

Learner guide

DEALING WITH EXAM STRESS



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Finding your exam calm

It's exam season, and you've got a million things rushing through your mind. Your friends, family or teachers are likely saying "it will be fine, just try and relax". But all you're thinking is, "how can I relax? This is my future!" I get it, 100%. Here are some tried and tested techniques to help you manage any feelings of anxiety or nervousness during your exam times.

1. Give yourself a break

It's very easy to burnout during exam time, so pay close attention to what your mind and body need. This is key to keeping those nerves at bay. Remember, exam success does not define you as a person. Everybody copes differently, and there is far more to who you are than how well you respond to exam pressure.

- Make it your priority to unwind after each exam. Whatever you choose, the aim is to give your brain some respite, preventing you from fixating on your exam performance.
- On the run up to each exam, ensure to have frequent breaks during your revision periods. We can only concentrate effectively for 30-45 minutes at a time, so staying at your desk all day will be counterproductive.
- Don't cut out all the enjoyment in your life. It's tempting to knuckle down and 'focus', leaving no time for fun or distractions, but you will struggle to maintain that focus if you feel unfulfilled in other areas of your life.

2. Eat, sleep and exercise well

Let's pull the plug on surviving on super noodles and monster energy drinks, getting minimal amounts of movement and staying up all night revising. Cutting out these unhealthy habits will minimise stress and anxiety, and your body will thank you in the long run.

- Make sure to get a minimum of seven hours of sleep a night. If you struggle to get to sleep, create an evening routine that helps you to wind down and, more importantly, stay away from blue light devices. They only make it harder!
- Keep active. Exercising is one of the quickest and most effective ways to destress; even a short walk will do. Fresh air will clear your head and exposure to the sunlight will release serotonin in your brain, boosting your mood and helping you feel calmer and more focused.
- Avoid highs and lows of energy by eating slow-release foods such as multi-grain bread, oat porridge, nuts and vegetables. Try to reduce your intake of caffeine and junk food too. They may provide a quick energy boost, but their effects are short lived and can leave you feeling sluggish. Not ideal when you need to bring your A-game to the exam room.

3. Get ready and feel organised

It's normal to feel uneasy the night before the exam but try not to cram information in. Have one last read over your revision notes and then get your things ready so you feel more relaxed and prepared in the morning.

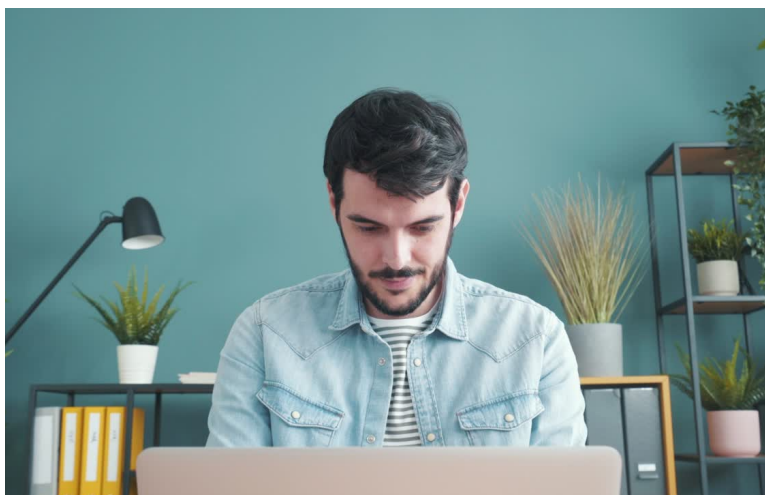
- Check your exam details e.g. location, time and what equipment is required.
- If you have to travel to an exam location, schedule and plan your route, leaving plenty of time for parking, public transport etc.
- Prepare everything you need for the exam: water, student ID and any equipment and medication you might need.

4. Believe in yourself

When we're faced with challenges, we often forget to look back at how we've come and how much we've already achieved. Making time for reflection before each exam will help to boost your confidence.

If you start having negative thoughts, try to replace them with positive ones. For example, instead of thinking "I'm a failure if I don't get a 4 for my English exam," think, "whatever happens, I will be proud of my efforts and value how much I've already achieved."

You're capable of more than you know. You've got this.



Relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, are a fundamental part of stress management. These techniques trigger the relaxation response, which counters the body's stress response.

