

## Coping strategies and guidance for exam-related stress

### Exam Stress

Exam anxiety is:

- excessive worry about upcoming exams
- fear of being evaluated
- apprehension about the consequences
- experienced by many normal students
- not mysterious or difficult to understand
- manageable by following a plan of helpful suggestions

Four main areas which can contribute to your exam anxiety are:

#### Lifestyle issues:-

- inadequate rest
- poor nutrition
- too many stimulants
- insufficient exercise
- not scheduling available time
- not prioritising commitments

#### Information needs:-

- strategies for exam-taking
- academic information such as course requirements, lecturers' expectations, exam dates and exam location
- knowledge of how to apply anxiety reduction techniques while studying before any exam

#### Poor Studying Styles:-

- Inefficient: inconsistent content coverage; trying to memorize the textbook; binge studying; all-night studying before exams
- Ineffective: reading without understanding; cannot recall the material; not making revision notes; not revising

#### Psychological Factors:-

- feeling little or no control over the exam situation (rather than knowing and applying exam strategies)
- negative thinking and self-criticism (rather than being one's own best friend)
- irrational thinking about exams and outcomes
- irrational beliefs "If I don't pass, my (family/boyfriend/girlfriend/friends) will lose respect for me"; "I will never get the grade I need"
- irrational demands "I have to get at least a B or I am worthless."
- catastrophic predictions "I'll fail no matter what I do—there's no point."

### General Exam Stress-Busting Tips

**Believe in yourself.** If you prepare for the exams properly you should do fine, meaning that there is no need to worry excessively.

**Don't try to be perfect.** It's great to succeed and reach for the stars, but keep things in balance. If you think that "anything less than a 2.1 means I've failed" then you are creating mountains of unnecessary stress for yourself. Aim to do your best but do recognise that none of us can be perfect all of the time.

**Take steps to overcome problems.** If you find you don't understand some of your course material, getting stressed out won't help. Instead, take action to address the problem directly by seeing or talking to your Tutor or getting help from your classmates.

**Don't keep things bottled up.** Confiding in someone you trust and who will be supportive is a great way to alleviate stress and worry. You are welcome to come to Student Services or speak to any member of SLT, Miss Swain, Mr O'Rourke, Miss Ojulah or Mr Carter to talk about your specific concerns.

**Keep things in perspective.** The exams might seem like the most crucial thing right now but, in the grander scheme of your whole life, they are only a small part. Interrupt negative thoughts with positive ones. Examples: "I can do this", "I will do my best", "I can pass this test", "I will focus only on the question in front of me." "I have done it before, so I can do it again." Actively challenge your irrational thoughts. Life will be worth living regardless of this exam. Respect yourself for taking this course and getting this far, regardless of the outcome.

**Plan your study time.** Too much material + Too little time = Anxiety. Plan your studying with regularly scheduled study sessions about 50 minutes long separated by 5 – 10 minute breaks.

**Try to maintain a healthy lifestyle.** Anxiety increases when one feels tired, run down and overwhelmed. Overall resilience depends on one's physical and mental health, which can be strengthened by:

- enough movement and exercise (vs. couch potato lifestyle)
- balanced life (vs. over-stress)
- positive thoughts/beliefs (vs. self-defeating thoughts/cynicism)
- health focus (vs. self-neglect)
- replenishing nutrition (vs. junk food)
- regular and adequate sleep (vs. late night lifestyle)

**Get accurate information.** Check your School Handbook and get an understanding of the grading procedure. If you don't understand, ask. Well before the exam, make sure you know where it will be held, the start time, how long it will last, whether extra time will be allowed. Ask your Lecturer any questions like when the marks will be available, what materials can or should be brought into the exam room.

**Get yourself into exam mode.** Practice on sample tests in the textbook or study guide. Look at past exams. Ask for suggestions from your Lecturer what to expect in the exam, what course materials should be emphasised, how to prioritise study time for the course.

**Plan.** Rest well the night before the exam. Plan to arrive at the exam location early. If you can pick your seat, choose one away from the doors, windows or other distractions. Plan to monitor the time during the exam so wear a watch or sit where you can see the clock. Plan to wear layers of clothing so you can adjust your need for more warmth or coolness. Check out the examination room ahead of time if you can.

**Avoid bad things.** Give coffee and other stimulants a miss the night before the exam or on the day of the exam. Avoid anxious or talkative students. Avoid other people or things that may disturb your self-confidence, focus and level of relaxation. Definitely avoid arriving late.

### Tips for the Revision Period

**Leave plenty of time to revise** so that you don't have to do last minute cramming. Giving yourself adequate time will help to boost your confidence and reduce any pre-exam stress as you know you have prepared well.

**Develop a timetable** so that you can track and monitor your progress. Make sure you allow time for fun and relaxation so that you avoid burning out.

