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## **Counselling Service**

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### **Coping with exam anxiety**

Most of us experience some anxiety before exams or assessments and this can actually enhance performance. However too much stress works against us and we find that our revision and exam performance are negatively affected as a result.

Make anxiety work *for* you and not *against* you. Take some time now to identify the root of *your* anxiety. Are you a generally anxious person? Are you inadequately prepared - not enough revision time, poor revision skills, scant knowledge of parts of the course because of illness, other absence or lack of effort earlier in the year? Have you had a bad experience in a previous test and think that this will happen again? Now, having some more idea of *why* you are anxious you can move on *what to do about it*.

### **Preparation can help**

Being well prepared is the best way to reduce **rational** anxiety (anxiety that has a clearly identified cause. i.e. I am anxious because.....)

- Start your revision early. Trying to grasp a whole term's or year's work in the few days, or even hours, before the exam date will inevitably lead to exam anxiety. Take a look at your time management and basic study skills. Help and advice from Counselling Service, personal tutor, or self-help books in Library.
- Organise your course-related material. Work on mastering the main concepts of the course rather than trying to learn everything parrot fashion. Usually impossible! and certainly not learning with any understanding.
- Think about what type of questions may be asked. Try to pull together concepts and ideas from all your sources (lectures, notes, primary and secondary texts, practical exercises, class discussions) and integrate these into a cohesive answer.
- Don't panic if the work-load seems excessive, or your revision time or course work has been interrupted for some reason. Set realistic targets, learn core concepts and learn these well. A well-structured, brief answer that really addresses the question is preferable to a ramble with too many unrelated ideas.

## **Change how you think about exams**

- Many people fear exams because they see them as of utmost importance. Exams are only part of your overall learning and assessment, and you will have other chances to show your knowledge and skills (essays, lab reports, projects, dissertation).
- Be realistic. An "A" pass is nice, but if you set your target too high you may never reach it, and feel anxious and demoralised in the process.
- Try to avoid thinking of yourself in a negative light. "I'm not as good as my sister, flat-mate, boyfriend". "My parents won't like me if I fail". "Yesterday's exam was a nightmare, so today's will be too". "My life will be ruined if I don't get an A".

## **Don't neglect the basics**

- The pressure of exam time can make us neglect ourselves as whole people, with emotional, biological and social needs.
- Look after yourself and your physical well-being. Eat well and keep up your usual exercise routine. Be careful of too much caffeine, alcohol, nicotine and high calorie, but low nutrition snacks.
- No need to give up all your social activities, but you might want to reduce them as part of your time management plan.
- Take adequate breaks, both short and long. Studying 12 hours a day, 7 days a week is a sure way to burn yourself out long before the exam date comes round.
- Sleep is essential to refresh your body and brain. Ease off studying an hour or 2 before bed -time.

## **On the day**

- Begin your day in good time and take time for a light meal. A cup, or 3, of strong coffee and no food can lead to light-headedness and only add to any pre-existing exam nerves.
- Resist the temptation to do some last minute revision. Anything learned at this point will only cloud your mastery of the overall concepts of the course.
- Plan to arrive at the exam hall in good time, but not too early, taking everything you need with you (but leave the notes at home).
- Avoid other students who you know will be anxious. No need to add to your own stress.
- Read a newspaper or magazine while you are waiting.

## **Once in the exam hall**

Remember that some anxiety at this moment is *normal*.

- Make yourself comfortable. Tell yourself that this is your opportunity to show to the examiner that you have worked hard. You can be anxious later. Sit with your eyes closed for a short while. Take a few deep, slow breaths to reduce tension. *Then* turn over the question paper.
- First review the entire exam, then read the instructions *twice*. Select the questions you think you can answer best (if there is a choice) and do the easiest first to boost your confidence.
- For essay type answers spend 5 to 10 minutes on an answer plan and outline. For short answer questions answer only what is asked, briefly and to the point.
- For multiple choice questions read *all* the options first. The immediately obvious is not always right.
- Work at a steady pace, keeping an eye on the time.
- If panic sets in, stop what you are doing and breath slowly and evenly until you begin to feel calm. Tense and relax muscles in your body - shrug shoulders, stretch out your arms & legs, wiggle your toes and fingers.
- Reward yourself after the exam, whatever the outcome. After all, you did the best you could.
- If things didn't go well, move on. Plan ways of doing better next time.

## **I've tried all of that & I am still anxious about exams**

Sometimes your anxiety is at a level that paralyses you and you are unable to put into practice all your good intentions. *Seek help*. The counsellors are here to help you find out why you are so anxious and what you can do about it. But see them in good time, preferably early in the academic year before the problem becomes entrenched, and certainly well before you begin any revision.

***Good luck!***

Find out more about us at :  
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