

Dealing with Assessment and Examination Anxiety



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Why have examinations?

Formal and informal assessments of learning and tests of your ability to perform specific tasks are part of the experience being a student and may have been a constant feature of your education. Exams and other types of formal assessment are designed to test your performance, giving an indication of your ability to cope under pressure in a fixed time period.

You have done very well to get this far, though this does not mean that you have found it easy.

What is anxiety?

It is our natural response to threat or sense of an emergency. When we feel under threat, our bodies go into a 'fight or flight' response. We become prepared to fight or to run away. The main bodily change is the release of adrenaline and cortisol which gives us the surge of energy to act. The hormone cortisol helps to slow down other processes in the body not involved in dealing with the perceived threat. It is understood that 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, short and long-term memory, the capacity to learn, concentrate and focus, and even speed up the signs of aging!

Other changes you might notice:

- Increased muscle tension
- Increased heart rate
- Increased breathing rate
- Increase in alertness to the slightest touch or sound



You need time to switch off...

Feeling anxious about Examination is normal and to be expected

A moderate amount of anxiety may not be a bad thing . It can sharpen concentration and performance and help to create the extra energy and momentum needed to keep studying, when you might prefer to be doing something else.

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

Consequences and effects

For some people just the mention of examinations or thinking about tests, examinations, presentations or assignment deadlines can lead to some of these reactions:

Sweaty palms, dry mouth, feeling sick, feeling shaky in the legs and abdomen, feeling tearful, becoming fearful, panicky , wanting to escape, heart pounding , can't concentrate, mind wandering , can't sleep, feeling tired, finding reasons for lots of sleeping, can't eat, or eating more than usual especially snack foods.

Popular coping strategies

When feeling anxious about examinations some people:

- Turn to drinking excess alcohol
- Smoke more
- Use drugs
- Eat lots of chocolate
- Avoid the issue; spend more time watching television or socializing for example.

Some of these strategies may have a calming effect in the short term, but are not ideal solutions and their after effects could lead to you feeling less able to focus or concentrate or perform well.



Too much caffeine may make you feel on edge and panicky

How you can help yourself

- Reminding yourself of your past successes, especially achievements in examinations.
- Paying closer attention to your physical and mental wellbeing all are linked and part of a whole.
- Having some coping strategies to deal with anxiety . (See ideas mentioned below)
- Having a plan of action.
- Visualize (mentally rehearse) completing the examination successfully . Repeat this rehearsal hundreds of times.
- Tackle one small piece of work at a time.
- Consider whether studying with others may be helpful.
- Explore new ways of improving your studying techniques.
- Talk with people that you know have a calming effect on you.

Coping strategies

Mental preparation

Sleep Get as much rest as you can; 6-8 hours a night are recommended. Even if you cannot sleep, give your body a chance to rest. Try to have a wind down period before you go to bed, preferably not watching TV as the programme content might stimulate anxious thoughts and feelings.

Study patterns

Take regular breaks from studying . 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 that you are distracted, get up and take a short break.

If your mind is wandering repeatedly try studying in very short bursts of time bringing the time down to one that feels manageable, 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.

If you spend weeks doing nothing but eating, sleeping and trying to study, the chances are you will feel miserable, more anxious and find it harder to concentrate.

Study skills

Effective study skills can reduce your levels of anxiety and encourage you to feel more in control of your work. Study skills advice and support is available from numerous websites and books or talk to the appropriate specialists.

Physical preparation

Food - Try to eat at least one proper meal 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. The positive effects of a good diet on mood, concentration and productivity are well documented. Think back to your diet at a time when you felt well and focused.

Drink - It is important to maintain a good level of hydration. Some people find that drinking plenty of plain water helps to remove toxins and helps them to think clearly. It may be helpful to take some water with you to the examination hall.

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

Exercise - Taking some form of daily exercise will help to relax tense muscles, use up some of the extra adrenaline and increase your circulation. Frequent short walks can be helpful.

