

Reconceptualizing Test Anxiety Through Hope Theory: From Fear of Failure to Academic Goal Regulation

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Abstract

Test anxiety constitutes a critical educational concern that impairs students' exam performance, cognitive functioning, emotional well-being, and sustained academic engagement. Existing scholarship largely centers on its adverse effects on attention, working memory, stress reactivity, and academic outcomes, yet it overlooks a key discrepancy: some learners persistently chase academic goals amid test anxiety, whereas others engage in avoidance, procrastination, self-handicapping, or disengagement. This conceptual review reconceptualizes test anxiety through hope theory and academic goal pursuit via a targeted literature review and conceptual synthesis, integrating research on test anxiety, fear of failure, self-regulation, and goal cognition. Rather than merely framing test anxiety as a situational cognitive-emotional reaction to evaluative pressure, this work frames it as a goal-adjustment challenge shaped by fear of failure, perceived goal attainability, pathways thinking, and motivational agency. Fear of failure amplifies evaluative threat and drives defensive goal pursuit, while hope acts as a vital goal-regulatory resource. It sustains learning motivation, fosters alternative learning pathways, enables strategic adjustment, and supports persistent academic striving amid anxiety. This paper's core contribution reframes test anxiety research away from failure-induced performance impairment toward hope-centered goal regulation, offering a robust framework to explain student academic persistence under evaluative stress.

Keywords

test anxiety, hope theory, fear of failure, academic goal pursuit, goal regulation

1. Introduction

In highly evaluation-oriented educational environments, test anxiety has become an important issue affecting students' academic performance, cognitive processing, emotional well-being, and long-term engagement in learning [1–4]. Existing research often understands test anxiety as a set of cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses that arise in testing or evaluative contexts due to concerns about failure, negative evaluation, or the consequences of exams. This body of work has mainly focused on its negative effects on exam performance, attentional control, working memory, stress levels, and mental health [5–8]. Educational interventions in this area have therefore tended to emphasise anxiety reduction, stress management, cognitive behavioural training, and emotion regulation [9,10]. Existing research has explained well how test anxiety weakens students' exam performance, cognitive processing, and psychological well-being. Its main focus, however, has often been placed on immediate performance impairment in testing situations. Less attention has

been given to the ongoing process of goal pursuit, including exam preparation, interpretation of feedback, strategy adjustment, and long-term engagement in learning. This leaves an important question for further consideration. Why are some students, even when they experience test anxiety over a long period of time, still able to remain engaged in learning and sustain the pursuit of academic goals, while others gradually show avoidance, procrastination, self-handicapping, or even academic disengagement? Research on fear of failure suggests that when students interpret failure as evidence of damaged self-worth or insufficient ability, they are more likely to adopt self-protective avoidance strategies, such as procrastination, self-handicapping, and academic disengagement [11,12]. This indicates that test anxiety should not be understood only as an isolated negative emotional response. It may also be closely related to how students understand their goals, evaluate their own capacity for action, and identify possible pathways for achieving those goals.

This article aims to reinterpret exam anxiety: it is not only an emotional reaction, but also can be understood as a signal that students' pursuit of academic goals is disturbed. This perspective requires a cognitive-motivation framework to explain how students set goals, generate paths to achieve them, and maintain the motivation to take action. Snyder's hope theory defines hope as a goal-oriented system composed of goal, active thinking and path thinking [13,14], which fits this theoretical need. In this framework, agency thinking refers to individuals' perceived capacity and motivation to continue working toward their goals. Path thinking refers to the ability of individuals to generate routes to the goal and identify alternative strategies when existing routes are blocked. From this perspective, exam anxiety may increase when students no longer believe that they can continue to move towards their goals or cannot find an effective way to meet academic challenges. On the contrary, a higher level of hope may help students maintain action-oriented motivation, adjust their learning strategies, and still pursue academic goals in the case of fear of failure and exam anxiety [15,16]. This paper uses Hope Theory as a framework to look again at the relationship between test anxiety and academic goal pursuit. Many studies have discussed test anxiety through its symptoms and negative effects. This paper takes a slightly different focus. It looks at what happens when students feel both fear of failure and test anxiety. In this situation, some students keep working toward their academic goals, while others begin to avoid tasks or give up. Hope may play an important role in this process because it can support students' motivation and help them find ways to continue their pursuit of academic goals under pressure.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Traditional Theoretical Explanations of Test Anxiety and Their Limitations

