

How can I avoid getting stressed before an exam?

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How to cope with exam stress. What are the signs of too much stress?

Brockington

COPING WITH EXAM STRESS

How do I minimise exam stress?



How do I plan a timetable?

How you can Help Yourself Booklet

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Can I avoid getting stressed before an exam?

Taking exams is bound to be stressful for you because of what's at stake. You may be feeling a weight of expectation from your family and school, to succeed. You maybe afraid you're not good enough, or haven't worked hard enough. You may be scared of letting yourself down or not being able to get into college or university.

Your pre-exam nerves may seem worse if you are doing exams for the first time or if you have particular learning difficulties. Exams do not exist alone there may well be other events going on in your life that are putting you under pressure.

If your stress levels rise too high for too long, it can be harmful both to you and to your chances. Everybody's stress 'threshold' is different. A situation that is too much for one person to tolerate may be stimulating to another. Controlled at the right level, stress can work to your advantage as it can help you to produce your peak performance.

How do I minimise exam stress?

Exams bring out the best in some people and the worst in others. Whatever your case is, you may be in a situation where you have to do them. Remind yourself that you can only do your best and your best is all that you can do!

Being organised

If you find out exactly what you are facing, you can work out a plan for dealing and working with it. This will go a long way towards putting your mind at ease.

- Get hold of the right information from the start.
- Make sure you know how you will be examined and what you'll be examined on.
- Catch up with anything you've missed, so you are up to date with your notes.
- Find out about resources available to help you. Ask your teachers for advice.

Plan a timetable

Try to start your revision in plenty of time. Take time to plan a revision timetable that is both realistic and still flexible. So linked to your exam timetable you will revise subjects in the right order. By planning this way you give yourself clear priorities and can try to balance your revision with other demands on your time; meals, sleep, chores and other commitments, as well as time for relaxing. Identify your best time of the day for studying.

If you are on study leave, one way to structure your work may be to divide your day into three units, morning, afternoon and evening. By giving you a total of 21 units per week, you can then make a list of all the subjects you need to cover. Estimate how long you think it will take you to revise each one, allowing more time for things you find most difficult. Then divide the subjects up between the units.

Everyone needs time off. It is a bad idea to abandon your social life and sporting activities. But for a time near your exams you may need to cut down. This will involve making hard choices. But always try and leave yourself a minimum of six units of free time per week.

What's the best way to revise?

It's not always possible to find peace and quiet, or a comfortable place to revise. Try to arrange with those at home a set time and space where you can work without being disturbed. Failing that, think about whether you could use other facilities at school or your local library. If you study in a room where you also eat or sleep, try to keep your work area separate, so it's not always confronting you when you're not studying.

There's no right way to revise, it's largely a matter of what suits you best and the particular exam you're taking, whether it is a multiple choice answer, calculations, short-answer questions or an essay. Your method might be to make notes from text books or writing quick summaries of topics in maybe the form of mind maps, or reciting facts out loud, learning dates or vocabulary by heart, reading revision books or watching revision programmes. Switching between methods helps you to hold your interest and absorb information better. Mix duller subjects with more interesting ones for the same reason. If it's hard to get started, begin with something easy.

Think about what you are writing and reading and test yourself afterwards. Writing endless notes is probably a waste of time. If you come to a point when you don't understand something, try reading about it somewhere else. If that doesn't work, then ask someone who knows the subject well.

If you have a problem with concentration you can improve it by starting with short bursts of study, then by adding an extra few minutes to each session. Don't try to study for longer than 45 to 60 minutes at a stretch.

It may be less stressful to do the work than it is to worry about it. If you find it hard getting motivated, set yourself measurable goals for each revision session, then tick them off when you have achieved them. After each session, acknowledge the achievement and reward yourself with something. Have a break between sessions, or if you find things on top of you. Get a soft drink, read a magazine or take some exercise. Bear in mind that drinks containing caffeine, such as tea, coffee and cola are stimulants and may make you feel more agitated.

It's also worth practising timed exam questions and papers. This can give you some idea of what the real exam will be like and how to divide your time between questions. Although exam papers are never the same they're similar enough to be useful.

” I just felt desperate. I wanted to be somewhere where I didn't have to worry about the exams, or anything else any more.”

What's the best approach to actual exams?