- Sit in a comfortable chair (or lie on the floor, or on a bed).
- Ensure you will not be disturbed by other noises.
- If you become aware of sounds - just try to ignore them and let them leave your mind just as soon as they enter.
- Make sure the whole of your body is comfortably supported - including your arms, head and feet. (Rest your arms on the arms of the chair, with your feet flat on the floor)
- Close your eyes. Feel the bed or chair supporting your whole body - your legs, your arms, your head.
- If you can feel any tension, begin to let it go.
- Take 2 slow and deep breaths, and let the tension begin to flow out.
- Become aware of your head - notice how your forehead feels.
- Let any tension go and feel your forehead become smooth and wide.
- Let any tension go from around your eyes, your mouth, your cheeks and your jaw. Let your teeth part slightly and feel the tension go.
- Now focus on your neck - let the chair take the weight of your head and feel your neck relax. Now your head is feeling heavy and floppy. Let your shoulders lower gently down. Your shoulders are wider, your neck is longer.
- Notice how your body feels as you begin to relax.
- Be aware of your arms and your hands. Let them sink down into the chair. Now they are feeling heavy and limp.
- Think about your back, from your neck to your hips. Let the tension go and feel yourself sinking down into the chair. Let your hips, your legs and your feet relax and roll outwards. Notice the feeling of relaxation taking over.
- Think about your breathing - your abdomen gently rising and falling as you breathe.
- Let your next breath be a little deeper, a little slower...
- Now, you are feeling completely relaxed and heavy.
- Lie still and concentrate on slow, rhythmic breathing.
- When you want to, count back from 5 to 1 and open your eyes.
- Wiggle your fingers and toes, breathe deeply and stretch.
- Pause before gently rising.



Take time to rest,
reflect and reset.

Situation	Emotions / Moods (rate 0 – 100%)	Physical sensations	Unhelpful Thoughts / Images	Alternative / realistic thought More balanced perspective	What I did / What I could do / Defusion technique / What's the best response? Re-rate Emotion 0-100%
<p>What happened? Where? When? Who with? How?</p>	<p>What emotion did I feel at that time? What else? How intense was it?</p>	<p>What did I notice in my body? Where did I feel it?</p>	<p>What went through my mind? What disturbed me? What did those thoughts/images/memories mean to me, or say about me or the situation? What am I responding to? What 'button' is this pressing for me? What would be the worst thing about that, or that could happen?</p>	<p>STOPP! Take a breath.... Is this fact or opinion? What would someone else say about this situation? What's the bigger picture? Is there another way of seeing it? What advice would I give someone else? Is my reaction in proportion to the actual event? Is this really as important as it seems?</p>	<p>What could I do differently? What would be more effective? Do what works! Act wisely. What will be most helpful for me or the situation? What will the consequences be?</p>

Stress is caused by our thoughts about a situation, not by the situation itself. Two people in the exact same situation might have different levels of stress (or no stress at all), just because of how they think about it. Often, the thoughts that cause stress are irrational or exaggerated, but we respond to them as if they are factual. Use the 6 column thought record above to help you challenge some of those unhelpful thoughts.

Weekly Schedule

Create a schedule of activities that will lead you to having more positive experiences in your day. If you are feeling low and unmotivated, it can be very difficult to focus on revising for your exams or managing other tasks. If this is the case, start with simple goals, that are achievable.

DAY	MORNING	AFTERNOON	EVENING
<i>Example</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Wake by 8 AM</i> • <i>Eat a full breakfast</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Go for a 15 minute walk</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Call a friend</i> • <i>Practice guitar</i>
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

Positive Journal

Every day brings a combination of good and bad experiences. Unfortunately, the human brain tends to focus more heavily on the bad experiences, while forgetting or discounting the good experiences. For example, we're more likely to remember one awkward social interaction over hundreds of normal ones.

Making a point to recognise positive experiences - no matter how small - can help to improve your mood. Practice by recording three positive events at the end of each day.

Monday
1
2
3

Tuesday
1
2
3

Wednesday
1
2
3

and so on...

Daily Sleep Diary

Complete the diary each morning ("Day 1" will be your first morning). Don't worry too much about giving exact answers, an estimate will do.

		Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
	Enter the Weekday (Mon, Tues, Wed, etc.)							
1	At what time did you go to bed last night?							
2	After settling down, how long did it take you to fall asleep?							
3	After falling asleep, about how many times did you wake up in the night?							
4	After falling asleep, for how long were you awake during the night <u>in total</u> ?							
5	At what time did you finally wake up?							
6	At what time did you get up?							
7	How long did you spend in bed last night (from first getting in, to finally getting up)							
8	How would you rate the <u>quality</u> of your sleep last night?							
	1 2 3 4 5							
	V. Poor V. Good							