

MANAGING EXAM STRESS

WHAT IS EXAM STRESS?

Exam stress means different things to different people. It can be anything from mild apprehension to acute and debilitating panic.

We respond to exams in different ways. We may:

- Thrive on them
- Take them more or less in our stride but get a bit stressed in the last couple of weeks
- Worry about exams for weeks beforehand and get so stressed we find it hard to switch off.
- Become so anxious we can't study at all. We may sit for hours in front of a book not taking anything in and then panic that we know nothing
- Worry how our performance will affect final degree results
- Worry we will blank out, forget everything, find there are questions we can't answer, and worry about what the examiner wants from us
- Experience physical symptoms such as insomnia, headaches, diarrhoea, nausea, sweating, and problems with sleep
- Fear that we will fail.

IS EXAM STRESS NORMAL?

To a certain extent most of us suffer from a degree of exam stress. If we didn't, we might find it difficult to motivate ourselves to revise. Stress can sharpen concentration and performance and help to create the additional energy and momentum we need to keep studying when we would rather be doing something else. However, too much stress can be debilitating.

More people suffer from exam stress than they like to admit. There are many students who sail through exams and see them as an opportunity to show off what they know but these are not in the majority.

WHO IS LIKELY TO SUFFER FROM EXAM STRESS?

Anyone who is ambitious, competitive and wants to do well, in other words potential high achievers are likely to suffer.

It is a popular misconception that only the less intelligent experience exam stress. Often it is bright but under achieving students who suffer the most. They want to do well but something gets in the way. Trying to work out the reasons behind this can help to manage the stress.

REASONS FOR EXAM STRESS

Reasons for exam stress are very personal and can include being a way of expressing anger. Sometimes the anger is linked to feeling that you have not reached your full potential or got the marks you really deserve.

Sometimes it is linked to disapproval of the whole examination system and anger with tutors for putting you through it. Sometimes it is connected with anger about lost educational opportunities, parental pressure to succeed and high expectations from others. Instead of expressing the anger directly, students often take it out on themselves and underachieve.

Exam stress can also be caused by things that happen in life. Bereavement, the break up of a relationship, financial problems, family problems, career worries, fear of having to leave university, pressures to get married, or anxiety about sexuality or potency can all express themselves in exam stress.

Mature students can also worry about feeling that they are out of practice, that they don't have the necessary skills, or feel envious of the ease with which they imagine younger students do exams.

If your mind is distracted by other things, these can get in the way of studying. You then slip behind and as the exams approach, and you begin to panic.

" EXAM STRESS CAN BE A WAY OF SAYING SOMETHING IS WRONG IF THIS CAN'T BE EXPRESSED DIRECTLY."

HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THERE ARE ONLY TWO MAJOR REASONS WHY PEOPLE DO BADLY IN EXAMS: LACK OF WORK OR TOO MUCH WORRY.

If you have not done enough work, there is no other way around it but actually doing the work.

If you are suffering from exam stress, it is surmountable. It is important to remember that you are at university because you have the potential to succeed, otherwise you would not be here. Some people, particularly those who have not sat an exam for many years, may feel they lack the skills. If this is the case, it is important to get help quickly. You can ask your personal tutor for help with basic exam skills and also seek support from fellow students.

It is important to understand why you are in a panic. Talk to other students, and try to think why you are feeling as you are. If you talk about it, you will probably be surprised to find out how many other people share your experience. If you have a history of under-achievement, you can see a University counsellor for help in overcoming this.

To help yourself overcome your fears, try to imagine the worst scenario – failing. Think about what you would do if you did fail. Coming to terms with the idea in your mind can help to reduce the panic and make failure less likely. For some people the worst scenario is not getting a first or a 2:1. **Are you one of those people who say they are afraid of failing but are really afraid you won't do brilliantly and come out top?** Think about whether you are afraid of succeeding. **Are you someone who fears doing well in case you do better than your parents, sisters, brothers or peers?** It is surprising how many people who suffer from exam anxiety are afraid of doing well. Understanding what you feel helps a lot and you can see a University counsellor for help with this.

PRACTICAL TIPS

IF YOU ARE ABOUT TO TAKE AN EXAM, HERE ARE A FEW PRACTICAL TIPS TO HELP YOU THROUGH.