In existing research, test anxiety is usually viewed as a multidimensional psychological response. Liebert and Morris initially distinguished test anxiety into two core components: worry and emotionality. They also pointed out that these two components have different relationships with expected test performance [17]. Zeidner further conceptualised test anxiety as a multidimensional psychological phenomenon involving cognitive, emotional, somatic, and behavioural manifestations [2]. Within this framework, the cognitive dimension has long been regarded as a key mechanism for explaining the negative effects of test anxiety. From the perspective of attentional processes, Sarason argued that test anxiety is largely reflected in the interference of intrusive thoughts with task-focused thinking [5]. Cassady and Johnson further examined the measurement and validation of cognitive test anxiety. Their findings showed that this cognitive dimension is significantly associated with poorer performance in both course examinations and standardised tests [3]. These studies suggest that traditional research has mainly understood the negative effects of test anxiety as a mechanism of performance impairment. In this view, anxiety affects students' immediate test performance by weakening attentional focus, information processing, and task execution efficiency [5,6]. Traditional research has also treated tension, physiological arousal, and stress responses as important emotional and somatic manifestations of test anxiety [2]. A meta-analysis by von der Embse et al. further showed that test anxiety is significantly and negatively associated with educational outcomes, including test performance, standardised test scores, and GPA. It is also related to individual and contextual variables, such as self-efficacy, motivation, self-regulation, achievement goals, and testing contexts [7]. An important contribution of this research tradition is that it clearly shows how test anxiety can impair students' immediate test performance in evaluative contexts through cognitive, emotional, and physiological mechanisms. Its explanatory focus, however, has mainly remained on the relationship between anxiety responses and performance impairment. It has paid less attention to the longer-term regulation of learning behaviour, goal maintenance, and academic engagement before and after

exams. As a result, it has limited capacity to explain why students differ in their long-term academic persistence. For the present paper, traditional theories provide a useful starting point for understanding the negative effects of test anxiety. Yet it is still necessary to examine how test anxiety may extend beyond an emotional-cognitive response in evaluative situations and become part of a broader process that shapes students' learning behaviour and goal regulation.

2.2 From Performance Impairment to Goal Pursuit: An Expanded Perspective on Test Anxiety Research

Exams should not be understood as isolated events. They are embedded in a broader learning process involving exam preparation, effort regulation, strategy use, task engagement, and goal maintenance. In this sense, the influence of test anxiety may extend beyond students' immediate exam performance. It may also shape how students continue to pursue academic goals when they anticipate failure or face evaluative pressure. Research on coping and self-regulation helps support this wider view. Endler and Parker's coping model divides responses to stress into three types: task-oriented coping, emotion-oriented coping, and avoidance-oriented coping [18]. Task-oriented coping means that people try to deal with stress through planning, problem solving, and changes in action. Avoidance-oriented coping is different. It means that people reduce stress by moving away from the stressful situation, related thoughts, or related behaviours. This view is useful for understanding test anxiety. In a meta-analysis, von der Embse et al. found that test anxiety was positively related to avoidance coping. They also found that test anxiety was negatively related to problem-focused or active coping. Test anxiety was also linked to lower self-regulation, self-efficacy, and academic confidence [7]. These findings show that test anxiety is not only about feeling tense or worried in exams. It may also be linked to how students manage their learning, put in their effort, and stay involved in academic work when they are under pressure. The cognitive side of test anxiety also helps explain why fear of failure matters here. Cassady and Johnson pointed out that cognitive test anxiety is mainly shown in students' worries and inner thoughts before, during, and after evaluative tasks. These worries may include comparing their performance with others, thinking about the results of failure, lacking confidence, paying too much attention to grades, feeling unprepared, and fearing harm to their self-worth [3]. These thoughts show that worry in test anxiety is often connected with self-evaluation and perceived threat. Test anxiety may not only reduce students' thinking during exams. It may also make students pay more attention to failure and its possible results when they are trying to reach academic goals. Fear of failure is usually understood as an anticipatory concern about the consequences of failure in achievement contexts. Its core concern is not simply the possibility of receiving a low grade. Rather, it involves worries that failure may lead to doubts about one's ability, damage to self-worth, negative evaluation from others, and loss of future opportunities [11,19]. In achievement motivation research, fear of failure is often regarded as an important source of avoidance-oriented motivation. When students interpret failure as evidence of insufficient ability or damaged self-worth, they may be more likely to adopt self-protective learning strategies.

