

Taming Test and Exam Anxiety

#WellbeingWarriors

Compiled by Nadia Maloney
(Student Counselling & Development)

Quote by Arthur Ashe: "Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can."

Argh, it's almost that time of the year again – the dreaded exam time! Your life turns into an endless cycle of studying, eating, sleeping, and repeat. Let's be honest; online- and multimodal learning is probably not helping your anxiety either. One thing is sure – if you are writing exams, you will most likely not be able to get out of it, but hopefully, we can help you to get through it.

A variety of factors may cause test anxiety. Expectations, past experiences, poor study habits and perfectionism are all contributors. The good news is that with the right interventions, you can reduce the amount of test anxiety you experience. Why only lower and not eliminate your this anxiety? [Research](#) has shown that a healthy amount of stress can be beneficial, as it increases your motivation, makes you more alert and helps with memory retrieval.

Common test anxiety symptoms include heart palpitations; sweaty palms; difficulty breathing; feeling overwhelmed; irritability; fatigue; and sleeping difficulties. We're probably in agreement that experiencing any of these symptoms is highly uncomfortable, not conducive to an ideal learning environment and can affect your exam outcome. Take the following informal [quiz](#) to see whether you might be experiencing any test anxiety.

The following tips can help. We will discuss what you can do before, during and after an exam to lessen your test anxiety during the exam period.

Quote by Colin Powell: "There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure."

BEFORE THE EXAM

Proper planning prevents poor performance

It is crucial to start preparing for your exams in advance and plan the amount of time you need to study for each subject. Failing to do so will lead to you cramming a large amount of work in a short amount of time. Proper planning paves the foundation for effective learning. Try to keep to your study schedule as much as possible.

Know what to expect

Explore the format of the exam (e.g. types of questions, mark- and time allocation) and work through old exam papers. Make sure that you study all the work that was highlighted by the lecturer.

Writing an online exam?

Make sure you check your computer and internet connection before you write your exam. Read guidelines thoroughly on how to access and submit your exam paper and familiarize yourself with the online site. Come exam day, find a quiet spot to complete your exam.

Study smarter and avoid cramming

Know which time of the day you are most productive and use that to your advantage. Rather have a shorter good quality study session, instead of studying throughout the night with fruitless results. Avoid cramming at all cost, as it will increase your stress levels and leave you exhausted before your exam.

Challenge negative thinking

Your negative thoughts might increase during exam time. Challenge these self-defeating thoughts by taking all the evidence into account, seeing things in perspective and applying logical thinking. [This worksheet](#) can help you in this regard.

Visualization

Use your imagination in this technique to relax and lessen your stress. Visualizing yourself completing the exam successfully will help reduce your test anxiety. Use [this link](#) for visualization techniques.

Reward system

Reward yourself after completing your study goals. These planned rewards can range from something small (e.g. having your lunch outside) to something more significant (e.g. watching a movie). This will help increase your motivation to study and help you relax.

Balance

Your academics need to be your priority, but always make sure you take care of yourself. Balance your study time with sufficient sleep, regularly eating and exercising, practising self-care and doing any other essential tasks. Stay away from the misuse of any stimulants (e.g. energy drinks, caffeine, Ritalin).

Quote by Charles Dickens: "My advice is, never do tomorrow what you can do today.
Procrastination is the thief of time."

DURING THE EXAM

Don't be late

Rather be early for your exam. Avoid talking about the exam, with the other students, before you write, as this will increase your anxiety. Keep conversations light, or listen to your favourite song to help you relax and avoid those anxiety-provoking conversations.

Take a deep breath

[Deep breathing](#) is shown to decrease stress, lower blood pressure and make you feel more relaxed. Make this a habit, especially when you notice your anxiety increasing – inhale deeply

and slowly through your nose, and exhale slowly through your mouth. Repeat this easy technique as many times as necessary.

Stop negative self-talk

If you are freaking out, tell yourself to stop the negative thinking. Instead, remind yourself that you have done your best or think about a similar time when you had a successful outcome on an exam. You have been here before, and you survived!

Approach your exam paper wisely

Quickly scan through your exam paper and assign enough time for each question based on the mark allocation. Don't read all the questions yet – as you might panic if you don't immediately know the answer to a question. Answer the questions that you know first, and leave space open for the ones you do not know – you can always come back to them.

Grounding technique

When feeling panicked, a [grounding technique](#) can help you focus on the present task, lessen your anxiety and help you feel calmer. Try out the 'Five Senses grounding technique': Focus on five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste. Combine deep breathing with this grounding technique!

Quote by Robert Tew: "Trust yourself. You've survived a lot, and you'll survive whatever is coming."

AFTER THE EXAM

Do not ruminate, rather reflect

You cannot change the results of an exam after completing it. You can, however, reflect on what you did well and where you can improve. Reflecting on an exam is essential for future success, but if you find yourself ruminating and beating yourself up about it – STOP! There is no purpose to your self-defeating thoughts and behaviours, which will lead you to feel demotivated and be less productive.

Relax and reward yourself

Writing exams is stressful, and you should give yourself a break. Relax and reward yourself after an exam. Relaxing is very important as it gives your body and mind a break from all the stress, and gives you sustenance to continue with the rest of the exams.

Exam time is daunting and online- and multimodal learning can further increase your stress during an already difficult time. Focus on what is within your control and make the most of the situation. If you feel lost or anxious about the upcoming exams, start by applying the tips mentioned above. Good luck, and may all your hard work be rewarded with a favourable outcome.

Quote by John Wooden: "Don't let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do."