

# Managing Exam Anxiety and Stress

Preparing to tackle exam stress and anxiety is not just about learning strategies to use during an exam. It is also about the way you look after yourself during the lead-up to exam time and in fact, all year round.

## The lead-up to exams

Under the stress of study and examinations, students often neglect their health. It is a common belief that in order to cope with the workload and 'cram' as much information in as possible, it is necessary to make temporary changes to, and sacrifices in, lifestyle. This includes not making time to prepare and eat proper meals, not sticking to usual exercise routines and leisure activities and altering sleeping patterns. As a result, many students find that they become drained, run-down, or ill, right in the middle of the exam period, precisely when they need to be at their best.

The aim should be to maintain your physical efficiency at all times and particularly around exam time. This requires:

- regular nutritious meals
- regular sleep
- regular exercise
- regular 'rest & relaxation pauses'
- regular leisure time

These activities are beneficial for exams because they:

- maintain your energy levels
- help you to stay well
- enhance your concentration

## Diet Hints

1. It is important to set aside time to prepare and eat simple, nutritious meals as part of your study schedule.
2. Try to keep away from caffeine products (like coffee, tea and cola drinks). Have a jug of water by your desk and try drinking herbal teas instead (peppermint is particularly refreshing).

3. If you cook for yourself, try pre-cooking some meals and freezing them so they are ready to be quickly defrosted and heated up during the exam period. Prepare quick things like fresh vegies, salads and fruits to supplement these.
4. Avoid eating too much starchy or junk food. While quick and easy, they are low in energy and tend to make you sleepy.

## Sleep Hints

1. Try to maintain your usual sleep pattern during the lead-up to exams and the exam period itself. Depriving yourself of sleep during this time with the intention of catching up after the exams does not help. If anything this is a time when you will need more sleep, not less.
2. Towards the end of the day start to wind down slowly so that your mind and body can adjust to a slower pace. Finish your study period with light re-reading of your notes rather than intense revision.
3. Have a warm shower or soak in a bath to relax yourself before retiring.
4. Try practising a relaxation technique before going to bed or when you first get into bed. While you are focusing on this you can't be concentrating on other worries and thoughts that might otherwise keep you awake.

## Exercise Hints

1. You can't hope to study effectively or do your best in exams if you spend too much time locked away in a room behind a desk. Far from taking valuable time away from your studies, exercise will actually enhance your effectiveness as well as give you a much-needed break from 'the grind'.
2. Include a brisk walk, or other exercise that you prefer, in your study program at least three times per week.
3. Schedule hourly breaks away from your desk – the average attention span is only about 40-50 minutes. Use your breaks to move around and get your blood circulating. This increases the

oxygen flow to your brain and will help you to stay alert. Simple exercises such as stretching your arms and legs, bending your upper body and twisting your torso will help achieve this.

4. Do some regular tension-relieving stretches, especially for the neck, arms, shoulders and back.

### Leisure Hints

1. Decide on the activities which you find most enjoyable and rewarding and include these into your study program. Dropping these things in favour of increased study time can make you feel resentful and may negatively impact on your motivation to sit down and work.
2. Be realistic – you won't be able to do everything you enjoy during exams but at the same time you won't be able to just study, study, study. Try to find a manageable balance.
3. Decide what you will do and when – and stick to it!! Even if you are having the time of your life, STOP when you said you would stop.

### It's all in the mind ...

It is not events themselves that create anxiety or stress, it is our reaction to the events. Our thoughts or perceptions about a situation and our ability to handle it trigger responses in our body, responses which lead to us feeling anxious and stressed. The positive aspect about this is that just as we can 'create' a stress response, we can also learn to turn it off.

You can reduce your stress and anxiety either by addressing the situation or event that the stress is a response to, or by dealing with the symptoms of stress directly. Consider this question:

*"Is my anxiety/stress realistic and in proportion to what is going on?"*

That is, do you really have something to be anxious about? For example, if you have an exam tomorrow, it's worth 100% of the year's marks and you have not started to study yet, then you have every reason to be anxious and stressed. If, however, you have been studying steadily over the year for this exam and are basically up-to-date with the work, then anything more than a certain amount of nervousness might be a bit unrealistic.