These may include lowering the difficulty of goals, avoiding challenging tasks, delaying study, engaging in self-handicapping, or withdrawing from academic tasks [11,12,20,21]. Fear of failure can therefore explain why worry within test anxiety may move beyond an internal cognitive response and develop into defensive academic behaviours. On this basis, fear of failure can be seen as an important theoretical mechanism linking test anxiety with defensive goal pursuit. It will strengthen students' assessment of threats in the exam situation and make students pay more attention to the negative meaning of failure. It may also cause students to temporarily protect their self-worth by avoiding, procrastinating or self-limiting. From this point of view, the fear of failure provides an important perspective for understanding how exam anxiety affects the pursuit of academic goals. However, since this perspective mainly focuses on students' expectations and avoidance of failure-related consequences, it still has certain limitations in explaining how students can still maintain goal commitments, adjust learning strategies, seek support and maintain academic investment in the presence of anxiety and the risk of failure. For example, two students may have a similar fear of failure. One student may delay revision because they are afraid of failing again. This student may avoid difficult exam tasks or slowly lower their academic goals. Another student may also fear failure, but they may still keep the original goal. They may make a new revision plan, ask the teacher for feedback, discuss difficult points with classmates, or change their exam preparation methods. This difference shows that the pursuit of academic goals under the pressure of evaluation is not only about what negative results students try to avoid, but also about how they

judge whether the goal can still be achieved, whether they can find a feasible path to the goal, and whether they have the initiative to continue along these paths [13,14].

Hope Theory provides a more process-oriented cognitive-motivational framework for explaining this process of goal regulation. The theory understands hope as a goal-directed system composed of goals, pathways thinking, and agency thinking [13,14]. Goals provide direction for individual action. Pathways thinking refers to individuals' perceived ability to generate workable routes towards their goals. Agency thinking refers to individuals' perceived ability to initiate and sustain goal-directed action. In academic contexts, pathways thinking can be reflected in students' perceived capacity to identify learning strategies, problem-solving approaches, and alternative courses of action. Agency thinking can be reflected in students' perceived capacity to maintain effort and goal commitment under pressure, setbacks, or uncertainty. From this perspective, test anxiety may affect students' academic behaviour not only by activating the threat of failure. It may also undermine academic goal pursuit by weakening students' pathways thinking and agency thinking. In turn, hope may serve as a goal-regulation resource that helps students maintain goal-directed action under evaluative pressure.

2.3 Integrating Test Anxiety, HOPE, and Academic Goal Pursuit: A Theoretical Framework

Based on the literature reviewed above, test anxiety can be understood as an evaluative stress condition with implications for goal regulation. Fear of failure helps explain why students may adopt avoidance, procrastination, or self-protective strategies under evaluative pressure. Hope Theory further explains how students may still maintain goal commitment, generate pathways for action, and remain engaged when the risk of failure is present. This paper therefore proposes a goal-regulation framework based on Hope Theory. The framework is used to explain how test anxiety may influence academic goal pursuit, and how hope may play a potentially protective role in this process.

3. Research Methodology

This article is a conceptual review. It uses a targeted literature review together with conceptual synthesis. The article brings together key theories and representative studies on test anxiety, fear of failure, Hope Theory, and academic goal pursuit. Based on these studies, it builds a goal-regulation framework to explain how test anxiety may affect students' pursuit of academic goals. The purpose of this article is not to review all studies on a single variable relationship. It also does not compare effect sizes across different studies. The focus of this article is theory building. For this reason, the article selects classic theories, important empirical studies, and meta-analytic reviews that are closely related to the research question. By bringing these studies together, the article shows the limits of existing test anxiety research. It also explains how Hope Theory can help us understand students' pursuit of academic goals in anxiety-related contexts. Relevant literature was identified through searches in Google Scholar, Web of Science, Scopus, PsycINFO, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. The search covered studies published from 1980 to 2025. This time range was chosen because it includes both early theoretical literature and recent studies on test anxiety, fear of failure, and Hope Theory. The main search terms included "Hope Theory," "pathways thinking," "agency thinking," "test anxiety," "cognitive test anxiety," "fear of failure," "achievement motivation," "goal-directed cognition," and "self-regulation." The reference lists of key theoretical works and highly cited empirical studies were also checked to find other relevant sources. This article prioritised peer-reviewed journal articles, theoretical papers, meta-analytic reviews, and classic literature that were highly relevant to the research topic. Studies were included if they met one or more of the following criteria: they discussed the cognitive or motivational mechanisms of test anxiety; analysed the relationship between fear of failure and avoidance-oriented achievement motivation; explained pathways thinking and agency thinking in Hope Theory; or examined the relationships among self-regulation, coping, and academic engagement. Studies were not treated as core sources for the theoretical integration if they only discussed general anxiety without a clear educational evaluation context, or if they discussed hope without addressing the process of goal pursuit.

