



Exam Stress and Anxiety Management

Most students notice some stress and anxiety at the thought of sitting exams.

- Some students, however, will experience a degree of stress and anxiety that is consuming. Their fears can manifest in physical symptoms such as difficulty sleeping, headaches, breathless and they may feel their focus is impaired.
- It then becomes important to take steps to minimise and reduce these feelings.

What is stress and anxiety? How are they different?

- Stress is when we are faced with something too challenging or even overwhelming, causing physical tension and mental anguish.
- Anxiety can create stress or be a response to it. Anxiety is the response every person has in response to uncertainty. When we are uncertain, we feel a certain sensation in our gut and our thoughts turn toward figuring it out. We begin "what if" thinking to figure out the uncertainty and resolve anxiety (Wehrenberg, 2012).

When we feel acute anxiety, our bodies go into a 'fight', or 'flight' response. We become prepared to fight, or run away. The main bodily change is the release of adrenaline & cortisol which gives us the surge of energy to act.

Stores of adrenaline and cortisol not used up by action or fighting off the threat can have a damaging effect on our auto-immune system, affecting sleep, memory, the capacity to learn, concentrate and focus.

Other changes you might notice:

- **Increased muscle tension**
- **Increased heart rate**
- **Increased breathing rate**
- **Feeling sweaty**
- **Feeling nauseous**

Feeling stressed about exams is normal and to be expected.

Not all stress is bad. A moderate amount can sharpen concentration and performance and help to create the extra energy and motivation needed to keep studying, when you might prefer to be doing something else.

However, too much anxiety can be overwhelming and stop you from being able to study and get on with life in a satisfying way.

How can you help yourself?

- The antithesis of exam fear is **preparation** and a well organised study programme that factors in breaks for physical and mental well-being.
- Know what type of learner you are (auditory, visual, kinesthetic, or a combination) and then devise study techniques that align with your learning style. This is a must-read article.
http://www.passingexams.co.nz/downloads/other/Discovering_How_You_Learn_Best1.pdf

Coping strategies

Mental Well-Being

Sleep Hygiene: Get as much rest as you can; 9 hours a night is recommended. If sleeping is difficult have a look at your sleep routine and check whether you are having a wind down period before you go to bed without any screen time. It is vitally important to go to bed device free so that your mind can detach from the buzz.

Study Patterns:

- Take regular breaks. Few people can concentrate for hours at a stretch.
- Forcing yourself to sit at a desk for hours while your mind is wandering is **not** useful.
- If you notice you are distracted, get up and take a short break. Head outside and connect with a green or blue space.
- If your mind is wandering repeatedly try studying in shorter bursts of time bringing the time down to one that feels manageable and productive. For example, 15 minutes at a time.

15 minutes when you can concentrate is better than 3 hours of staring into space and then feeling guilty or anxious.

- Defeat your revision enemies with these clips on 'the fear', 'the fog', and the 'cram' to help improve your focus and stop you from overloading.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2Tc9FPRfmszxGziDC7cLNg4/defeat-your-revision-enemies>

Physical preparation

Food:

* Try to eat at least two proper meals a day which includes protein and vegetables. Paying extra attention to your diet and ensuring that it is balanced, and protein rich will be of benefit.

* A good diet has positive effects on mood, concentration and productivity. Essentially a diet that includes:

- magnesium (think wholegrains),
- vitamin B12 (fish, dairy, cheese, eggs)
- zinc (dark chocolate, spinach, almonds)
- Antioxidants (blueberries, pecans, goji berries)

You can also take a vitamin supplement of magnesium and vitamin B12 for an added calming effect. Ask your local health store or seek advice from an herbalist.

See this website for further info regarding calming food for dealing with anxiety <http://www.hungryforchange.tv/article/6-anti-anxiety-foods-to-calm-your-mind>.

Drink:

- It is important to maintain a good level of hydration. Drinking plenty of water is best and helps you to think clearly.

