

Exams: Dealing with Nerves.

It is completely natural to feel anxious about exams, and there are many possible reasons for this. This sheet provides tips on how you might manage exam anxiety. It covers five key areas: being prepared, physical health, a healthy attitude, and dealing with panic. If you use them, you will probably still feel anxious, but should be less stressed and more effective than you would otherwise be.

Many people can find it difficult to get started and to maintain the techniques, but they are worthwhile, so please give them a try and persist.

Part of coping better with exams lies with knowing that revision should start early: for a Summer exam, you should ideally begin revising around early February. For information to be stored in your long-term memory, it needs to be repeatedly revisited over time.

Many students do not start revising early enough.

You don't have to do all your revision chained to a desk. You can revise while moving, for example, while walking, cleaning, or standing in a queue. This can help both your understanding and your memory. More tips on this are provided below.

You can seek support from the Academic Skills Unit, known as Ask, and Wellbeing. Both are in the Nuffield building. You could also see your Faculty Support Tutors. You could talk to your tutor or lecturers.

Be Prepared

Familiarise yourself, as far as you can, with what the exam will be like. You cannot know everything about an exam, but you can and should make sure that you know the following six things, which might itself help reduce exam stress and anxiety:

1. Explore the topics and consider what might come up in the exam.
2. Know the day, time and duration of each exam. Put the information in a diary or calendar.
3. If you can, visit the venue to familiarise yourself with how to get there, where you could wait, and what the exam room itself looks like.
4. Find out if there is any equipment which may, or may not, be allowed.
5. Find out how the exam paper or task is structured: for example, whether it is multiple choice, a short answer, a long answer or practical. You might be told if the paper or task is divided into sections.

6. You might have access to past papers. If so, it is well worth finding and using them.

Physical Health: diet, exercise and sleep.

This is important for all of us all of the time, but it is even more important during times of high pressure. A better diet and the right amount of sleep can help increase **energy**, and therefore aid **concentration** and **focus**. Consequently, you may find that your **memory** and understanding improve.

Have breakfast on the morning of an exam to keep your blood sugar levels up in a healthy way.

Have a well-balanced diet. Include plenty of fruits and vegetables. Include foods that release energy slowly, such as brown rice, oats, nuts and seeds.

Get as much exercise as you can.

Get sufficient and regular sleep. Lack of sleep will certainly affect your ability to recall and communicate information. If anxiety affects your sleep, it is especially important to stick to a routine by going to bed at a regular time and, if needed, seek support.

A Healthy Attitude: perspective, positive visualisation and positive thinking.

Perspective.

Keep the exam in perspective. Although exams are important, your overall success and future do not depend on the outcome of any one exam. An exam is an opportunity for you to demonstrate your learning.

Positive Visualisation.

Try positive visualisation. This powerful technique can be very effective if, for example, you know that it is the idea of the exam itself which makes you nervous.

Every positive visualisation, however small, adds to and develops positive neural pathways. Revisit the visualisation when you are in the exam room, which can help reactivate those pathways.

Whenever you think of an exam, immediately visualise something which makes you feel more positive, relaxed or happy. It can be absolutely anything, because it is all about association. Gradually add visualising yourself sitting comfortably in the exam, relaxed and confident. This can work better if you actually act out sitting comfortably, breathing deeply, and physically relaxing.

You can do this any time and anywhere. You could even sit at a table with something used as an exam paper on it, and imagine the invigilator telling you to turn your paper over. Use positive visualisation for anything more specific which you think might make you feel more anxious, for example scanning the questions, choosing a question, planning

your answer, or starting writing. Visualise yourself walking out of the exam with confidence. Again, you can mimic this with movement during your visualisation, which increases its power.

Positive Thinking.

Try positive thinking, especially if you know that you are easily sabotaged by negative thoughts. This works in a similar way to visualisation, and you can combine them to make them even more effective. Imagine success. List the study qualities you do have, and consider how they will help you before and during an exam. **If you do not feel that you have many, or any, revision and exam skills, seek support in order to gain them, but try not to leave it too late!** Repeat positive statements to yourself every time you have a negative thought or say something negative about exams.

Dealing with Panic: Three techniques.

First, control your breathing. Inhale slowly through your nose until your lungs are full, then exhale slowly through your mouth, relaxing your shoulders as you breathe out. Inhale slowly, then exhale quickly, relaxing your shoulders as you breathe out. You may find that more, slower exhales, are best, that more fast exhales are best, or that it depends on how much you are panicking. Try it out for yourself until you find what works for you.

Secondly, exercise some of your muscles. You can do this in an exam. Bend, tense or stretch your fingers, arms and legs, straighten your back, relax back into the chair instead of sitting forward. Be careful not to overdo it. **Gentle is best.** You can do this alongside the breathing techniques.

Thirdly, allow yourself some time when you are thinking only about something which relaxes you. Forget about the exam. Even just a minute can be effective. You can do this any number of times during an exam, especially when you start to feel particularly stressed or anxious.

If you would like an ASK tutorial, please contact us.

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Resource revised 2019 by Heather Lee.

