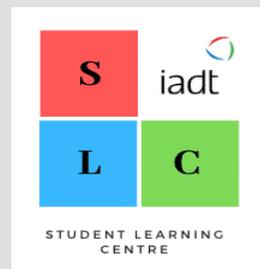


## A Guide to Stress Free Exams



# Managing Exam Anxiety: A Guide

## 1. Introduction



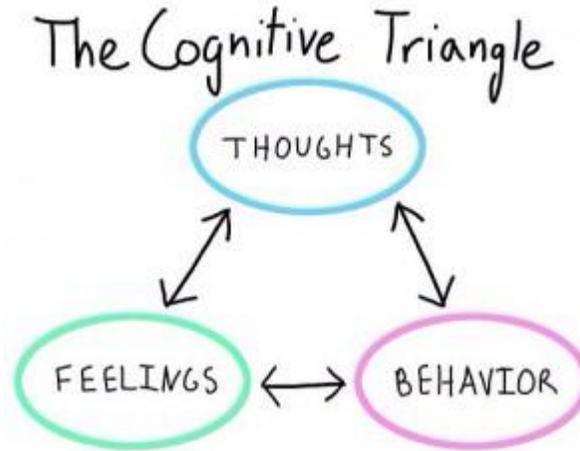
Anxiety leading up to exams is an entirely normal, typical experience for students. There is a tendency to think of any anxiety as only bad; something to be gotten rid of or avoided. This kind of thinking can actually make it harder to deal with. The truth is that anxiety has a function and a certain amount of it is necessary for

motivation and preparation. It's also a sign that doing well matters to you.

Of course it is important to *manage* exam anxiety so that it does not overwhelm you and that you can still perform to the best of your ability.

This guide presents several tools and strategies which you can employ to manage your exam anxiety including: changing how you think of your exam performance, exercises for focus and tips on how to prepare in advance of, the night before and the day of the exam.

## 2. Changing how you Think about Exams



As mentioned previously, there is a tendency to label anxiety as bad. Thoughts tend to feed into feelings, which tend to feed in undesirable behaviours. The following is an example of how this can happen:

**Thought:** %Something unexpected will come up and I won't be able to answer it!+

**Feeling:** Anxious, nervous, fear

**Behaviour:** Blanking on a test

If you can identify and analyse negative thoughts, you can take away some of their power. If you run with these thoughts they can easily work you into a state of panic and despair. The key is to realise that your thoughts are not always facts and that although there may be reasons you can think of that support the thoughts, it is possible to find evidence that does not support the negative thinking, but rather the opposite.

Try to identify the patterns of unhelpful thinking that precede your exams, and see if you can generate alternative reasoning and thoughts.

## Types of Unhelpful Thoughts

*“I never do well in tests”*. this is a type of *generalisation*. You see a never-ending pattern of defeat.

**Alternative:** What exams have you done well in? Try to think of times when you got good marks, despite thinking you wouldn't.

*“I can't work under time pressure”*. this is a type of *mental filtering*; you pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it to the point where it dominates your thoughts.

**Alternative:** Working under time pressure is more of a challenge, but it is possible to get used to it by timing yourself when answering past papers and practicing breathing to focus yourself in the exam.

*“What if the lecturer sets an unexpected question and I don't know how to answer it?”*. this is a type of *fortune-telling* thought.

**Alternative:** The truth is you have little control over the possibilities of questions. Try to focus on what you *do* have control over. Surprise questions are set to test a student's ability to apply the thinking they have learned to broader problems. This is an opportunity for you to show you can be flexible in your thinking. Even if you don't have the answer to a question exactly right, attempt marks can still be earned.

Sometimes we exercise our negative thinking muscle much more than our positive thinking muscle. Some coping thoughts can help you reframe the situation by replacing the negative thoughts and help you strengthen your positive thinking muscle.

Come up with coping thoughts that work for you or use some of the following ones:

*“I've done well before and I will do well this time.”*

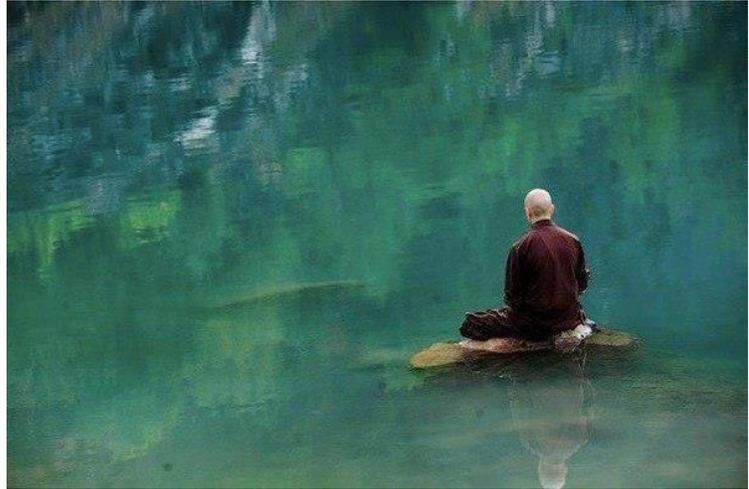
*“I am good enough.”*

*“I've done everything I can do to prepare for this.”*

*“I am capable and can problem-solve anything unexpected that may come up.”*

### 3. Mindfulness for Focus

Reframing your anxiety works well with practicing *acceptance* and *non-judgement* the central tenets of mindfulness. Achieving some quietness and space in your head can help you make room for more helpful thoughts.