BEFORE THE EXAM

- Do not waste time sitting in front of books, pretending to revise. Just one or two hours effective study is worth five staring out of the window
- Give yourself breaks. Try to plan something you enjoy in every revision day before the exam. Have some fun – a happy mind thinks better than a fed up one
- Try to enjoy your revision. Those who do well academically are those who are interested and enjoy their subject. If a subject really does not interest you, leave it until last. Revise the subjects you enjoy best, first
- Have an early night before the exam. A rested mind thinks better than a tired one
- Do not drink tea, coffee or alcohol late at night, it will stop you sleeping
- Don't cram up your revision at the last minute. You are far more likely to forget things you have learnt in a hurry
- Eat well before an exam. Do not go in with a rumbling stomach or drink too much fluid. It could mean wanting to go to the toilet in the middle of an exam
- If possible, familiarise yourself with the exam room in advance. This will help to make it feel less strange on the day
- If you find it hard to sleep before an exam, try thinking about a place or a home, which has happy memories for you. Think your way round the place, taking in every detail in your mind, until you fall asleep. Do not lie in bed panicking if you still cannot sleep. Get up and read a book, watch television or listen to the radio until your mind unwinds

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Do not panic about panicking. Many students work themselves into a state because they panic about panicking. What you're going through is normal. Exams are about going into the unknown. They are challenging and can be intimidating but they are not monsters
- Remember your lecturers want you to pass. They are not out to get you, the exam is not a trap. It is a way of helping you and them find out how much of the course you have absorbed and how you are progressing
- Try to work out a time plan for the exams in advance. Give yourself some time at the beginning to read through the whole exam paper and at the end to read your answers.

IN THE EXAM

- Make yourself as comfortable as possible. Take deep breaths and try to relax when you get in. If necessary, think about something else for a minute or two to clear your mind
- Write down your time plan for answering the questions
- Read through the questions and pick the ones you think you can do. If you blank out at this point, do not worry, try to calm yourself down
- Do the questions you find easiest first to give you confidence
- Be sure to answer the question rather than saying all you know about the subject
- Allow your mind time to think. It is better to write shorter answers than put down everything you know
- If you do panic, put your hand up and let the invigilator know.

GOOD LUCK AND TRY NOT TO WORRY. SOME OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE HAVE SUFFERED FROM EXAM STRESS AT SOME TIME IN THEIR CAREER.

HOW YOU CAN HELP SOMEONE ELSE

YOU CAN PLAY AN IMPORTANT PART IN SUPPORTING SOMEONE WHO IS STRESSED DURING THE EXAM PERIOD.

Simple things may help that won't take up a lot of time when you may also be preparing for exams yourself:

- Just accepting that your friend is worried and listening to their concerns may be useful
- Encourage your friend to take breaks and go out from time to time
- Your friend may benefit from some of the strategies we have described. If you remain worried about your friend, you can encourage them to get help from their personal tutor and/or the Counselling Service.

WHERE YOU CAN FIND HELP

INSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- The **Counselling Service** offers free, confidential, individual and group counselling and workshops. The Service also offers support and guidance to those concerned about the welfare of a friend, relative or colleague. To arrange an initial appointment, telephone 020 7911 5000 ext 66899, email counselling@westminster.ac.uk or visit westminster.ac.uk/counselling
- The **Student Advice Service** offer advice and information on funding, benefits, visa and immigration matters. Contact studentcentre@westminster.ac.uk or visit westminster.ac.uk/advice
- **Disability Learning Support** offer information, support and advice with managing as a student with physical disabilities or mental health conditions. Tel 0203 506 8800 or visit westminster.ac.uk/disability-services
- The **Students' Union** offer advice and support. They can be contacted on 020 7911 5000 and at uwsu.com

WHERE YOU CAN FIND HELP

OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- Your **GP** can offer you support, advice, medical treatment or referral to specialist help. All GP practices offer an out-of-hours service for emergencies.
- **London Nightline** offers a confidential telephone listening service, run by students for students, which is available from 6pm-8am every night during term-time, Tel 020 7631 0101.
- **The Samaritans** offer a listening ear 24 hours a day, Tel 116 123, this number is FREE to call.
- Information, resources and links to useful organisations can be found at studentdepression.org
- Information about managing exam stress can be found on the Counselling Service webpage, westminster.ac.uk/counselling

FURTHER READING

- **Passing Exams Without Anxiety**
(David Acres, How To Books, 1998)



DETAILS OF OTHER SPECIALIST HELP CAN BE FOUND AT:
WESTMINSTER.AC.UK/COUNSELLING

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