Be sure you're clear about what exam is coming up and when, so that you don't prepare for the wrong one. Working through the night before an exam may save you on the day, but it's not a good strategy to rely on. It's possible to work effectively without having had enough sleep, but getting a good night's sleep is a better option.

To reduce the chance of anxiety, have everything you need ready in advance. Do have something to eat before the exam, however queasy you are feeling. It doesn't need to be a huge amount, but you will function better with fuel inside. Set off in good time.

Once in the exam, if you feel panic is rising and your mind going blank, take a minute to do a breathing routine (see below) and give yourself time to calm down. The biggest mistake people can make in exams is not to read the questions carefully, so they don't answer them in full. So take your time to read each question carefully.

After the exam is over, it's tempting to think about all the answers you gave and if they were good enough. This will only stress you further. Try to forget about your last exam and focus on the next one.

Keep things in perspective. Be realistic about what you can achieve. We are all different and achieve at different levels and have different qualities and skills. Exam stress isn't a valuation of you as a whole person. Be positive about what makes you the individual you are. If you do end up doing badly, it won't be the end of the world. Facing up to the worst will enable you to look at how you might cope and what you could do next. There may be another chance to take the exam or another different option may open up.

How can I de-stress?

Learning how to relax is crucial. Effective, straightforward self-help techniques are going to be very helpful in the run up to your exams and even when you're sitting in the exam room.

Breathing techniques

Stress can make you start breathing with quick, shallow breaths and make your heart beat faster than usual. If this happens, sit down somewhere comfortable, if possible. Place one hand on your stomach and check how quickly you are breathing. If it's one breathe every couple of seconds, then put both your feet on the floor, take a deep breath as if you are filling up a balloon in your stomach and start counting steadily. Breathe out slowly letting the balloon air out and try to get the last of your breath out in about five seconds. Carry on doing this until you are doing it naturally and you feel calm. It can help to practise this when you are feeling less stressed and it will become more natural without having to think too much about it.

Relaxation routine

- Close your eyes and breathe slowly and deeply.
- Locate any areas of tension and try to relax those muscles, try to imagine the tension disappearing.
- Relax each part of your body, from your feet to the top of your head.
- As you focus on each part of your body, think warmth, heaviness and relaxation.
- After 20 minutes, take some deep breaths and stretch.

Physical activity

Regular exercise is an excellent way of coping with stress. As little as 10 or 20 minutes a day spent cycling, walking or at the gym can make a big difference.

Sleep

If you are tired, worries can get blown out of proportion. If you've been finding it hard to get to sleep, try cutting down on stimulants, tea, coffee or cola. Make sure you make time to unwind before bed.

Things to do if you can't sleep

Suggestions for helping you get to sleep.

- **Writing things down before you sleep.**

If you have difficulty sleeping as you have something on your mind, even if things in your head are not making sense, write them down. If you can't sleep this can help to get the words, ideas and thoughts on paper so you don't lie awake thinking about them all.

- **Writing things down when you wake up**

If you wake up with something on your mind, write your thoughts down, this may help you get back to sleep. If you wake up in the morning it may help if you write your thoughts down to help you put them to one side for the day, these you could come back to later.

- **Drinking a warm drink**

Try having a warm drink to help relax you before you go to sleep. Like warm milk or hot chocolate. Stay away from drinks with caffeine in, such as tea, coffee or coke as they may keep you awake.

- **Lavender**

This is a natural flower which is used for relaxation; you can get sleep pillows filled with lavender or aromatherapy oil to put on your pillow. This is also good if put in a warm bath just before you go to bed. Lavender is deeply relaxing and great help with getting to sleep.

- **Lights on at night**

A light left on at night can be comforting. Or you could try leaving your curtains open, or leave your bedroom door open with a light on outside your room. You could buy night lights to plug in or even a lava lamp.

- **Blocking out light**

If you feel you need your room very dark then you can buy thick heavy curtains that block out all the light, or you could try hanging a blanket across your window instead.

Support groups

Think about getting together in a study group with fellow students. It can help with revision and give you an opportunity for talking to each other about what is worrying you. Sometimes others are reluctant to open up for fear of what others might think of them, but everybody is in the same situation.

Eat well

It's very important to eat properly, and not to exist on snacks. The right foods can help your concentration for studying and help you feel well generally.

What are the signs of too much stress?

