COPING WITH EXAMS AND EXAM ANXIETY

Generally, we all experience some level of nervousness or tension before tests. A little nervousness can actually help motivate us; however, too much of it can become a problem – especially if it interferes with our ability to prepare for and perform on tests. While there is no guarantee for an easy time during exams, here are some specific guidelines that you can follow which might help you manage exam anxiety.

Before the exam

Relaxation

- Try to establish a pattern of revision that gives you time to relax, especially last thing at night. Experiment until you find the best way of relaxing to suit you – a long bath, listening to music, reading a novel, or listening to a relaxation tape.
- Practice relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and grounding.
- Counselling Services provides information in dealing with anxiety. Check the website coun.uvic.ca.

Balance and study time

- Try to stay on a regular schedule of reviewing, eating, sleeping, and relaxing. Start at least a week, or preferably two, before exams begin.
- Don’t attempt to study 24 hours/day; your ability to retain material will rapidly decrease.
- Don’t force yourself to study beyond your normal limits of concentration. Take short breaks. In fact, short and regular study periods are more productive than lengthy single sessions.

Be prepared

- Avoid cramming for a test. Trying to master a semester’s worth of material the day before the test is a poor way to learn and can easily produce anxiety.
- When studying for the test, ask yourself what questions may be asked and try to answer them by integrating ideas from lectures, notes, texts, and supplementary readings.
- If you’re very short of time, you might try focusing the bulk of your time on areas that need work rather than on those which you already know and can remember well. This way you can cover more of the course material.
- It can also be useful to pay attention to practical aspects of the exam. Find out where it is scheduled to take place and how long it will take you to get there. It’s a good idea to go and look at the room/building so that it feels more familiar. Make sure you know the rules and regulations about what you can take into the exam room etc.
- Put yourself into a positive frame of mind by imagining how you would LIKE things to go. Imagine yourself turning up for the exam feeling confident and relaxed – try to picture it in as much detail as possible.
- Shortly before the exam:
  - Don’t work to the last minute on the night or morning before the exam. Last minute revision may leave you feeling muddled and anxious.
  - Before you go to bed on the night before the exam, make sure to collect together anything that you will need for the exam – pen, pencil, ruler, eraser, calculator, etc. Double check the time of the exam and the location.
  - Set the alarm clock and then get a good night’s sleep before the exam.
  - Plan to arrive at the test location a little bit early – this will allow you to relax and to select a seat located away from the doors, windows, and other distractions.
  - Avoid classmates who generate anxiety, as anxiety is contagious.

Do not

- Although you may feel tempted, do not keep irregular hours, pull all-nighters, eat irregularly, eat a lot of junk food, or have excessive amounts of caffeine when studying.
During the exam

Here are some remedies to the ‘I can’t answer anything’ feeling and other worrying thoughts about exams. When you get into the exam room and sit down, the following approach can help settle your nerves:

- As the papers are distributed, calm yourself by taking some slow deep breaths in and out.
- Breathe in again and straighten your back – as if someone were pulling a lever between your shoulder blades.
- Look straight ahead at something inanimate (the wall, a picture, the clock…) and focus your mind on the positive thought ‘I CAN DO this exam’ as you breathe out.
- You are given time to read the exam, so do so thoroughly. If you begin to feel panicky again, repeat the focusing exercise. Panicking will stop you from reading carefully, so it is important to keep yourself focused and positive. Read the whole paper once, then read it again and mark the questions you think you can answer. Then read those questions carefully – make sure you understand what is required – and select the ones you are going to answer.
- Decide on the order in which you’ll answer the questions. It is usually best to begin with the one you feel most confident about. Think about how you will plan your time, and stick to your plan.
- Plan out your answer for each question as you go. If you find that thoughts or ideas about other questions come into your head, jot them down on a separate piece of paper – don’t spend time thinking about them now.
- Do not rush through the test. Wear a watch and check it frequently as you pace yourself. If it appears you will be unable to finish the entire test, concentrate on those portions which you can answer well. Recheck your answers only if you have extra time – and only if you are not anxious.
- If your concentration wanders or you begin to feel panicky, you can try the following:
  - Repeat the focusing exercise
  - Try to consciously replace the negative messages such as, ‘I can’t do this’, ‘I’m going to fail’, ‘I’m useless’, with positive, encouraging thoughts: ‘This is just anxiety, it can’t harm me’, ‘Relax, concentrate, it’s going to be OK’, ‘I’m getting there, nearly over’, and ‘I can be anxious later, now is the time to take the exam.’
  - Ask the instructor a question.
  - If allowed, get a drink, eat something, or go to the bathroom.
  - Break your pencil lead – then go sharpen it
- If the exam is more difficult than you anticipated, try to focus and just do your best.

After the exam

- Don’t dwell on the exam just written.
- Try not to talk to other students about the exam immediately after writing it.
- Reward yourself after the test – take in a movie, go out to eat, or visit with friends.
- Evaluate your study plan and identify any improvements you could make for the next exam.
- Don’t start studying for your next exam right away. You’ve worked hard and deserve a break!

Remember that exams measure what you can demonstrate about your learning thus far in a course of study, not your worth as a person.

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www.coun.uvic.ca