

EXAM ANXIETY

Introduction

For some people the examination period is an extremely stressful and anxious time. Stress can cause medical problems or reduce the efficiency of exam performance. Of course, most people have some anxiety reaction to examinations. The task is to know if we ourselves are the ones who have such excessive anxiety that it affects our exams and life as a whole.

How do I know if I am Excessively Anxious?

There are two good indicators which will help you identify whether your concern about exams might be something greater than the usual unease which most people feel:

- You will be aware of a history of nerves at various times before and/or during exams. See below for a checklist of possible reactions.
- You will be aware that you begin to feel uncomfortable during the run up period, or even at random times. The worries suddenly seem to appear. You wake up one morning, or somebody says something and that reminds you about an exam, and you have unpleasant feelings without any other apparent cause.

Worry May Start:

- Long before the event – at the beginning of the exam year or before you even arrive at university
- About three months before exams.
- The week preceding exams.
- 36 hours before the exam.
- At the start of the exam.
- During the exam.

You may have strong reactions at more than one of these times.

Typical Reactions to Exam Stress

Feelings/mood

You may feel some or all of the following:

- Slightly on edge and “stressed out” most or all of the time
- Somewhat “down” or “low” most or all of the time
- Both of these in parallel or constant cycling from one to the other
- Waves of extreme fear and/or panic

- Despair, wanting to “give up”, run away, drop out of university, even commit suicide
- Recklessness, “who cares”, feeling slightly manic or “high”

Physical symptoms can include the following:

- Sleep may be short and interrupted. Sometimes oversleeping occurs.
- Loss of appetite or changes in appetite and digestive pattern, worsening of existing digestive problems such as IBS, or ulcers
- Skin rashes can develop or existing skin conditions worsen
- Hair loss
- Agitation, trembling, twitching, constant fidgeting
- Headaches, backache, neck-ache, stomach-ache, muscle tension in limbs
- Increased craving for alcohol, stimulants, caffeine, sugar
- Sensations of panic: dizziness, shaking, hyperventilation and nausea

Anxious Thought patterns you may slip into:

- Excessive preoccupation with exams even though the exam period is a long way off.
- Complete refusal to think about the exams, “head in the sand”; shrugging it off as a reality and a future challenge that you will have to face.
- Self critical ideas, running yourself down and comparing yourself unfavourably with your colleagues. “All or nothing” thinking. Forgetting or denying your previous academic achievements and aptitudes.
- Catastrophising: only seeing the future as bleak with you as a loser – failing all your exams, not getting your degree, facing your parents’ anger and disappointment, not being able to get a job etc.
- Some people develop a fear of losing their memory – which is not helped by noticing the negative effects of anxiety on their memory function.

Anxious Behaviours you may slip into:

- Avoidance of anything to do with exams – not going anywhere near the exam halls, leaving lectures or switching off when the subject is mentioned.
- Avoidance of study, refusal to organise study time and tasks to make revision a smooth process with a logical progression towards the exam dates.
- Increased pursuit of pleasurable activities and socialising, as part of denying the necessity of preparation for exams.
- Decreasing or stopping exercise and regular eating, both of which are highly supportive of effective study.
- Excessive studying for hours on end, with or without an organised plan (but with compromised concentration, so that progress is not steady or reassuring). More unfocused study instead of analysing the academic task and addressing it logically.

- Social withdrawal – interacting less with friends and coursemates, perhaps to avoid conversation about exams or finding out how much revision they have completed.

Unpleasant and unhelpful though all these reactions are, they are very common and with the right attitude and some support, they can be overcome.

How to Deal with Exam Anxiety

Stop avoiding the issues

- Try to face up to what lies ahead and plan for the event.
- Review your exam skills and plan to deal with any deficiencies.
- Set up a study timetable to manage revision more effectively.
- Schedule relaxation time between study sessions (but avoid over-partying!). Also schedule in some form of exercise on a daily basis.
- Be realistic when planning your time; don't be too ambitious otherwise you will become exhausted.
- Create an area where you can study effectively i.e. good lighting, comfortable chair etc. The area should be free from clutter which might cause a distraction.

Learn to handle anxiety more effectively.

- Get a routine: you will keep stress at a low level if you have a routine which allows for regular nutritious meals, exercise and sleep etc.
- Make a concerted effort to discover a successful 'winding down' routine for the evenings and get to sleep. See handout on insomnia from NTU Student Counselling or look on the net.
- If you begin to panic, concentrate on breathing techniques and take a little time out to calm down fully before resuming study. The Student Counselling Service can advise further on breathing and relaxation skills.
- Picture yourself positively; maybe struggling with aspects of an exam – but doing so competently and winning through. Try this morning and night to set you up for a productive day and a peaceful night's sleep.
- Enlist the support of your friends and family – ask them to contact you frequently with messages of encouragement and reassurance.

Strengthen exam and revision skills.

- To help reduce anxiety you need to practice answering questions under exam conditions using old papers etc. Don't be frightened to ask for support from your tutors.
- Books can offer instructions on skills for use in an exam room. There isn't one set way to succeed in exams. Try a range of options so you don't feel trapped and worried. There are a number of text books which explore

these topics. There are also some useful self-help books which will assist you in changing your negative beliefs.

- If you are dyslexic the Dyslexia Support Team based in Student Support Services provides specialist advice and study skills information.

Sometimes we need someone else's help to get us to face up to a problem and new skills develop more easily when you have a chance to talk it out. The NTU Student Counselling Service operates on all 3 campuses and counsellors are trained to help you with your specific anxieties and behaviours.

Books

Passing Exams Without Anxiety David Acres. How To Books

Panic Attacks: What they are, Why they happen, and What you can do about them Christine Ingham. Thorsons

Do It Now! Break the Procrastination Habit Dr William J Knaus. John Wiley & Sons, Inc

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