Feeling stressed is a natural response to such pressure. We all respond as if it were a physical threat. The body releases chemicals into the bloodstream that make you feel nervous and edgy. Muscles tense ready for action and the heart beats faster to carry blood to the muscles and the brain. You breathe faster, sweat more and your mouth becomes dry. Your hormones, such as adrenalin cause these physical reactions.

These are some of the early signs that you might be under too much stress:

- Sleeping badly
- Headaches
- Loss of appetite
- Being unusually bad tempered
- Feeling sick
- Feeling tired all the time

You may also be feeling restless, finding it difficult either to relax or to concentrate. You may be feeling disorganised, with a fear of getting out of control.

Panic can sometimes produce physical sensations such as chest pains, muscle cramps, pins and needles, dizziness, fainting and stomach problems, all of which can worry and alarm you.

It is important to talk to someone about these feelings and to get appropriate help.

What should I do if things are getting on top of me?

Try to get an accurate picture of your situation. Ask someone who knows your work and the standards required. You may be worrying unnecessarily and setting yourself much too high a standard.

Sort out your priorities

If you think there's too much work and not enough time left to do it in, then write down everything you need to do and sort it into order or priority. You can then work out what action you may need to take for each task and work your way through your list. You need to take into account which subjects are the most important or compulsory, which you already know the best and which you have enough information on. If you have a tutor or mentor, they can advise you and help you organise your work realistically.

Soothing yourself

Taking good physical care of yourself is an important way to reduce stress. Self soothing can help you to relax and feel calmer, especially during times of stress. To come up with ideas to soothe yourself, think of things you can do that are comforting for you. For example, if you have a dog, being with it could be soothing; to sit, walk with it or just enjoying its company. For each of us these activities will be different.

Think of things you have done in the past to help yourself feel better, like asking someone for a hug, taking a hot bath, or snuggling under the covers with a good book. You can also think about what is pleasing to each of your senses.

- Taste, eating a favourite food.
- Touch, playing with your pet.
- Sight, looking at a favourite object
- Smell, drinking a cup of hot chocolate
- Listening to your favourite music

Whatever is soothing for you!

How can family and friends help?

As a student who is under stress you need to know that you have the support of family and friends. It's important that others should be sensitive to the extra strain you may be under and allow you the space and time to study. Regular meals, appropriate opportunities for relaxation and emotional support are all going to help. So by offering plenty of positive feedback, this can demonstrate their confidence in your abilities.

Friends and family should keep distractions to a minimum and do as much as possible to ease any additional pressures. They may find it difficult not to let their own frustrations and anxieties about the outcome influence their response, especially if it's meant putting limits on their own activities. It won't be for long though!

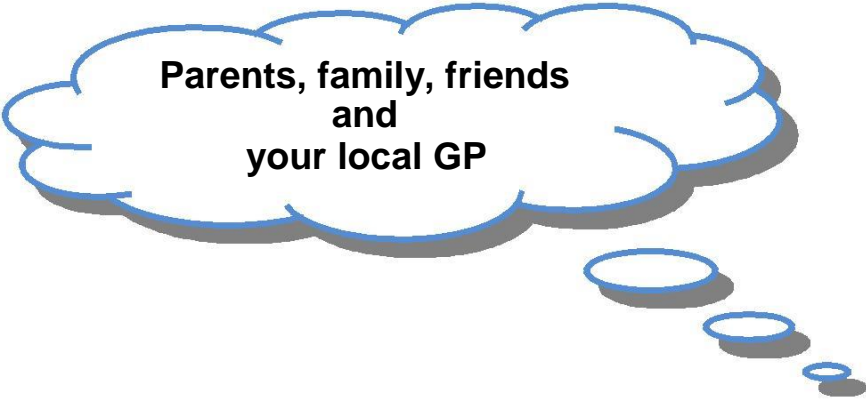
If it does look as if the stress is getting too much for the person taking the exam, encouraging them to seek appropriate help could be vital. It's important to reassure them that this is a sign of strength, not weakness.

“It felt OK to be in the routine of working some of the time and going to the gym or for a run. I was still going out at night, but I was getting home at a reasonable time. I felt as if I'd got it under control and so when the exams came, I'd done my best and stayed sane.”

Who Can Help?



**Your Tutor, Teachers
and your Head Of Year. Don't
forget your peers.**



**Parents, family, friends
and
your local GP**