

TIP SHEET FOR EXAM ANXIETY

1. Feeling Anxious About Exams?

It's natural to feel some degree of anxiety, stress or apprehension about exams.

The challenge is to manage your arousal level successfully and optimise your performance. Some arousal can help you perform better: your thinking is sharp, you're focused and alert, and your mind is able to work quickly. Too much arousal and you can "go blank", "freeze", and "panic", forget things, make mistakes and not be able to concentrate or recall information. You may even feel sick in the stomach and your heart may be pounding.

To assist in managing these reactions successfully, you may need to look at the problem from different angles. The information and the knowledge is there, if you have prepared for the exam. You just need to calm down.

Thoughts: How do you perceive the situation, and what are you saying to yourself?

Is it negative, sabotaging and fear-producing or helpful and encouraging?

- e.g. "Oh no I won't get it all done, I'll fail."
- "I can't remember the answer, I'll fail."
- "I've gone blank I've blown the entire exam."

Or more realistic and positive

- "I don't have to know everything or get 100%, I will attempt all that I can and come back to this question and have a go at it later. More will come to me as I get going."

- "This stress reaction will settle down. I just need to calm down and breathe slowly."

Behaviours: How can you change your behaviours and become calmer?

Physical reactions: How can you settle your body down, reduce tension and arousal?

Energy flow: Is it balanced and flowing smoothly or is it disrupted and disorganised?

The skills required to manage this reaction are best developed and put in place long before exam time.

2. Preparing For Exams & Exam Technique

Being prepared for exams is essential. You are more likely to feel stressed and overwhelmed if you have not set aside the time to review your studies. Over-prepare by studying earlier and more than is absolutely essential. If you over-prepare then your responses become more automatic, and performance is less affected by anxiety.

The University of Newcastle has an online Module, "**Passing Exams**". It has lots of helpful information about preparing for exams and passing them.

Topics include:

Exam Preparation, setting goals, planning your exam timetable, different types of exams and how to study for them, preparation immediately prior to the exam, exam technique and reviewing how you went. The module is found under Students, New Students, Managing Your Studies, Passing Exams: Online Module or directly via the following link:

<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/teaching-and-learning/surviving-first-year-exams/>

3. Some General Tips to Manage Stress & Anxiety during the weeks prior to exams

Teach yourself to consciously relax. It's physiologically impossible to have a stressed mind if your body is relaxed. Try out different types of relaxation and meditation.

Learn to focus: Each day take a few minutes to focus your attention on a specific object. Concentrate your attention on this. When distracting thoughts occur, take your attention to your object and its particular sight, sound, touch etc. The idea is to calm your mind by occupying it with a particular sensory sensation. When in the exam room, use this technique by focusing on the wood of your desk or a pen to regain your focus.

Exercise: reduces our bodies' stress reaction. Research links a healthy body with a healthy mind. Study is usually a sedentary activity and needs to be combined with periods of physical movement. A brisk walk will aid concentration. More demanding activity and physical exertion are vital 3- 4 times per week. This increased blood flow assists memory.

Sleep: A healthy sleep routine also supports improved memory and concentration. Research indicates that 6-8 hours sleep produces the best improvements in cognitive abilities. Our mind is working during sleep. Sleep is very restorative. Compromising healthy sleep patterns during exam times is rarely helpful. A "cat nap" during intense study periods, or meditation, yoga nidra or some other relaxation technique can also assist memory and concentration.

UoN counselling web site has meditations that can be downloaded.

<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/counselling/meditation.html>.

Leisure: Maintaining some enjoyable activities during intense study periods can greatly aid the effectiveness of your study.

Diet: The brain uses up a lot of energy. The better the fuel you put in, the better your performance. A healthy balanced diet including proteins, grains, fresh fruit and vegetables etc. helps. If you are stressed and find it difficult to eat, try fruit smoothies, fruit, nuts or eating small, frequent meals.

4. Some simple exercises to assist in reducing stress and assisting better performance

Visualise what it would be like to succeed. Create detailed pictures in your mind of how you will successfully manage the exam situation.

Abdominal Breathing

With feet flat on the floor and sitting comfortably in your chair, close your eyes and focus on your breath – breathing in and breathing out – following the breath, noticing its effects on the body (rising chest, rising abdomen, falling abdomen, falling chest....). Focus your attention on your abdomen rising as you breathe in and falling as you breathe out. If your attention wanders off elsewhere, bring it back to your breathing and the rise and fall of your abdomen.

Heart Focused Breathing

Focus your attention in the area of your heart, feel your attention there. Imagine breathing in and out through your heart. Whilst maintaining heart focus and heart breathing, try to slow and deepen your breathing e.g. 1 2 3 4 in & 1 2 3 4 out - breathing in and out to the same count. Imagine your breath coming in and out from your heart area, deeply but easily and evenly.

Now it's time to ease into a positive feeling. Try to feel a positive feeling: care for someone, appreciation of good things in your life or an uplifting experience. Ease into that positive feeling as you maintain a heart focus and heart breathing.

Research has shown that this process can have a good calming effect and increase our ability to learn.

Over-energy correction

Cross your left ankle over your right ankle, your right arm over your left arm with palms facing. Clasp your palms together and bring your hands up and under to rest on your heart. The tip of your tongue will be resting behind the top teeth. Roll the tip of the tongue so that the underneath of the tip is resting on the top teeth. Breathe. Hold for a few minutes until you take a sigh or deep breath or feel a shift in your energy. Relax. If you have trouble keeping your tongue on the roof of your mouth, drop the tongue as you breathe out and bring it up to the roof as you breathe in.

This process can be calming, grounding and centering.

5. During the Exam

When outside the exam room, don't get involved in conversations about the possible exam content (particularly with confident students!). This can lead to panic and that horrible thought that everyone knows more than you do.

Manage your thoughts or "self talk"

Your thinking has a direct impact on how you feel and react. If sitting for exams is viewed as a threat rather than a challenge, your body can become more anxious than it needs to be. What are you saying to yourself? Is it helpful, realistic and encouraging? Or negative, sabotaging and fear producing?

It is important to **identify, challenge and replace unhelpful thinking.**

e.g. "I'm going to fail." "I can't do this." "I won't be able to remember everything."

e.g. "I can do this. Don't panic. As I get going, it will get easier."

Say to yourself STOP if your thoughts are negative and you feel as if things are getting out of control.

Slow down your breathing

Focus on slowing down the rate to 10 – 14 breaths per minute. Breathe deeply into the lungs; focus on pushing your diaphragm down and the abdomen rising with each breath in. Anxious and tense people breathe in very quick shallow breaths that set up physiological reactions that create more stress and fuzzy thinking.

Recognise muscle tension

Learn to tense and then release groups of muscles throughout the body. Let the tension go on each outward breathe. Observe the difference.

Simple visualisation skills

Visualisation skills such as imagining yourself being at your favorite location without any worries can help you as well, allowing you to attend again to the memory recall process.

Where can I get help from others?

Talk to a counsellor at the Newcastle campus (4921 5801) or at the Central Coast campus (4348 4060).

What other resources are available?

Passing exams module: <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/teaching-and-learning/surviving-first-year-exams/>

Learning & Development: <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/unit/centre-for-teaching-and-learning/learning-development/>

Books: Dorland, S. (2009). *Exam stress: No worries*. Wrightbooks: Queensland.

Orr, F. (1984) *How to Pass Exams*. George Allen & Unwin: Sydney.

Orr, F. (1984) *101 Great Exam Tips*. Allen & Unwin: St Leonards