4. Theoretical Synthesis

This paper proposes a goal-regulation framework based on Hope Theory. The framework is used to explain the relationships among test anxiety, fear of failure, hope, and academic goal pursuit. Within this framework, test anxiety is not only an emotional-cognitive response that affects exam performance. It can also be understood as an evaluative stress condition that may interfere with students' goal-regulation process. More specifically, fear of failure may strengthen the threatening meaning of testing situations. It may make students more focused on the consequences of failure, negative evaluation, and damage to self-worth. Test anxiety may further affect how students judge goal attainability, possible pathways for action, and their capacity to sustain effort. Hope Theory offers a complementary perspective on this process. It helps explain whether students can continue to generate pathways towards their goals and maintain the agency to act towards those goals while anxiety is present. First, fear of failure forms an important motivational pathway through which test anxiety may shift towards defensive academic goal pursuit. Based on the review above, fear of failure may strengthen students' threat appraisal of testing situations. In this way, test anxiety may move from a general experience of tension to a perceived threat to ability, self-worth, and future opportunities. As a result, students may become more likely to adopt defensive academic behaviours, such as avoidance, procrastination, self-handicapping, or reduced engagement. Second, test anxiety may influence academic goal pursuit by interfering with the process of goal regulation. Traditional research emphasises that test anxiety may affect exam performance through cognitive interference, the occupation of attentional resources, and impaired information processing. Cognitive test anxiety has also been found to be associated with lower performance in course examinations and standardised tests [3,7]. From a goal-regulation perspective, however, the influence of test anxiety may extend further into the learning process before and after exams. Students with high test anxiety may find it more difficult to understand academic difficulties as problems that can be addressed through strategy adjustment. They may also find it harder to identify effective pathways for action or maintain the subjective belief that they can continue to invest effort. Test anxiety may therefore affect not only cognitive processing during exams, but also exam preparation, strategy adjustment, effort maintenance, and continued goal pursuit after receiving exam feedback. Third, Hope Theory can help explain why some students still stay involved in learning when they feel test anxiety. Some explanations of test anxiety mainly focus on the threat of failure. Hope Theory gives a different angle because it looks at how students think about possible ways to reach a goal and whether they believe they can keep working toward it [14].

In academic settings, pathways thinking can be seen in everyday learning actions. Students may make revision plans, change their study methods, ask for feedback, or look for another way to understand difficult content. Agency thinking is more about whether students can keep putting in effort when they face pressure, setbacks, or uncertainty. Fourth, this distinction is useful for understanding academic persistence. Students with a stronger sense of agency may still believe that they can work toward their academic goals, even when they feel anxious or experience temporary failure. For example, a student who performs poorly in an exam may continue reviewing, change the study plan, and stay focused on the course goals. This student may not immediately reduce effort or give up on later assessment tasks. In this situation, the agency helps the student return to action and keep working under exam pressure.

Pathways thinking also matters in this process. Previous research has found that hope pathways are positively related to coping strategies such as direct problem-solving, planning, and positive thinking [22]. In academic contexts, this means that students with stronger pathway thinking may be better able to change their revision strategies, ask for feedback, reorganise their time, or find another learning route when their first study plan does not work. For these students, exam pressure may be seen as a problem that needs adjustment, rather than as a sign that the goal has already failed. Overall, this paper does not argue that hope removes test anxiety. A more reasonable view is that hope may help students keep pathways thinking and agency while anxiety is still present. Test anxiety may lead some students to withdraw from academic goals, but this is not always the case. Its effect may depend on whether students can still find workable ways forward and whether they believe they can continue to act toward their goals.