If the answer to the question is "yes":

- You need to focus on the task at hand and put all your effort into getting things done. Until you have done the necessary work, or the exam is over, there will be little that you

can do to relieve the symptoms of anxiety. After all, there is good reason for you to feel that way.

- Try to avoid being afraid of the stress and anxiety. Instead put it to use in your favour. Anxiety and stress feel uncomfortable; hence the desire to get rid of these symptoms can be just the motivation you need to do the work that you have been putting off or avoiding. Anxiety often provides the impetus and the energy for us to do tasks that we otherwise would not undertake.
- Break the task that you are anxious about into smaller components so that you can focus on achieving small goals rather than feeling overwhelmed by the idea that you have to conquer the whole mountain all at once.

If the answer to the question is "no":

- You can then confront the anxiety as a problem in itself and look at what you can do to relieve the symptoms.
- Recognise that a certain amount of anxiety and stress is to be expected and has a functional role to play. It forces us to be focused on the task at hand and helps to produce optimal performance.
- Try to notice what thoughts you are having about the upcoming exam/s. Very often the thoughts which are producing the anxiety will be very self-defeating, critical and pessimistic in nature. Once you have identified what these are, try to catch yourself whenever you start focusing on one of these negative thoughts and replace them with positive 'self-talk'. This is not easy to do, especially at first, but with some determination and practice you will find that changing your self-talk about the exam/s can make all the difference.
- Anxiety and stress often has a lot to do with how the people around you react and support you. If you feel that people could be more helpful or constructive, discuss this with them and let them know how you would like them to respond instead.

Keep reminding yourself, of the following points:

- Exams are not set with the aim of making people fail – they are designed to test what you know, not what you don't know.

- Considering that most people end up passing, exams can't be as unmanageable as you might perceive them to be.
- You will never know everything – focus on knowing the main points and ideas.
- You will never feel totally prepared. Make an honest attempt to do your best and accept that you do not have to (and can't) give perfection.
- Allow recovery time where possible. Concentrating for that length of time takes a toll on the mind. Build in appropriate breaks, especially if you have to sit an afternoon exam on the same day.
- Prepare for the next exam. Be realistic in how much recovery time you might need and then focus on the next task at hand. If you are feeling overwhelmed, break the task down into smaller steps.
- Being in the right environment will help maintain the intensity of study focus required to complete your examination period. Consciously choose your environment where possible. Choosing to be with those that have recently completed their exams will probably not help you do this!

## During the exam

Most students experience some degree of stress and anxiety when they enter an examination room. In most cases this is quite positive as too little anxiety prevents us from performing at our best. Too much, however can interfere with performance. The following are some suggestions that can help you to manage exam anxiety and allow it to work for you:

- Prepare thoroughly – when it comes to finding solutions to exam anxiety, thorough preparation should be one of the first things you try. The more confident you feel about the material being examined, the less likely you will be to perceive the exam environment as threatening.
- Watch for the negative and self-defeating thoughts. During an exam it is important to identify and stop these thoughts and replace them with more productive, positive ones. The more you have practised this before the exam the easier it will be during the exam.
- Use your breathing to control the stress reaction. This can be done on the way to the exam, outside the exam room, during the exam, and/or immediately after. Slow your breathing rate and breathe using your abdominal muscles so that the breath goes into the lower parts of your lungs. Repeat this a number of times. Tensing (as you inhale) and then relaxing (as you exhale) muscles can also help to reduce stress. Visualising yourself in a peaceful place for just a few moments can help enormously. The key to using any of these techniques successfully is practice.

## After the exam

- Focus first on what you did well. Don't dwell on the negatives. Avoid after exam 'debriefs' with other students. They usually only heighten anxiety.

## Need more help?

If your stress/anxiety level continues to stay high and is affecting your performance, or if you know that you tend to get over-anxious during the exam, make an appointment to see one of the counsellors or the Disability Adviser at Student Centre a few weeks before the exam period. We will be able to work with you to develop some strategies for managing your stress/anxiety more effectively.

Fact sheets on the following related topics:

- Effective Exam Preparation
- Effective Exam Techniques
- Improving your Sleep
- Stress Management

and many other topics can be downloaded from the web at:

[www.utas.edu.au/students/fact-sheets](http://www.utas.edu.au/students/fact-sheets)

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