residents.

How useful did you find the 2021-2022 oral board examination didactics? (N/A for pre-curriculum survey))% 10 	0% 20 ⊨	0% 30	0% 40'	% 50%	60%	70%	80% 9	00% 100%	Mean Response
			2								3.9
After an exam, I worry about whether I did well enough.		-	3		5	4		5	2	2	3.5
		1			4		2	5	3	5	3.3
struggle with writing assignments or avoid them if I can. feel that whatever I do will not be good enough.		1		6			5		3	1	3.19
				4			3	1		2	2.9
When I study, I worry that I will not remember the naterial on the exam.		1	3			7			4	1	2.94
			2			5			2	1	2.8
nd that my mind sometimes wanders when I am taking	Pre	2	1		6			5		2	2.75
nportant exams.		1		2		4			2	1	3
iring important exams, I think that I am doing awful or	Pre Post	2			8			3		3	2.69
hat I may fail.		1		3			4			2	2.4
- -	Pre Post	2		5			7	1		2	2.44
finally remember the answer to exam questions after ne exam is already over.		2	2	1		8	1		1		2.1
worry so much before a major exam that I am too worn ut to do my best on the exam.		1		3			4			2	2.19
		2	2				9			3	2.19
lose focus on important exams, and I cannot remember he material that I knew before the exam.		1		2			6			1	2.19
		1	2	2			7	_	4		2.3
	Post	_	3			4			3		2.13
feel out of sorts or not really myself when I take mportant exams.			4			7			5		2.13
•	Post	- 1	1	1		3			4		1.94
The closer I am to a major exam, the harder it is for me o concentrate on the material.		5: Extremely or always true 4: Highly or usually true									
			3 : M	oderately	or sometim	nes true 2	: Slightly or	seldom true			2.2

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Results

Of 32 eligible participants, 16 participated in the re-curriculum survey and 10 participated in the ost-curriculum survey. There were no ignificant differences between pre-course and post-course with any questions. Matched pairs comparison was not performed due to an nadequate number of individuals completing ooth surveys (n=4).

Conclusion

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