Caffeine:

- There is research to show that whilst caffeine consumption in the short term is an effective stimulant, it is not helpful for people who are experiencing anxiety.

Exercise:

- Taking some form of daily exercise will help to relax tense muscles and use up some of the surplus adrenaline and increase your circulation. Frequent short walks can be helpful and getting outside is hugely beneficial for your mental well-being.
- Factor in exercise to your daily study schedule. You will find post exercise improvements in your ability to concentrate.

Breathing and relaxation exercises:

- Simple breathing exercises can help you cope and feel more in control. Out of all the anxiety research that has been done, the one coping strategy that stands out is the breath. Come in and see the guidance counsellor for an example of an effective breathing exercise. Or check out the following free Apps for excellent resources at your finger tip.

Breathe – this app will talk you through correct diaphragmatic breathing and show you the inhale and exhale. It uses the camera part of your phone to

measure your heart rate then takes you through a breathing exercise and re-measures your heart rate to see if you have slowed your resting heart rate.

Smiling Mind – this app demonstrates simple mindfulness and meditation exercises you can do in the comfort of your own room.

It is not enough to just think that you can use a breathing exercise on the day of your exam. You need to learn one now and practice it at least twice daily.

The Countdown – You need space and time for yourself

- Making time for relaxation – even in the weeks leading up to the exams, it is important to give yourself time off to do something you enjoy.
- You could try displaying uplifting and positive images around your work space.
- Carrying supportive words or phrases with you in a pocket or displayed on your phone while you head to school for your exam can be helpful for settling and bringing you back to the present moment
- The night before an exam try to detach from technology and spend time with family. Get outside and do something active with a willing family member. Do a little bit of revision but don't cram yourself as you'll feel overloaded.

On the assessment or exam day

- You may find it helpful to review some prepared brief notes or prompt cards.
- Use the release of adrenaline to energise and motivate you.
- Try to accept that this is how you feel now, but it won't last forever, and the anxiety will decrease once you get started on your exam.
- The chapel will be open prior to your exams as a quiet and reflective space to be. You are welcome to light a candle. The chapel will be supervised by a staff member and is strictly a **non-talking** space. The timing will work so that you leave the chapel and go directly to your exam room and therefore avoid the time mingling around with others.
- Remind yourself that you have the tools to help calm your mind, ultimately this is the breathing technique and a body scan to bring you back to the present moment and focus a wandering mind.

Don't wait until you're in the exam room to do a breathing exercise or body scan, do it first thing in the morning and then for as many more times as you need.

Tips for during the exam

- Breathe.... always remember to breathe. Give yourself time to settle before reading the exam questions and starting to write.
- Read through the exam paper, marking easier questions first with a tick and difficult questions with a question mark.
- Allow time per question according to the marks they are worth.
- Plan your answers, make sure you are answering what the question is specifically asking. Anxiety can sometimes cause us to write excessive ramble which gets you no points and will just exhaust you. Take the time to plan and answer specifically.
- Stay until the time is up, checking your answers for spelling, grammar, legibility etc....

Your results don't define you as a person

Some people say things like: "If I don't get excellence, merit...."

- I won't get a good job
- Other people will think badly of me
- I will be a complete failure
- People will think I'm dumb
- I will be letting my parents down.....

Whilst it would be disappointing if you do not perform as well as you hoped, the chances are that will not be as catastrophic as any of the above thoughts suggest.

Challenge these with a more realistic view of the situation

Try statements such as:

I have prepared well for this

I have done all that I can do, now I am going to do my best

I have got tools on board to help me should I feel anxious

I can do this!

Tips for after the exam

- Try not to engage in post exam mortems. Instead shift your focus from the exam you have just finished to the next one.
- Review your stress management/relaxation techniques to see if they were effective in helping you to cope. Ask for help from a parent or the guidance counsellor if needed.

Be kind to yourself, reward yourself with a treat like doing something you really enjoy.

It
always
seems
impossible
until
it is

DONE.