



## Exam Stress for Students: Study Smarter, Stress Less

An explainer, exam-week plan, and study-break resets · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)

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### At a glance

- Some stress before exams is normal and can even help focus.
- Too much stress narrows attention and makes it harder to recall what you know.
- Smart study habits and quick resets protect both your grades and your wellbeing.

### When stress helps, and when it hurts

A moderate amount of stress can sharpen focus. But high test anxiety tends to crowd working memory with worry, leaving less room for recall and reasoning. That's why you might "blank" on something you knew the night before.

### Study habits that actually work

| Habit                                             | Why it works                                                       |
|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Testing yourself (practice questions, flashcards) | Retrieving information strengthens memory more than re-reading.    |
| Spacing study over days                           | Spreading study out beats cramming for long-term recall.           |
| Short breaks every 25–50 minutes                  | Helps maintain focus and prevents burnout.                         |
| Sleep before the exam                             | Sleep helps consolidate memory. All-nighters usually backfire.     |
| Mixing topics                                     | Switching between topics improves your ability to apply knowledge. |

### What the research says

A meta-analysis of 238 studies found that test anxiety is associated with lower academic performance (von der Embse, Jester, Roy & Post, 2018).

Writing about worries for 10 minutes before an exam improved performance for students with high test anxiety (Ramirez & Beilock, 2011).

## Tool: My Exam-Week Plan

| Day | Subject / topics | Study method | Self-care (sleep, food, movement) |
|-----|------------------|--------------|-----------------------------------|
| Mon |                  |              |                                   |
| Tue |                  |              |                                   |
| Wed |                  |              |                                   |
| Thu |                  |              |                                   |
| Fri |                  |              |                                   |
| Sat |                  |              |                                   |
| Sun |                  |              |                                   |

### Study-break resets (2–5 minutes)

Walk around or stretch

Drink water and have a snack

Breathe out slowly five times

Step outside for fresh air

Text a friend or listen to one song

### Morning of the exam

1. Eat something, even small.
2. Spend 10 minutes writing down your worries, then put the paper away.
3. Arrive a little early, but avoid anxious group chats.
4. In the exam, read all questions first and start with the easiest.
5. If you blank, breathe, move on, and come back.

## Strategies to try

- **Reframe stress.** Tell yourself, "This feeling means my body is getting ready."
- **Limit comparison.** Other people's study hours don't predict your results.
- **Protect sleep.** Aim for a regular bedtime, especially the night before.
- **Ask for help early.** Talk to instructors, tutors, or student services before you fall behind.

## Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Say "I'm excited."** Instead of trying to calm down, reappraise nervousness as excitement. In experiments, this improved performance.
- **Teach it.** Explain a topic to a friend, a pet, or an imaginary student. Studying as if you'll teach improves understanding.
- **Test yourself before studying.** Try answering practice questions before reviewing a topic, even if you get them wrong. This "pretesting" improves later learning.
- **Match the exam conditions.** Do practice tests timed, at the same time of day as your exam if you can.

## Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What thoughts show up for me before an exam?

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What do I believe a bad grade would mean about me?

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What study habits have worked best for me in the past?

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How do I want to treat myself during exam season?

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### When to reach out for support

If exam stress is causing panic, sleeplessness, avoidance, or low mood, talk with your school's counselling services or a therapist. We support teens and university and college students, including at Durham College and Ontario Tech.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

*In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.*

*This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.*

## References

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