

Wrangling Exam Anxiety

What is exam anxiety? Most people naturally feel anxious before an exam. Some anxiety before and during an exam actually enhances your performance. Sometimes, too much adrenalin is released and you may begin to feel distress. Then anxiety can get in the way of performing well. It is useful to keep your anxiety about exams at a level that allows for your optimal alertness and performance.

Do I have exam anxiety? Here are some signs you may notice:

<input type="checkbox"/> Feel panic or overwhelm about exams	<input type="checkbox"/> Can't recall information I studied
<input type="checkbox"/> Find it hard to concentrate in exams	<input type="checkbox"/> Worry that I will fail
<input type="checkbox"/> My mind goes 'blank'	<input type="checkbox"/> Suddenly know the answers after exams
<input type="checkbox"/> Feel sweaty, racing heart, or breathless	<input type="checkbox"/> Score much lower than on assignments

1. Balance Your Health and Wellbeing

Keeping a balanced lifestyle is one way to manage and even prevent anxiety. This includes eating well, having sufficient sleep, exercising regularly, having time to relax, and time to focus. Dr Dan Siegel's Healthy Mind platter is a useful tool to keep this healthy balance:

http://www.drdansiegel.com/resources/healthy_mind_platter/

The Healthy Mind Platter



The Healthy Mind Platter for Optimal Brain Matter

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2. Prepare for Exams

Good preparation, such as weekly revision, regular class attendance, and study planning can reduce or prevent anxiety, whereas last minute study (cramming) and disorganisation can increase stress and be ineffective for learning in the long-term.

See: *Managing Exam Anxiety*, ANU Academic Skills and Learning Centre
<https://academicskills.anu.edu.au/resources/handouts/managing-exam-anxiety>

3. Understand Anxiety

Gain knowledge about the stress response (which is useful to take you out of danger, less helpful in an exam.) Being aware of your physical, mental and emotional responses gives you an opportunity to practice the soothing activities below. This can improve your concentration, attention and memory, along with your participation and performance in exams.

See: <http://au.reachout.com/tough-times/somethings-not-right/stress-and-anxiety>

4. Soothe Anxiety

You can use skills such as these during an exam to help you focus. Regular calming activities can help you become well-practiced and reduce your overall stress levels.

- Lengthen your out-breath – breathe in for 4 seconds and out for 5 or 6 seconds.
- Change the focus of your attention– focus in detail on an ordinary item in the room until you feel calmer.
- Visualise a comforting scene.
- Try free online relaxation exercises:

http://counselling.anu.edu.au/sites/counselling.anu.edu.au/files/Online%20Relaxation%20resources%20for%20student%20wellbeing_0.pdf

5. Explore Your Attitudes: Challenge Fixed Thinking

Assess your mindset and aim to become more flexible, which will reduce anxiety. According to the research of psychologist, Dr Carol Dweck, if we believe intelligence is an inborn talent requiring no active effort (fixed mindset), this can stifle learning and development.

If you can enhance your belief that academic abilities and knowledge can be learnt through effort and hard-work, then make a commitment to doing that work, you are more likely to be resilient and to learn and perform well. You can build this flexible or growth mindset:

- Embrace challenges;
- Apply effort and persistence;
- Seek feedback;
- Learn from criticism or mistakes;
- Celebrate the achievements of yourself and others.

See: <http://mindsetonline.com/whatisit/about/>

Mindset: The New Psychology of Success (2006), Carol Dweck, Random House:NY.

6. Check Your Thinking

Thoughts have a direct link to anxiety levels. Thinking about negative outcomes can increase anxiety, whereas, being more balanced or objective can reduce anxiety.

- Become aware of your negative or catastrophic thinking.
- Challenge or balance these thoughts.

See: <http://www.mindhealthconnect.org.au/cognitive-behaviour-therapy-cbt>

7. Learn to Tolerate Normal Discomfort and Thrive

Anxiety is a normal human experience, so learning to tolerate a certain level is adaptable. Consider 'riding out' the anxiety using these ideas:

- Emotions naturally come and go, like the weather or waves on the ocean. And much like gravity, once anxiety rises, it naturally comes back down.
- You can sit with anxiety temporarily without trying to get rid of it. Attempting to avoid or block anxiety can actually increase it.
- You can be anxious and cope with a situation at the same time.

See: Building resilience <http://au.professionals.reachout.com/wellbeing-and-resilience>

8. Celebrate Achievements and Persist

Be kind to yourself and celebrate your successes, no matter how small. Keep on trying, by using small encouragements for yourself (things you say or do).

See: Staying Motivated <http://www.mindhealthconnect.org.au/staying-motivated>

If you have difficulty with any of these techniques, contact the University Counselling Centre for additional assistance. Phone: 6125 2442 to make an appointment.