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Effective Coping with Exam Pressure

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A guide for students

Many students find preparing for and taking GCSEs, BTECs, and A Levels a stressful and anxiety-provoking time. This guide will explain some important facts about exam stress and anxiety and show simple ways to manage it effectively.

STRESS IS NOT NECESSARILY A BAD THING

Martin Seligman, famous for his research into learned helplessness and depression then went on to develop his knowledge and furthered his expertise in the world of positive psychology and since the year 2000, this has expanded into a massive phenomenon that is being incorporated into all areas of life, education, the workplace, coaching, relationships. Positive psychology is all about what makes life worthwhile. It focuses on strengths rather than an individual's weaknesses.

STRESS IS NEITHER GOOD NOR BAD IN ITSELF

People react to stress in different ways. For some students stress can be a great motivator and gives them the 'get up and go' they need to succeed. Other students are indifferent to stress; they can float along without getting affected by stress in a good or bad way. Stress can be a bad thing for some people when exam pressures become overwhelming.

SHOULD I BE CONCERNED?

The key thing to remember is that stress is nothing to be scared of. If you are someone who responds well to stress then it can help push you to better performance. If you are not there are things that you can learn to help yourself cope more effectively.

THE BALANCE BETWEEN PRESSURE AND COPING

When the pressures that we put on ourselves, or the pressures that we believe others put on us, outweigh our ability to cope with those pressures then stress can lead to anxiety. A high level of exam anxiety can be distressing and can interfere with your ability to perform well in exam situations. However, it is important to remember that anxiety is not inevitable; there are many things that you can do to reduce your level of anxiety.

This guide will explain:

- how to recognise the signs of high exam anxiety;
- learning how to respond effectively to high exam anxiety;
- how to control physical reactions to anxiety;
- learning to think positively; and
- how to make revision effective.

High exam anxiety

HOW TO RECOGNISE THE SIGNS OF HIGH EXAM ANXIETY

Exam anxiety can show in thoughts (cognitive signs), emotions (affective signs), and the body (physiological signs).

COGNITIVE SIGNS OF EXAM ANXIETY

- Going blank or 'freezing' during an exam.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Remembering answers after you have finished the exam.
- Negative thoughts about your past performance in exams.
- Negative thoughts about the consequences of failure.

AFFECTIVE SIGNS OF ANXIETY

- Feeling excessive tension.
- Feeling panicky.
- Feeling overwhelmed.
- Feeling not in control.

PHYSIOLOGICAL SIGNS OF EXAM ANXIETY

- Fast heartbeat.
- A dry mouth.
- Jelly/wobbly legs.
- Dizzy or faint.
- A tight or churning stomach.
- Sweating.

Remember that most people experience these signs at some point when doing an exam. That is entirely natural. High exam anxiety is when you tend to experience these signs before or during an exam most of the time.

LEARNING EFFECTIVE WAYS TO DEAL WITH HIGH EXAM ANXIETY

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Many people who experience high levels of exam anxiety think they are the only ones who do so. High levels of exam anxiety are more common than many people think. A survey in 2020 found that just over 16% of students in Years 10 and 11 reported high levels of exam anxiety. That is approximately one in every six students.

SHOULD I JUST IGNORE IT?

Although it might be tempting to avoid doing anything about it this is not the best approach. Many people with high exam anxiety experience something that psychologists call cognitive interference. Cognitive interference is when anxiety interferes with your memory, attention, and concentration. This makes it harder for you to understand what exam questions are asking for and to remember that you have revised. Ultimately it could mean that do don't perform as well as you could do.

WHAT IS THE GOOD NEWS?

The good news is that there are ways you can learn to control high levels of exam anxiety that are simple and can be learned by everyone. These will help to prevent the effects of cognitive interference.

Effective ways of reducing high levels of exam anxiety include the following:

- controlling physical reactions to anxiety with deep breathing;
- learning to believe in yourself;
- developing a plan for your revision; and
- using effective revision strategies.

The remainder of this guide will explain how you can learn to use these strategies.

LEARNING TO CONTROL PHYSICAL REACTIONS TO HIGH EXAM ANXIETY

WHAT IS DEEP BREATHING?

