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Dealing with Assessment and Exam Anxiety

Feeling anxious about assessment is normal and to be expected

A moderate amount of anxiety 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. However, too much anxiety can be overwhelming and stop you from being able to study effectively.

Consequences and effects

For some people just the mention of exams or thinking about assessments, 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, panicky, heart pounding, can't concentrate, mind wandering, can't sleep, feeling tired, can't eat. **Don't ignore these feelings!**

Coping strategies

Preparation and planning are vital to reducing and controlling exam nerves. Build yourself a sustainable revision schedule which allows you to review your skills and address your weaknesses. You must take responsibility for your learning style and the following advice and tips are just a few ways in which you can help yourself. More sources of help are listed at the end of this sheet.

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.

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.*

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.

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.

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 just one example:

1. 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.
2. Just pay some attention to your breath and breathing to begin with.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. Repeat this exercise for around 5 minutes.
6. You could progressively try to increase the ratio/difference between inhalations and exhalations from 5:7 to 7:11.
7. 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 assessment challenge.
8. It is worth maintaining your practice over time. What you will find is that focussing on your breathing to bring about calm begins to happen automatically when you feel anxious.

On the assessment or exam day

Before the exam

- Eat! Don't skip breakfast or lunch.
- Don't try to learn any new topics as this may impair your ability to remember those you have learnt previously and may leave you feeling muddled and anxious.
- You may find it helpful to review some prepared *brief* notes or prompt cards.
- Put yourself in a positive frame of mind by imagining how you would LIKE things to go.
- Practise any breathing or mental exercises that you find help keep your anxiety down.
- If you find even getting into the examinations hall a problem, talk to a trusted friend and ask them to walk to the exam hall with you.

During the exam

- Give yourself time to settle before reading the exam questions and starting to write. *Do not rush.*
- Read the instructions on the paper carefully. Slow down if necessary.
- Preview your exam – spend a short period of your exam time reading through the paper carefully, marking key terms and deciding how to budget your time. As you read through, maybe jot down brief notes indicating ideas you can use later in your answers.
- Budget your test taking time, and stick to your time allocation for each question. Remember, the first few marks of a question are easier to get than the last few marks. Extra time spent trying to get the last mark out of a question, would be more effectively spent getting the first few marks from the next question.
- If you can, leave space after each written answer so that you can go back and add more relevant information if you have time at the end.
- If you find that thoughts or ideas about other questions come into your head, jot them down on a separate piece of paper (if available) – don't spend time thinking about them now.
- If your concentration wanders or you begin to feel panicky, focus on your breathing or any other strategy that works to control or reduce anxiety.
- Don't panic when other students start asking for more paper or handing in their papers. There's no reward for being the first to finish.



Further help

There is lots of support and guidance available online as well as from your form and subject tutors. The following websites are just a selection and give top revision tips and further links to help:

BBC

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1HsY1X8ySjKBMVXPVCbP4qH/exam-stress>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/>

MIND

<http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/stress/#.VhZN1MdwbcS>

ChildLine

http://www.childline.org.uk/SiteCollectionDocuments/BeatExamStressPDF_wdf56569.pdf

Exam Boards

<https://www.wjec.co.uk/home/student-support/your-wellbeing/>

<http://www.ocr.org.uk/ocr-for/learners-and-parents/information-for-parents/>

Your **subject tutor** will also be able to advise you about revising for specific subjects and where you can find resources to help you.

Remember:

Never suffer with exam anxiety alone, always talk to someone: a friend, your form tutor, a teacher.