

Exams: Managing Anxiety

Feeling nervous before an exam is normal

Most students are familiar with feelings of butterflies in the stomach – feeling nervous. Worrying whether you will be able to answer the questions is an indication of exam nerves that is familiar to most students. Indeed, some nervous anticipation helps us to feel alert and focused. But too much anxiety can create a negative mindset that, without strategies to manage it, can lead to poor exam performance.

There are a number of things you can do to turn exam anxiety into a constructive force.

Before

- Establish a routine of revision that includes time to relax, especially last thing at night. Experiment until you find your preferred method, e.g., a bath, exercise, listening to music, or a relaxation tape (available from the Medical Centre)
- Learn a relaxation or stress management technique. Knowing how to relax is invaluable.
- Prepare well. As well as revising your subjects, consider the practical aspects of the exam. Find where it is to be held, and how long it will take you to get there. If possible, visit the room or building so it will feel more familiar on the day of the exam. Familiarise yourself with the rules about what you can take into the exam room.
- Imagine how you would LIKE things to go. For example, imagine arriving at the exam feeling confident and relaxed. Rather like rehearsing for a play, picture it in detail as this can help replace negative thoughts with positive ones.
- Don't study up to the last minute before the exam. Last-minute revision can leave you feeling muddled and anxious.

During

When you get into the exam room, sit down and use the following approach to focus you on the task:

- Take a deep breath in, and a long breath out.
- Breathe in again and straighten your back, as if someone were pulling a lever between your shoulder blades.
- Look at something inanimate (the wall, a picture, the clock...) and focus your mind on the positive thought 'I CAN DO this exam' as you breathe out.
- Take another deep breath in, and a long breath out. Then breathe normally.
- You will have 15 minutes to read the paper; do so thoroughly. If you begin to feel panicky, repeat the above steps.
- Read the whole paper a second time, and mark the questions you think you can answer. Then read those questions carefully, making sure you understand what is required, and select the ones you will answer.
- Decide on the order in which you'll answer the questions, beginning with the one you feel most confident about.
- Plan your answer for each question, and stick to your plan. If thoughts or ideas about other questions come to mind, note them on a separate piece of paper for when you get up to them.
- If your concentration lags, or you begin to feel anxious, repeat the first steps to refocus your mind. Take five minutes to try one of the following techniques.

Anxiety management techniques

Developing techniques for managing anxiety can take time, so keep practising.

Thought stopping

When we become anxious, we begin to have negative thoughts ('I can't answer anything' etc). If this happens, halt the thoughts by mentally shouting 'STOP!' or picture a road STOP sign, or traffic lights on red. Once you have literally stopped the thoughts, practise a relaxation technique or continue with your task.

Distract yourself

Mild pain, such as pressing your fingernails into your palm, can block feelings of anxiety. Another technique is to place an elastic band around one wrist, then when you feel yourself becoming anxious, stretch it lightly and let it go so that it flicks your skin and distracts you from worrying thoughts.

Use a mantra

Derived from meditation, a mantra is a word or phrase which you repeat to yourself. Saying something like 'calm' or 'relax' under your breath or in your head, over and over again, can help defuse anxiety.

Shift your focus

Distract yourself from anxious thoughts by noticing the number of people wearing glasses, or counting the number of desks in each row. Once you feel the tension subside, return your focus to the task.

Bridging objects

It can help to carry or wear something with positive associations to a person or situation. Touching this bridging object can have a calming effect as you think about the person or situation with which the object is associated.

Self-talk

Experiencing exam anxiety, we often give ourselves negative messages, 'I can't do this', 'I'm going to fail', 'I'm useless'. Consciously replace these with positive, encouraging thoughts:

- 'This is just worry, it can't harm me'
- 'Relax, concentrate, it's going to be OK'
- 'I have prepared well for this'
- 'I'm getting there, it's nearly over'

Different techniques work for different people, so it's worth experimenting to find the ones that are right for you. Whichever technique works for you, finish by going through the refocusing exercise. It can have a profound effect on your ability to focus on the task in hand and to believe in yourself.

Other helpsheets available

- Stress Management: A Guide for Students (available from the Health Centre)
- Time Management
- Short Answer Questions
- Exams: Multiple Choice Questions
- Examination Strategies