



LEARN TO MANAGE EXAM ANXIETY

COUNSELLING AND
PSYCHOLOGICAL
SERVICES (CAPS)



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

Do you feel like your mind 'goes blank' during exams? Do you find yourself thinking 'I can't do this' or 'I'm stupid'? Does your heart race or do you find it difficult to breathe during exams? If this sounds familiar then keep reading.

It is normal to experience some anxiety both in preparation for and during exams. A moderate level of anxiety helps us to perform optimally. Experiencing little or no anxiety can leave us feeling unfocused and unmotivated, while high levels of anxiety can tip us over into disorganization. The challenge is to recognize when anxiety levels have increased past an optimal level and then learn to manage anxiety so it doesn't hijack performance.

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WHAT IS EXAM ANXIETY AND WHY DO I EXPERIENCE IT?

Exam anxiety is the experience of intense fear before and/or during exam situations. It is characterized by a pattern of physical sensations, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

The physical sensations involved are those of acute anxiety or the fight or flight response. Some examples include a racing heart, sweaty hands, shortness of breath, and nausea. The fight or flight response is our bodies normal and adaptive response to threat and while unpleasant it is not harmful. It is very useful when it occurs in the appropriate context, for example, in the face of physical danger (e.g. running away from a tiger, jumping out of the way of a car). It can help to increase our attention to the threat and enhance effective performance. However, it is not so useful when the threat we are faced with is psychological.

The thoughts involved in exam anxiety typically include negative predictions about performance or the physical sensations being experienced; for example, 'I'm going to fail', 'I can't do this', 'My heart is pounding so fast I can't concentrate'.

The feelings involved are of panic or fear and the behavioural component is escape/avoidance (or the urge to).

A number of factors contribute to exam anxiety. Some common causes include:

- Undue alarm in response to the normal fight or flight response (triggering a cycle of physical symptoms and increased anxiety)

- Anticipatory anxiety and avoidance, for example, having a bad exam experience can result in worrying and avoiding preparing for the next exam
- Lack of adequate preparation (which can be linked to anticipatory anxiety and the urge to avoid)
- Unhelpful thinking
- Poor self-care (including poor sleep and nutrition, and lack of exercise/relaxation)

Exercise: Have a think back to the last time you experienced exam anxiety. Which of the above factors do you think might have contributed?

HOW COULD LEARNING TO MANAGE MY EXAM ANXIETY IMPROVE MY LIFE?

Exam anxiety may interfere with your ability to show you're academic competencies. Learning to manage exam anxiety can have a number of positive effects including;

- Improved academic performance
- Reduction in stress and distress
- Increased sense of control/sense of mastery/confidence
- Decreased frustration

WHAT SKILLS COULD HELP ME MANAGE EXAM ANXIETY?

Skills useful in managing exam anxiety fall in to two broad categories - those which improve study skills, and those which help you to manage your emotional response to the situation. The skills you find most helpful in managing your exam anxiety will vary depending on what factors are contributing to it.

LEARNING TO MANAGE THE PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY

GUIDED BREATHING EXERCISE

Running time: 6 min 22 sec

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It is important to know that the physical symptoms associated with the fight or flight response are unpleasant but not dangerous. Interpreting these symptoms as dangerous can work to keep them going. Shallow breathing can also keep these physical symptoms going.

While not dangerous these symptoms can make it more difficult to focus your attention both while studying and during an exam. Learning techniques such as calming your breathing or progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) can work to decrease the physical symptoms of anxiety and facilitate general relaxation.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

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A guided breathing and a progressive muscle relaxation exercise are available above. Written instructions for these exercises are also available in information sheets from the [Centre for Clinical Interventions](#).

Practice these techniques first in situations that don't make you anxious and then, once you've mastered the technique, try them out in situations in which you feel anxious. Like learning to ride a bike, it helps to master the skill before going in a bike race!

CHALLENGING UNHELPFUL THINKING

The way we think about something can influence how we feel and behave. However, often our thoughts are automatic and we are not necessarily aware of them or the impact they are having on our feelings. Unhelpful thinking is not based on evidence and can include exaggerations and/or selective interpretations. Challenging thoughts involves treating them like hypotheses rather than like facts.

The first step in the process of challenging unhelpful thinking is becoming aware of it. Asking yourself 'what just went through my head?' when you notice you feel anxious can help identify automatic thoughts.

Often exam anxiety is characterized by anxious thoughts about the physical symptoms of anxiety and/or anxious thoughts about performance. For example, imagine you're waiting for an exam to start and notice your heart pounding and your hands sweating. You think to yourself 'Oh no, here it goes again, I'm going to blank out, I'll fail, it'll be a disaster...' Thinking like this is going to increase your anxiety and physical symptoms.

If on the other hand you identify these thoughts as anxious thoughts and remind yourself that these physical symptoms are just that, physical signs of arousal which can be managed, you will be better able to manage your anxiety. In the above scenario you might instead say to yourself 'I'm about to start, it's OK. I am experiencing physical symptoms of anxiety but they are just that and I can continue with them. I'm well prepared, there is no need to get more anxious'



Some questions you may find useful for introducing a more balanced perspective to negative thoughts include:

- What's the evidence for that thought?
- What alternative views are there?
- How likely is it?
- How much would it really matter?
- Is that thought helpful?