You might have noticed that when you become anxious your breathing becomes shallow and fast. This is one of several physical reactions to anxiety. However, if we breathe slowly and deeply your anxiety can be reduced. This is one of the most effective ways to temporarily reduce anxiety.

WHEN CAN I USE DEEP BREATHING?

You can use deep breathing at any time and not just in exams. However, it can be an effective approach to use at those moments when you are feeling very anxious, panicky, or faint, such as at the beginning of an exam. Using deep breathing will help you to calm down and feel like you are in control.

HOW DO I LEARN DEEP BREATHING?

- Sit comfortably with a straight back.
- Place your left hand flat on your chest and your right hand flat just underneath your left hand at the bottom of your ribs. This is where your diaphragm is.
- Breathe in and out normally. You should not feel much change in the chest or the diaphragm.
- For deep breathing inhale slowly through your nose for about five seconds.
- Hold your breath for about two seconds.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth.
- If you are doing the technique correctly you should be able to feel more expansion in your right hand placed over your diaphragm.
- Repeat for a minute or two until you are feeling more calm.

Deep breathing techniques are taught in yoga and mindfulness classes. Many people find it easier to learn deep breathing by following an instructor. If you want to try this there are many examples on the internet. For example, try a search for 'deep breathing' or 'box breathing' and you will find many examples to choose from.

Learning to think positively

LEARNING HOW TO FEEL MORE CONFIDENT ABOUT YOUR EXAMS

WHAT ARE NEGATIVE BELIEFS?

Many people with high exam anxiety can't stop worrying about failing or the consequences of failing. Sometimes these beliefs can become unrealistic and extreme, for instance thinking 'If I fail my GCSEs my whole life will be a failure' or 'If I can't answer the first question on this exam, I will fail the whole exam.' These types of beliefs are not helpful as they focus on what you can't do rather than what you can do and increase pressure on yourself.

HOW TO RECOGNISE NEGATIVE BELIEFS

Many people are not aware if or when they have a negative belief and so the first step is to learn to recognise them. Whenever you are feeling worried or anxious about an exam, you need to pause and ask yourself 'what exactly am I thinking here?' It might be something like 'I am rubbish at exams' or 'I am never going to be able to learn this.' You need to ask yourself if these beliefs are realistic or helpful and if they are not replace them with positive realistic beliefs.

REPLACING NEGATIVE WITH POSITIVE BELIEFS

You need to decide what positive realistic belief can replace the negative belief. For instance, if your negative belief was 'I am rubbish at maths, I always do poorly in maths exams' a positive more realistic alternative could be 'Even if I will never be the best at maths, I will always be able to do better if I have a better revision plan than before.' Every time you get anxious or worried you need to then replace your negative unrealistic belief with a positive realistic belief.

- Replacing negative beliefs with positive ones takes a bit of time to master so it is better to start sooner rather than later.
- Some people find it helpful to keep a record of their negative and positive beliefs in a diary.
- Over time you become a more confident and positive person with a 'can do' attitude.

How to make revision effective

PLANNING YOUR REVISION

PUTTING OFF STARTING REVISION

For many students getting started with revision is the biggest hurdle to overcome. One of the reasons is that there is so much to revise that it can seem overwhelming. Some students procrastinate and will find any excuse not to start. Other students will claim they are not doing any revision while finding inventive ways to hide the fact from others that they are loads of revision. It is best not to listen to what others are doing and instead focus on getting yourself started.

OVERCOMING PROCRASTINATION

The way to get started and overcome procrastination is to create a plan where you break down everything you need to revise into small topics and just revise one topic at a time. By creating a plan, you are taking control.

SET YOURSELF TARGETS

Once you have broken down what you need to revise into topics, set yourself a target for when to revise each topic. Give Yourself a time limit for when to revise that topic.

CHECKING PROGRESS

Check your progress regularly and set yourself a new time limit if you need to. Once you have met each target set yourself a new one and keep up the process of setting and monitoring your targets. By doing this you will gain confidence in your ability to revise everything you need to.

Remember...

- targets must be achievable and manageable;
- targets must be short-term and include a time-limit; and
- review your targets and when you have hit your target set a new one straight away.

WHAT MAKES EFFECTIVE REVISION?