Breathing exercises - Simple breathing exercises can help to calm you down

Here is an example:

Sit comfortably and upright in a chair with your feet on the ground and your hands placed loosely on the tops of your thighs. If it helps you to focus, close your eyes and picture yourself in a safe relaxing place.

Just pay some attention to your breath and breathing to begin with.

Breathe in through your nose slowly and deeply , pushing out your lower abdomen to a count of 5. If it helps, put the palm of your hand on your abdomen and try to push it away as you breathe in.

Breathe out through your mouth slowly pulling your lower abdomen in (imagine aiming to get your abdomen to touch your spine) to a count of 7. If you have followed the suggestion above your hand should move inwards.

Repeat this exercise for around 5 minutes.

You could progressively try to increase the ratio/difference between inhalations and exhalations from 5:7 to 7:11.

Once you have an effective technique it can be particularly useful because you can do it anywhere, anytime; for instance, before, during and after your examination challenge.

It is recommended that you do the breathing exercises three times a day, every day.

It is worth maintaining your practice over time. What you will find is that focusing on your breathing to bring about calm begins to happen automatically when you feel anxious.

Meditation and Mindfulness

The practice of meditation and mindfulness can be useful in helping you to focus on your breathing; bringing a sense of calm.

Getting ready space and time to think

Making time for relaxation - Even in the weeks leading up to the examination deadline, it is important to give yourself time off to do something you enjoy . Some people also like to give themselves a reward or small treat each day . It can help to keep you motivated on your task of examination preparations. You could try placing and displaying positive and encouraging images around your work space. Carrying supportive words, phrases, photos with you in a pocket, bag or book can also help. Top athletes and performers do this to good effect.

On the Examination day

Don't try to learn any new topics as this may impair your ability to remember those you have learnt previously .

You may find it helpful to review some prepared brief notes or prompt cards.

Use the release of adrenaline to your advantage. You may even enjoy the examination experience.

Try not to study for the last hour before the exam time. Focus on a simple everyday activity and deliberately slow it down. Notice new things about doing that activity .

Time your arrival at the exam hall so that you don't need to wait outside with others who may increase your anxiety level.

Keep away from other anxious people.



Breathe...

Give yourself time to settle:

- Before reading the exam questions and starting to write.
- Before beginning your presentation.

It may help to use a breathing exercise that you have practiced to regulate your breathing and calm yourself down.

You are not your results

Some people say things like: 'If I don't get a 1st

- My future is over... my degree is worthless
- I won't get a good job
- Other people will think badly of me
- I will be a complete failure
- People will think I am stupid/lazy
- I will be letting my parents down...

and so on.

Whilst it would be disappointing if you do not do as well as you hoped, the chances are that it will not be as catastrophic as any of the above thoughts suggest. If you have had the same or similar thoughts, it is helpful to challenge these with a more realistic assessment of the situation. You may want to do this with the help of a friend or someone else that you trust to be honest with you.

Thoughts and feelings that add to anxiety

Believing that you are judged (by friends, family or work colleagues) only on your academic achievements will increase the sense of pressure you feel about tests and examinations.

You start to depend on your academic achievements alone for self-esteem or to feel worthy of being liked or loved.

Feeling fearful and anxious can make things worse and might reduce your ability to perform well.

Too much anxiety stops you from being productive and effective. You can become frozen by your fears.

It may be worth taking the time to think about what you value in others is it their academic achievement?

How you can help others

- By accepting that your friend is worried and listening to their concerns without necessarily offering solutions or advice.
- If possible, encouraging them and or helping them to prepare their ideal working environment.
- If appropriate, working together to prepare for examinations.



What if I fail?

Find out what the consequences and options are if you fail.

Failing an examination need not mean the end of your studies and does not mean that you are a failure. Failure means that you have not met the required standards of the examiner/assessor at this particular time.