Challenging negative thoughts is a bit like practicing to be your own coach. Rather than undermining and discouraging yourself it's about talking to yourself in a way that will help you to give your best performance.

In identifying patterns of unhelpful thinking you may notice that you have unrealistically high expectations of self and/or you equate performance with self-worth. If this sounds like you then you may find it helpful to have a read through our [Learn To Manage Perfectionism](#) page, or look at an online workbook at the [Centre for Clinical Interventions website](#).

GUIDED MINDFULNESS EXERCISE

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Exam anxiety focuses our attention on how we're feeling, taking it away from the task at hand. The practice of becoming aware of when your attention has wandered and refocusing it on the present moment can be useful in managing exam anxiety.

It can be particularly hard to direct our attention back to the task at hand when we feel that we first need to 'get rid off' or control how we are feeling (physically or emotionally) or what we are thinking. Rather than getting tangled in trying to change how we are feeling it can be more helpful to change how we relate to how we are feeling. That is, rather than fighting your anxiety in an exam, you may find it more helpful to accept that you feel anxious and direct your attention back to the task of the exam paper.

You can practice developing your attentional focus and relating to your thoughts and feelings with an attitude of acceptance with a mindfulness exercise (above). Remember the practice of mindfulness is a skill, and like any skill improves with practice. For further

information on mindfulness, the Centre for Clinical Interventions has an [information sheet on mindfulness](#).

In a nutshell, during exams:

- Try not to judge what just happened or will happen. Rather motivate yourself, observe your mind wandering and bring your attention back to the task.
- Try not to second-guess how you are going as your perception will probably be inaccurate. Self-judgment during a task is futile because it takes you out of the present, into the past or future. Aim to stay in the moment. When you notice your attention has been hijacked by self-judgment, bring it back to the task at hand.

Nothing helps reduce anxiety like confidence! Being well prepared for an exam and confident in your knowledge of the material can help to reduce exam anxiety. In order to prepare adequately for exams:

- Start studying early and allow plenty of time to cover the material. Avoid cramming.
- Prioritize the most important material to study
- Break down study tasks into smaller manageable chunks
- Make a study plan using a weekly/monthly planner and daily priority lists
- Make studying a mentally active process. Where possible don't just read or highlight the information - recite it and ask yourself questions about it. Aim to understand and be able to recall the information, not just recognize it.
- Study in bursts and take breaks.
- Develop good exam skills. The Learning Centre have a number of [workshops](#) aimed at helping students to develop exam skills.
- Where possible practice the performance. Get hold of a past paper or brainstorm possible questions and have a go at answering them under exam conditions.

An important aspect of preparing adequately for exams is having good time management skills. If you have difficulties with time management you may find it useful to have a look at our [Learn To Get Organised page](#) or attend a workshop at [CAPS](#) or the [Learning Centre](#).

The Learning Centre also have some online resources on [Becoming a More Effective Learner](#) and [Using Planners and Plans](#).

Sometimes feeling anxious about exams can



lead to avoidance of studying. If sitting down to study makes you worry or feel anxious, then not studying can feel good in the short term, but keeps anxiety going in the medium term. Get on top of avoidance by:

- Noticing when you are avoiding
- Breaking down tasks into smaller more manageable chunks
- Practicing strategies for managing your anxiety while studying

If procrastination is something that gets in the way of studying for exams you may find it helpful to have a look at our [Learn To Deal With Procrastination ebook](#) or an online workbook on procrastination at the [Centre for Clinical Interventions website](#).



It may sound obvious but an important aspect of managing exam anxiety is taking the time out to get enough sleep, eat well, and balance studying with taking breaks. For your brain to perform at its best it needs fuel and rest. These basic needs can be hard to prioritise with an exam looming, but remember optimal performance is about moderate stress. Try to make time for:

- Getting a good nights sleep, both while studying and the night before an exam
- Good nutrition. Beware of the use of excessive caffeine and energy drinks to enable you to keep studying, because they can interfere with sleep and may mimic symptoms of anxiety.
- Regular exercise. Vigorous exercise can help release endorphins and manage the physical arousal associated with stress/anxiety
- Taking some time out each day to do something enjoyable and relaxing
- Regularly talking to a friend or family member about how you feel



TOP TIPS

- Prepare adequately
- Identify avoidance early. Break tasks down and use doing them as opportunities to practice skills for managing anxiety
- Identify unhelpful thoughts and try replacing them with more encouraging self-talk
- Practice recognizing physical symptoms as just that
- Practice focusing your attention on a task rather than getting tangled in anxiety
- Learn some skills for reducing the physical symptoms of anxiety
- Remember good self-care. Pay attention to sleep, nutrition, exercise, relaxation, and good social support

USEFUL LINKS/RESOURCES

For further **online information** on managing exam anxiety go to a useful website from the University of South Australia.

INDIVIDUAL ASSISTANCE

If after accessing all of the resources on our website you are still needing some further help in learning skills to managing exam anxiety or are concerned about any symptoms you are experiencing, please **make an appointment** with one of our counsellors at Counselling and Psychological Services or see your doctor who can provide assessment and referral to resources in your local area.

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