5. Discussion

The main contribution of this paper is not to deny the negative effects of test anxiety on students' performance and psychological well-being. Rather, it further suggests that the influence of test anxiety may

extend beyond performance impairment during the exam itself. Existing research has already provided substantial evidence on how test anxiety affects exam performance through cognitive interference, the consumption of attentional resources, emotional arousal, and stress responses [5–8]. Building on this work, this paper extends the focus of analysis to the process of goal regulation before and after exams. From this perspective, test anxiety is not only an emotional-cognitive response in evaluative situations, but also a goal-regulatory stressor that may shape students' judgments of goal attainability, their generation of action pathways, and their belief in sustained effort. The theoretical contribution of this paper lies in using Hope Theory to complement the threat-avoidance explanation centred on fear of failure. Fear of failure helps explain why students may develop avoidance, procrastination, or self-protective responses under evaluative pressure. However, it is less able to explain why some students continue to engage in learning when they face similar risks of failure and experiences of anxiety. Hope Theory offers a further explanation through pathways thinking and agency. Whether students persist in pursuing their goals may depend not only on how strongly they fear failure, but also on whether they can generate workable pathways and believe that they are still able to continue taking action. Unlike traditional views that mainly treat test anxiety as a negative emotion that needs to be reduced or eliminated, this paper argues that anxiety does not necessarily lead to academic goal withdrawal. Its influence depends on whether students are able to maintain pathways thinking and agency. In this sense, the value of hope does not lie in removing anxiety, but in supporting students to continue taking action, adjusting their pathways, and sustaining goal commitment while anxiety is still present.

6. Future Directions

Future research could test the relationships between the main variables discussed in this paper. One useful direction would be to examine how test anxiety, fear of failure, hope, and academic goal pursuit change together over time. Researchers may pay particular attention to the roles of pathway thinking and agency. These two parts of hope may mediate, moderate, or protect against the link between test anxiety and academic goal withdrawal. It would also be useful to compare students with different levels of test anxiety. This may help show whether hope can reduce the risk of academic disengagement among students who experience high test anxiety. Another important direction is to clarify how test anxiety affects academic goal pursuit at the psychological level. This paper suggests that fear of failure may lead students toward defensive goal pursuit because it makes exams feel more threatening. At the same time, pathways thinking and agency may help students keep taking goal-directed action. Future studies could examine two possible chains: one linking fear of failure, threat appraisal, and avoidance behaviour, and another linking hope, pathway generation, and sustained engagement. These studies could also look more closely at related factors, such as cognitive worry, emotional arousal, self-efficacy, achievement goals, and self-regulation. The framework may also need to be examined in different educational settings. Test anxiety may not work in the same way across all assessment situations. Its effect on goal regulation may change with the type of assessment, the level of pressure, the stage of education, and the cultural background of students. For example, ordinary classroom quizzes, high-stakes entrance examinations, and standardised tests may shape students' fear of failure and academic goal pursuit in different ways. Similarly, secondary school students, undergraduate students, and postgraduate students may differ in their pathways thinking, agency, and learning autonomy. Future studies could therefore examine the applicability and boundary conditions of this framework across different assessment contexts, educational stages, and cultural settings. Future research could also explore how Hope Theory can be used in educational practice. Existing interventions for test anxiety often focus on anxiety reduction, cognitive reappraisal, relaxation training, or emotion regulation [9,10]. The theoretical framework proposed in this paper suggests that interventions could also focus on how students maintain goal-directed action while anxiety is still present. For example, teachers could guide students to clarify short-term revision goals, develop several workable pathways for exam preparation, adjust their strategies when their original revision plans are disrupted or when they perform poorly in an exam, and use process-based feedback to strengthen students' belief that they can continue taking action. In this way, such interventions may help students maintain learning engagement and academic goal pursuit even when test anxiety remains present. Future studies could further examine whether this type of hope-based intervention can complement traditional test anxiety interventions and support students' long-term academic persistence and goal pursuit.

7. Conclusion

By integrating literature on test anxiety, fear of failure, Hope Theory, and academic goal pursuit, this paper proposes a theoretical framework centred on goal regulation. It argues that test anxiety should not be understood only as a problem of performance impairment driven by fear of failure. It should also be understood as a goal-regulatory process involving goal maintenance, pathway generation, and agency. Moving beyond fear of failure and paying closer attention to how students maintain pathways thinking and agency under evaluative pressure may provide a more constructive theoretical perspective for understanding academic persistence and goal pursuit.

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