LEARNING IS ABOUT MAKING CONNECTIONS

To judge whether your revision is effective you need to understand how learning works. Learning is a simple process; it involves making connections between something new and something that you already know. The stronger this connection is, then the easier it will be to remember the things that you are trying to learn.

There are many different approaches to revision:

- summary cards help to condense lots of information into key points;
- highlighting key points helps to identify the most important things to remember;
- mind-maps help to show how key points are related to each other;
- mnemonics can help to remember facts (e.g. in Chemistry, the mnemonic 'OIL RiG' could be used to remember that Oxidation Is a Loss in electrons and Reduction Is a Gain in electrons);
- rhymes and songs can help by using a familiar pattern to hook the things you need to remember onto; and
- Post-it notes can help to provide a visual prompt.

...and there are lots of other approaches

There is no such thing as a right and wrong approach to revision. Any approach can be effective if it includes the following principles:

- make revision active and personal;
- practice; and
- test yourself.

MAKING REVISION EFFECTIVE #1

ENHANCING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE NEW AND OLD

Remember that learning is about making connections between things you already know and the things that you trying to learn. Anything that enhances or strengthens those connections will make things easier to remember and will make your revision more effective.

MAKE YOUR REVISION ACTIVE

Whatever approach that you take to revision you need to make sure that it is active. You can find lots of revision summaries online. Although it looks like someone has done all the hard work for you these are passive forms of revision – not active. It is only by actively creating your own revision materials that you create and strengthen the links between the new and old. Active revision is more effective than passive revision.

MAKE YOUR REVISION PERSONAL

Things are easier to remember when they have some personal link to us. If you make links from the things you are revising to your own life (this could be people, places, things, music, or anything) they will be easier to remember. This can be as creative or as silly as you like; it does not matter. When you make your revision material personal you are linking to something you already know well and so is easier to remember.

MAKE SURE THAT YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE REVISING

It is very hard to revise things that you do not understand. If this is the case you need to ask someone to explain it to you (such as a teacher, classmate, parent, or carer) or look for the explanation yourself. If you do not understand something, rather than trying to spend time revising it you would be better spending the time improving your understanding.

Active and personal approaches to revision can be applied to any revision technique and it will make it more effective.

MAKING REVISION EFFECTIVE #2

PRACTICE IS ESSENTIAL

One of the most effective ways to strengthen the connection between new and old is practice. The principle applies whether we are learning a new sport, an instrument, or revising for an exam. The more you practice something the stronger the link between the new and old becomes and the easier it is to recall the things you have been revising.

SPACING OUT PRACTICE

Practice means that you can't just revise something once and expect to recall it well. It might take two or three or maybe more attempts at revising a topic before you can recall it well. Learning improves when practice is spaced out. Rather than revising the same topic for three consecutive days it is more effective to revise the same topic three times but spaced one week apart.

Overlearning is a term that psychologists use to describe practicing something until it becomes automatic. When something is overlearned, it is easier to recall because it requires less processing capacity during an exam.

Overlearning is a useful strategy for people with high levels of exam anxiety as it helps to overcome the cognitive interference caused by anxiety.

MAKING REVISION EFFECTIVE #3

WHY TESTING YOURSELF IS IMPORTANT

The only way to know if your revision is effective is whether you can remember the things that you were trying to revise. You need to test yourself regularly to see if your revision is working or not. If you can't remember the things, you have revised then you need to try a different method of revision, make your approach more active and personal, or practice more. If you don't test yourself, you will never know if your revision is effective until your exam.

KEEP TESTING YOURSELF

Even if you test yourself after revising and you can remember all the key points, that does not mean that you do not need to test yourself again. Learning fades with time and so you need to keep testing yourself as the exams approach to ensure that your recall is good. You can combine testing yourself with the idea of spacing out practice (explained on the [previous page]). Keep practicing your revision and keep testing yourself.

There are many ways you can test your revision:

- Write down everything you can about the topic you revised immediately afterwards.
- Write down everything you can about the topic you revised one week later.
- Explain everything you know about a topic to a friend, classmate, parent/ carer, or anyone who will listen.
- Try a timed practice exam question.

Whichever approach you use you need to ask yourself afterwards – have I remembered the key points?



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