

## Managing anxiety in revision & exams

**Anxiety can be used to enhance your performance. Some anxiety before an exam is normal and, indeed, useful. Excessive anxiety, however, can paralyse with panic. Look at your own anxieties around assessment and reflect on the techniques that can be used to help you overcome nervousness and make your anxiety work for you.**

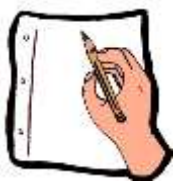


Many people suffer some anxiety about revision and exams and will report:

- the occasional sleepless night
- waking early in the morning
- butterflies in the lead up to the exam
- not wanting to eat on the day of the exam

Many of these states are the same as performers report before appearing before an audience, and before they give an outstanding performance. Can you see your examiner as an audience who is critical but ready to applaud your outstanding performance? It might help!

However, many students also feel overwhelmed by anxiety and this bears no relation to their ability. This nervousness can affect the revision process as well as the exam performance itself. Generally students fall into three groups who each need different strategies to cope with anxiety. One of the most effective ways of overcoming anxiety is knowing what has contributed to your feelings in the first place. The first thing to do is write down as many things as you want to about revision and exams which make you feel anxious.

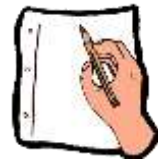


## Student groups:

1. Those who have too little adrenaline, are so relaxed that they do too little preparation. Here the task is to channel tension into a well rehearsed performance. For all students adrenaline turns familiarity with the material into an improved performance.
2. Those students who tend to be anxious people, who do better in less important assessments and worse in important ones. Worry about how this affects the revision process, affects their confidence and heightens their belief in their lack of ability. Here, fear will abate somewhat when you begin to feel a grasp of the material; techniques for managing anxiety are useful here too.
3. Students whose anxiety is specifically linked to assessment. Here the task is to regain confidence, using your imagination to cope with the specific fears you have of exams.

Now choose one of your stress factors from above and answer these questions:

1. How am I feeling about this?
2. What has led to my having these feelings?
3. How am I reacting physically?
4. Is there anything I am doing which contributes to this situation?
5. If someone else was in this situation what would my advice to them be?
6. What specifically can I do over the next week to help the situation?
7. Is this plan realistic?



These questions will make you more aware of your stress. It is important to monitor your levels of tension and to be able to identify when, and where in your body, you feel tension. Common feelings are:

- discomfort in the stomach
- headache or tight jaw
- knots in the back and neck

This is important because you can then take direct steps to deal with the results of stress. Taking direct steps means actively discovering what works for you, and employing those tension reduction techniques. Most of the following techniques can be used in everyday life in the preparation for the exam, or they can be used in the exam. Some of these will not work for you but others will; some are best used in combination (severe panic sufferers may find relaxation combined with visualisation especially helpful).

### **Relaxation techniques**

Ideally the best time to start learning and practising relaxation is three months before the exam or assessment. If you learn techniques and then can practice (15-20 minutes per day) then you will gain in confidence that you can control your anxiety, both generally and during an assessment, whether it is an oral test or an exam or a presentation.

Yoga and meditation groups, and relaxation tapes (some for exam panic) are all sources of types of relaxation. The following are techniques which can be used on your own or in an exam. They are quick, silent and used to stop the panic rising (once risen it can take 20min to calm down).

### **The emergency stop:**

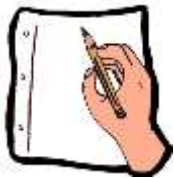
- As you begin to feel tense say, very loudly, to yourself: 'STOP'.
- Clench your teeth and jaw, hold for a count of five, relax for a count of five.
- Repeat, first with your eyes and forehead, then with your neck and shoulders.
- Finish with you hands and arms.
- Notice how you feel now - go back to work.

### The sigh of love:

- Take two or three deep breaths, letting them out as slowly as you can.
- Relax and drop your shoulders with a (quiet) sigh.
- Shut your eyes and picture someone you love saying something encouraging to you. Stay with that for a moment or two.
- Open your eyes, notice how you feel, go back to work.

There is a close relation between muscle tension and emotional states and the skills in recognising and releasing unnecessary muscle tension helps in avoiding excess fatigue and in protecting the body against the effects of anxiety and stress.

What other things can you do which you would find relaxing?




Some everyday things that you can do are:

- *take some time off; do something fun*
- *plan your time-setting realistic limits*
- *don't get cross with yourself for not being able to deal with stress*
- *meditate 20min a day*
- *have a massage - warm bath, sauna, etc*
- *go swimming; dance*


## Visualisation

Now, go back and look at your list of stressors, write them here in the left box, beginning with the most stressful.



Before Visualisation

A large empty rectangular box for writing stressors before visualization.



After Visualisation

A large empty rectangular box for writing stressors after visualization.

Relax, take a few slow deep breaths, inhaling for a count of five, hold for five, and exhaling for a count of five. Now, visualise yourself overcoming the least fearful first. This may take some time and some patience. Imagine this one until you can think about it with less fear. Write it at the top of the right hand box. Now you can move to the next least fearful thing on your list. Try each one, one at a time, until you can picture yourself doing all of the tasks confidently. Transfer each success to the right hand box. Don't worry if you can't transfer all your items - use this in conjunction with another technique (e.g. relaxation) and see if that is more effective for you.

## Humour

Laughing is a well known stress reliever, so allow yourself time to listen to a funny programme on TV or radio, or watch a video. Stand in front of the mirror and smile - keep practising! Some exaggeration of the more unhelpful fears can emphasise how unrealistic they are and humour can defuse them and help reduce your anxiety about them.

## Prepare Early For Your Exam

Plan and begin your revision early. Get support from friends and family for testing and confirming what you do know. Boost your confidence by noticing what it is you do effectively - both in your studies and in other areas of your life. This can remind you that you are a competent person and that you can transfer some of that competence onto your revision and exam experience.

## 8 Tips for reducing exam room anxiety

If you can't get started, or freeze, try:

- Shutting you eyes, breathing deeply. What is the colour of your anxiety? With every exhale, breathe out the colour of your anxiety, and see it becoming paler and weaker.
- If you are stuck with a question, leave it. Work on your plan for the next one.
- If stuck, give your right (logical, mathematical, analytical) brain a rest - sing yourself a song - it uses the creative, musical, intuitive left brain.
- Go to the loo. You can feel much more relaxed just by moving.
- Take a complete rest for three minutes, daydream, relax. Then sit up very straight, breathe deeply into your lungs, begin to work again.
- Do one of the relaxation techniques mentioned earlier.
- Avoid perfectionism - allow yourself to do a competent job and just get on with it.
- Look after yourself!

Sources: Henderson, P. (1993) *How to Succeed in Exams*; Hardy & Snedegar, (1993) *Planning For Higher Education*; Goldstein & Kanfer, (1975) *Helping People Change*.