

Managing exam anxiety and panic:

A guide for students

Almost everyone feels nervous before an exam. Butterflies in the stomach and worrying thoughts – ‘Will I be able to answer the questions?’ ‘Have I done enough revision?’ – are indications of exam nerves that are probably familiar to all students. In fact, a certain amount of nervous tension probably helps us perform to the best of our ability, producing a rush of adrenaline that helps us to feel alert and focused. But too much anxiety can *block thoughts*, create a negative frame of mind, and lead to panic and potentially poor exam performance.

There are a number of things you can do to help manage exam anxiety and turn uncomfortable, panicky thoughts into more creative tension.

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Before the exam

Here are some tips:

- It's hard to panic if you are feeling relaxed. 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, exercise, listening to music, a relaxation CD (available from the Counselling Service). You can find some [relaxation exercises](#) on our website.
 - Positive stress management techniques can be learned and acquired with practice (see [Stress Management: A Guide for Students](#)). Knowing how to manage stress and to relax is invaluable in the lead-up to exams, and on the day itself. The Counselling Service can also help you learn stress management techniques. If you think you are under-performing in exams due to exam anxiety or panic, do think ahead and seek help.
 - It helps to feel as well-prepared as possible. As well as thinking about the subjects you are revising, it can 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 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. Rather like rehearsing for a part in a play, this can replace negative, anxious thoughts with more positive ones.
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- 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.

In the exam

Here are some tried and tested 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:

- **Begin a focusing exercise:** Take a deep breath in and a long breath 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. Take another deep breath in and a long breath out. Then breathe normally. That ends your focusing exercise.
 - **Read the paper thoroughly.** If you begin to feel panicky again, repeat the focusing exercise above. Panicking will stop you 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. This is not wasting time – taking time now will pay dividends when you start to write!
 - **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. That is, you should start the next question when you planned to, even if, for now, you have to leave a question unfinished. Plan to go back to it later, if all goes well with other questions.
 - **Plan out your answer for each question.** Write out your rough plan – you can cross it out later. As before, this is not wasting time – taking time now will be helpful when you start to write your answer. 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.
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- If your concentration wanders or you begin to feel panicky, you could try the focusing exercise again, or use one of the following anxiety management techniques to help you overcome anxious thoughts. If you are worried that you haven't got time to spare on this, remember that taking 5 or 10 minutes right now may save you spending the rest of the exam in a state of panic.

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Anxiety management techniques

Thought-stopping technique

When we become anxious we begin to have negative thoughts ('I can't answer anything', 'I'm going to panic' etc). If this is happening, halt the spiralling thoughts by mentally shouting 'STOP!'. Or picture a road STOP sign, or

traffic lights on red. Once you have literally stopped the thoughts, you can continue planning, or practise a relaxation technique.

Physical distraction

A physical sensation, such as lightly pressing your fingernails into your palm, can block feelings of anxiety. Some people find it helpful to place an elastic band around one wrist, and lightly twang it when they are becoming anxious.

Use a mantra

Derived from meditation, a mantra is a word or phrase which you repeat to yourself. Saying something like 'calm' or 'relax' under your breath or in your head, over and over again, can help defuse anxiety.

Focusing

Looking out of the window, noticing the number of people with red hair, counting the number of desks in each row ... all help to distract your attention from anxious thoughts and keep your mind busy. Mental games such as making words out of another word or title, using alphabetical lists etc are all good forms of distraction.

Bridging objects

It can help to carry or wear something with positive associations with another person or place. Touching this bridging object can be comforting in its own right, then allow yourself a few minutes to think about the person or situation which makes you feel good. This can have a really calming effect.

Self-talk

In exam anxiety or panic we often give ourselves negative messages, 'I can't do this' 'I'm going to fail' 'I'm useless'. Try to consciously replace these 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'. Even if you struggle to believe the new message, it will help you if you try to say positive things to yourself.

Whichever of the distraction techniques has worked for you, finish by going through the refocusing exercise (it only takes 30 seconds or so, but may have a profound effect on your ability to believe in yourself and the task in hand).

Different techniques work for different people, so it's worth experimenting to find the ones that are right for you. Developing techniques for managing panic can take time, so it pays to keep practicing.