Counselling and Wellbeing

Overcoming Exam Anxiety

Feeling nervous before and during an exam is normal. Some butterflies and tension can help us to perform to the best of our ability as the adrenaline helps us to feel alert and focused. Too much anxiety however, can block thoughts, make us ‘go blank’, create a negative frame of mind and lead to panic and lessen our performance potential.

Anxiety might be created by negative thoughts and beliefs, for example: “I’m going to fail,” or “Everyone else is better than me/studying more than me.” These ideas cause excess anxiety or panic by raising adrenaline and cortisol (stress hormones) levels.

It is important to learn how to spot the signs and symptoms of anxiety in our body and behaviour so that we can deal with them before they become a big problem. You might notice your heart pounding; shallow, rapid breathing; feeling sick etc.

How can I turn anxiety into creative tension?

1. Use relaxation and breathing techniques to help calm your nerves - this will take care of the physical symptoms.

2. Challenge the negative thoughts. If you managed to get into University, you have no doubt passed exams at some stage – look at the evidence: you can pass exams.

   Try not to compare yourself to others; everyone learns in different ways. A few hours of structured, effective study time balanced with physical and social activities can be more helpful than staring at books or a computer screen for 12 hours and accomplishing very little.

3. Use pro-active behaviour to help yourself in constructive and practical ways, see over the page:

Preparing for an exam

- Understand yourself as a learner: When and how do you learn best?
- Timetable an achievable revision programme well in advance.
- Balance study time with breaks and rewards.
- Create an area where you can study (avoid distractions). Set targets and give yourself treats.
- Make notes using ‘trigger’ words.
- Look up and try past papers.
- Ask for help with things you don’t understand.
- Reward yourself for the studying you’ve done.
- If you could do with some extra support, make an appointment with a Study Adviser, who could help you manage your time and study more effectively.
Get exam fit

Just as an athlete trains for a race or a match, it is important that we get our minds and bodies ‘fit’ for the pressures of studying and exams:

- Make time to socialise and exercise: walking, sport etc.
- Eat healthily: lots of fruit, vegetables, protein etc. Avoid alcohol and other substances that can affect your memory and performance. Drink water.
- Use relaxation techniques and get regular sleep – if you go to sleep at a reasonable time, you will awaken in the morning refreshed and ready to make the most of your day.
- Turn negative statements into positive ones. E.g. “I’m rubbish at exams” – “The past is irrelevant, I am working well and have techniques which help”.

On THE day

- Eat well (e.g. breakfast or lunch).
- Give yourself plenty of time to arrive.
- Use a calming ‘mantra’ e.g. “I am calm and thinking clearly”.
- Breathe slowly and steadily.
- Avoid people who will stress you out.
- Wear or bring something with positive associations – touch it to calm you and remind you of positive thoughts.

During the exam

- Visualise yourself as competent and ready and see the exam as an opportunity for you to shine.
- Take time to read through the questions, answer the ones you know best first.
- ‘Budget’ your time. Look at how many points are allocated to each question and spend the appropriate amount of time on each. Allow time for checking/editing afterwards.
- Do an ‘info dump’ first – jot down key points that you don’t want to forget at the beginning.
- Ask the invigilator if anything is unclear.
- Use positive self-talk: “I CAN do this”; “Anxiety can’t harm me”.
- Can’t find any questions to answer? Look for familiar words and phrases. Read through questions slowly and think about how you can answer them.
- Can’t write enough? Concise answers that answer the question specifically are likely to be more effective than writing pages and missing the main points.
After the exam

- Remind yourself that you’ve done your best.
- This is not a life or death scenario – at worst you can re-sit.
- Avoid analysing answers with others, this provokes anxiety. This exam is behind you now; focus on the next task in hand.
- Set a time to begin studying for the next exam/essay.
- Take time to relax, recuperate and reward yourself.
- Look at what went well. What techniques worked for you? Review and see what needs improving

Relaxation Techniques:

- Breathing Exercises:
  Try ‘7/11’ breathing – breathe in slowly for a count of 7; imagine filling your stomach first and then your chest. Hold the breath for as long as it’s comfortable. Breathe out slowly for a count of 11. Repeat until panicky feelings subside.

- Tense and Relax:
  1. Put your feet flat on the floor.
  2. Grab the sides of the chair with your hands.
  3. Push down with your feet and pull up on the chair for 5 seconds.
  4. Relax for 5-10 seconds.
  5. Repeat 2-3 times, relax your muscles except the ones you use for the exam!

- Emergency Stop Technique:
  (Try this as a quick fix if you get anxious during the exam)
  1. Say sharply to yourself “STOP”.
  2. Breathe in and hold your breath for a moment before slowly breathing out. As you do so relax your shoulders and hands.
  3. Pause, then breathe in slowly again and hold. As you breathe out relax your forehead and jaw.
  4. Stay quiet for a few moments; notice your breathing, then go on with what you were doing, moving slowly and smoothly.

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