**Take a short break** as soon as you notice your mind is losing concentration. Make yourself a sandwich. You will then come back to your revision refreshed. Be careful that you don't reward yourself during your break with five minutes of TV or checking your e-mail or Facebook. A few minutes can easily turn into an hour before you know it.

**Experiment with alternative revision techniques** so that revision is more fun and your motivation to study is high. Try mind-mapping, use multi-coloured index cards, get yourself an assortment of highlighter pens.

**Don't drink too much coffee,** tea or fizzy drinks; the caffeine will 'hype' you and make your thinking less clear. Eat healthily and regularly; your brain will benefit from the nutrients. Don't give in to a Saturday evening of binge drinking, either!

**Regular moderate exercise** will boost your energy, clear your mind and reduce feelings of stress. Try out some yoga, pilates, tai chi or relaxation techniques. They will help to keep you feeling calm and balanced, improve your concentration levels and help you to sleep better.

### Tips for the Exam itself

**Avoid panic.** It's natural to feel some exam nerves prior to starting the exam, but getting excessively nervous is counterproductive as you will not be able to think as clearly.

The quickest and most effective way to eliminate feelings of stress and panic is to close your eyes and take several long, slow **deep breaths**. Breathing in this way calms your whole nervous system. Simultaneously you could give yourself some mental pep-talk by mentally repeating "I am calm and relaxed" or "I know I will do fine".

If your mind goes blank, don't panic! It will just make it harder to recall information. Instead, focus on slow, deep breathing for about one minute. If you still can't remember the information, then move on to another question and return to this question later.

**Take a small bottle of water** into the exam with you and some sweets (if allowed—find out ahead of time). Have a drink of water. If you are really stuck, you might consider getting up and taking a short walk outside the room to compose yourself or going to the toilet. Ask the invigilator for assistance. When you are able, get back to work - remember that it is better to put *something* down rather than nothing.

**Remember** that the invigilator is there to assist you (for instance, if you have a problem with distracting noises inside or outside of the examination room, if the sun is shining on your exam paper, if you need a drink of water, etc.).

### Survey what's in front of you

- Read the instructions carefully
- Quickly survey every page of the exam paper
- See what will be expected of you
- Re-read the instructions a second time (are you really being asked to answer either one or three of the questions?)

### **Prioritise what needs to be done**

- When surveying the exam paper, place a mark beside all questions you know you can answer
- Divide up your time according to the importance of the questions
- Answer the easiest questions first to guarantee marks in the least amount of time

### **Pace yourself**

- Do not rush through the exam
- Regularly check time left for the rest of the questions
- Give yourself time to proofread; you should not still be writing at the invigilator's "5 minutes remaining" announcement

### **After the exam**

- The day before the exam, you might want to decide what you are going to do immediately after the exam ends. Standing around and joining in with others' delight or dismay is almost always discouraging. If you have something already planned you can simply leave others to do the post-mortem, while you go and do something more enjoyable. Whatever you do, **don't** spend endless time criticising yourself for where you think you went wrong. Often our own self-assessment is far too harsh. Congratulate yourself for the things you did right, learn from the bits where you know you could have done better, and then move on.
- **Plan to reward yourself for your hard work.** After the exam, do something you enjoy that makes you feel special: take a relaxing walk, have coffee with a friend, buy yourself a present, exercise, have dinner at a favourite restaurant, take a luxurious bath with candles, soft music and a good book (not a textbook). If you are going to meet up with someone, you could agree with them that you will only talk about the exam for 5 minutes - or even not at all. It's important that you let the stress of the exam go if you have more exams to sit over the next few days or weeks..

### **Some Anxiety Reduction Techniques**

#### **Take a deep breath:-**

- hold it for three seconds
- exhale audibly all at once and let your head, jaw and shoulders drop
- breathe easy 'into' your neck, jaw and shoulders and breathe again into the relaxed state
- repeat cycle once or twice
- if you try this in an exam, you will likely want to exhale more quietly so that you don't disturb the other students

#### **Total tension release (can be done lying down or sitting):-**

- tense your whole body one part at a time
- lift your toes and tense both calves
- tense your thighs and buttocks
- tighten your abdomen
- tense your chest and back
- tighten your arms and clench your fists
- tense your neck and clench your jaw
- tightly close your eyes
- take a deep breath and hold it for five seconds
- let your breath and the tension in your body go all at once
- feel the tension leave your body

#### **Relaxation sanctuary (useful in the exam):-**

- focus on the inner screen of your mind's eye
- imagine your ideal, safe, relaxing place
- close your eyes
- in your mind, send yourself there for 15 to 30 seconds
- breathe easily and enjoy the relaxation
- go there whenever you need a quick relaxing break (make sure you don't fall asleep if you are in the middle of your exam, though!)