

## **Coping with exam anxiety**

Normal levels of stress can be productive in helping you work, think faster and more effectively, and generally improve your performance. However, if the anxiety you are experiencing feels overwhelming, your performance can be affected. Being aware of what is causing the anxiety can help reduce its effects. Anxiety can cause:

- Patchy sleep and sleepless nights
- Irritability or short temper
- Butterflies in the stomach
- Poor appetite or comfort eating
- Tendency to drink more coffee and alcohol and to smoke more.

## **Causes of Anxiety**

Take some time to think about what is causing the anxiety because, once you know what is causing the anxiety, you will be in a better position to tackle it. The anxiety could be linked to:

- Generally being worried on a daily basis, or having a tendency to be anxious
- Being poorly prepared
- Having a bad experience in a previous exam
- You are a perfectionist – anything less than top marks is a failure
- You are not feeling well or you are on medication

## **Anxiety Reduction**

The key to reducing exam anxiety is to make an **early** start on your revision. Subject teachers and tutors will advise you in relation to when you should start dependent on the subject, where you are in your studies and what year you are in. Take enough time to do yourself justice. Remember revision is just that – it is about seeing something again and refreshing your knowledge. It is not about new work. If you have worked at a steady pace throughout the year, revision will be relatively straightforward. If you have a shorter period than you need until the exams, be realistic about what you can revise. Perhaps ask for some guidance from your Tutors who should be able to identify core material. If you feel that your anxiety levels are only going to increase between this point and the start of the exams, do something about it now. The Inclusion Team can help with relaxation techniques and will talk with you about your feelings etc.

## **Before the Exams**

Everyone is naturally anxious before exams, and the stress only increases as the exam gets nearer. These feelings can be managed and planning can help.

## **Plan Your Revision**

- Set aside plenty of time for revision.

- Sort through your class notes, and completed work, and focus on the essential material.
- Actively use your notes – re-structure and condense them.
- Plan answer outlines.
- Think about questions you might expect to find in your exam. Use past papers to look at the types of questions and how they are structured. Check with your teacher if there are past papers for you to look at.
- Seek help and guidance from your teacher if you find something you don't quite understand. Don't be afraid to ask, teachers want you to succeed.
- Don't sit reading for long periods of time. It quickly becomes boring and you can easily start to lose concentration.

### **Take Proper Breaks**

- Studying 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, will make you exhausted. You are more likely to burn out long before the actual exam.
- It may help to divide your days into three periods of 150 minutes each and revise for two out of the three.
- Plan to have one day a week completely free from revision.
- Keep up with some of your other activities – try to get the balance right between study and leisure.
- Get the support of your friends and family.
- Try to maintain a healthy diet.
- Avoid anything that promises you limitless energy such as energy drinks or tablets, there is nothing that provides this and you don't want to experiment on anything new at this time.
- Take regular exercise. Find something you enjoy – swimming, jogging, football etc.
- Yoga, mindfulness, meditation or other alternatives for relaxing the mind and body are worth considering.

### **Eating and Sleeping**

- Your brain needs energy and it also needs rest. Eat little and often.
- Eat quality food, e.g. wholemeal bread, pasta, nuts, fruit, lots of vegetables etc.
- Go for quality drinks, e.g. plenty of water, milk, real fruit juice etc.
- Try not to use your phone or tablet before you go to bed as it may disturb your sleep and ability to switch off.

### **Revise when you are Feeling Alert**

- Make sure you take time after doing revision to wind down.
- Try not to go straight to bed without winding down.

### **Panic the Night Before**

You may have been feeling quite calm during the revision period. But then panic sets in the night before.

- Learn in advance how to relax. In that way, you will feel confident that, if you start to panic or your mind goes blank, you will be able to regain control
- Try to use humour to help you beat negative thoughts. Read a book or magazines or watch your favourite comedy.
- Do your best to be well prepared – it will give you some confidence that you have done the work needed
- However anxious you may feel, try to avoid working too close to the exam like the night before or the morning of the exam. Try to do something relaxing instead. Go for a walk or have a warm bath.
- Eat something even if you feel sick. Bread, crackers and cereals are good for settling your stomach
- Make sure you know exactly when and where the exam is. Try not to arrive late at the exam as that would only increase your anxiety
- Have everything ready to take with you – pens, pencils, calculator, matriculation card etc.
- Take some light reading in case you have to wait to get in to the exam room

### **Panic Attacks during the Exam**

You have been feeling nervous and have just sat down in the exam room. You feel the panic start to rise.

- Make yourself comfortable. Do you need to go to the toilet before the exam starts? Are you neither too hot nor too cold? Adjust your clothing. Take a few deep breaths to try to ease the tension you are feeling. Sit with your eyes closed for a little while. Only then, turn over the exam paper
- Remember that most people feel tense at this point - it is only natural. However much you have prepared, your task now is to just do your best
- Take time to read through **all** the instructions and questions carefully. Do that at least twice to make sure you get a firm grasp of the questions.
- Pick out the questions that best relate to the revision you have done. Do not rush anything. Taking time at this point can really reap dividends later. If you can't decide all the questions you want to answer, start with those you have picked and come back to the others later
- Plan your answers. This is a really important point. Five minutes spent on a plan and a rough guide will help your thoughts to flow
- Do your best to ignore everyone else while you are at the planning stage – not easy, but it helps.
- Decide whether you want to do the “easy” or “difficult” questions first. Doing an “easy” one first might help to relax you. Or maybe doing a “difficult” one first while you are very alert might be best for you
- Manage your time. Keep an eye on your watch so that you allow enough time for your final answer. If you don't have enough time for that final answer, make a skeleton answer in note form – at least you will have put something down

- Look after yourself. Do you need a sweet? Have you got enough fresh air? Are you feeling cramped?
- Avoid perfectionism. It is good to check spelling and punctuation but no one is expecting perfection.
- If you feel the panic is getting worse – stop, put down your pen and relax. Breathe slowly; close your eyes for a few minutes. If it helps, put your head on the desk. Shake your arms. Move your head slowly from side to side to ease the tension. Say something positive and encouraging to yourself. Imagine yourself somewhere else where you feel happy and relaxed
- If you feel unwell, ask the invigilator if you may leave the room for a short while - taking a few breaths of fresh air and some sips of water may be all you need to calm you down.