Brain-imaging studies show that mindfulness meditation can reliably and profoundly alter the structure and function of the brain and produce, for example, greater blood-flow to and a thickening of the cerebral cortex in areas associated with attention and emotions. As well its impact on specific problems, mindfulness has been shown to have a very positive effect on intellectual skills, improving sustained attention, visual special memory, working memory and concentration. Just two weeks of mindfulness training can significantly improve reading comprehension, working memory capacity, and focus<sup>1</sup>.

Sportsmen and sportswomen, students and a whole range of other people practice mindfulness to help them stay calmly focused on what they are doing while they are doing it. Steve Jobs found mindfulness improved his creativity too!

How it works: mindfulness can help you to focus and stay calm by encouraging you to **return your attention** again and again to what you are doing **right now** instead of getting lost in the stories your imagination tells you or in stressful emotions. Mindfulness is about becoming aware of what is going on in the moment; and rather than try to repress your emotions it actually encourages you to **just notice how you feel** without judgment or fighting it.

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<sup>1</sup> Mrazek, M.D., Franklin, M.S., Phillips, D.T., Baird, B., Schooler, J.W., 2013. Mindfulness training improves working memory capacity and GRE performance while reducing mind wandering. Psychol. Sci. 0956797612459659.

### **5 Senses Mindfulness Drill**

1. Pause what you are doing for a moment and take one or two deep breaths to help bring you into the present moment.

2. Look around you, and silently name three things that you see in your immediate vicinity.

2. Now opening to the sounds around you, silently note and name three things that you can hear right now.

3. Bringing your attention to your body, silently name three sensations that you can feel in this moment (maybe warmth, tingling, contraction, coolnessō ).

4. Bringing your attention to smell and taste, what do you notice in your immediate awareness when you bring your attention to these senses- lightly name what you experience.

5. Take one or two breaths to finish this mindfulness exercise.

Repeat this exercise regularly to deliberately bring your awareness to what is happening in the present moment and to build your resilience in dealing with exam anxiety by cultivating mindfulness in this way.

Another useful resource is [www.calm.com](http://www.calm.com). It provides guided mindfulness in 2, 10 or 20 minute sessions to a backdrop of beautiful scenery and sounds. You can access it on your pc or download the app on your phone.

## 4. Getting in the Zone



Imagine you have a basketball game coming up. In preparation for it, you read up on the rules of the game and watch a few games. You've also done some running to get fit for it. The day of the game arrives, and you're nervous. You get on the court and start playing, and the game is fast. It requires you to think quickly; there is no time

to hang around. The ball is passed to you and you need to make a decision without haste, but you look around and freeze. In your moment of freezing, one of the opposing team players wins the ball off you. You realise that a few practice games would have helped you get used to the speed of play and decision-making. This is why teams play games in training and hold friendly games in advance of more serious competitions,

Timed exams aren't the place to develop new theories. You have to have a strategy for solving problems before you take the test. During the test it becomes a matter of executing the strategy, and doing as little thinking as possible. All the thinking must be done before the test.

One of the most important ways to prepare is to practice under stress, in conditions as close to the performance situation as possible. Job applicants who practice doing interviews will do better in actual interviews. Students who do practice exams will do better in actual exams.

## 5. The Night Before

Avoid cramming the night before. If you have been consistent with your revision and started in plenty of time, cramming should not be necessary. The night before you should set aside *soothing time* for yourself. Cramming makes it difficult to let your brain settle and makes it harder to access the information you



already know. Self-soothing will assist you in thinking more clearly and with managing anxiety.

Plan something you enjoy that makes you feel soothed. It's different for everyone. Tapping in to your senses will make it more effective. You might like to:

- Lie down and watch a movie with the lights off
- Light scented candles and listen to gentle music
- Try some progressive muscle relaxation
- Watch a nature programme with animals or beautiful landscapes.
- Make your favourite meal and enjoy the smell and taste of homemade cooking.
- Have a craft beer or a cup of herbal tea.
- Have a hot shower with scented shower gel.
- Have clean sheets ready to put on your bed.

## 6. On the Day

- Do something to distract yourself beforehand; you might want to:
  - Play a game on your phone
  - Message/call someone and talk about something different
  - Listen to some music or a talk show that gets you thinking about something else
  - Take deep breaths of fresh air. Deep breathing counteracts the *sympathetic nervous system response* (i.e. the ~~fight~~ fight or flight response responsible for adrenaline, increased heart rate and blood flow) by activating the *parasympathetic nervous system response* (which counteracts the physiology of ~~fight~~ fight or flight to calm you down, reduce your heart rate and cortisol levels).
  - Avoid talking to people who are also sitting the exam with a tendency to panic.
- Have something nice planned for after. Even if you have more study to do, set aside even half an hour to do something nice.
- Before opening the exam, take five deep breaths. Plant your feet firmly on the floor and feel the solid ground under your feet. When you breathe out notice how the breath seems to go through your feet into the floor. This focus on the out-breath has been used successfully by Irish Olympic athletes.
- Read over the paper once then start with the easiest question to put you at your ease. Underlining the key words of a question can help you make sure that anxiety does not interfere with you being able to take in the information. Make a quick plan



about how you are going to answer it; this will help you avoid straying off track and getting lost in the question.

- If you get a blank, leave the question and start a different one. Often when you are thinking about something else the answers can come back to you. Whatever you do, don't sit there panicking, the time ticking by can worsen the anxiety. Go back to your breathing or just start writing something.

Don't forget your coping thoughts. Remember why you are doing this; to further your education, to secure the career that you want, because you enjoy this subject. Embrace the challenge and remember that there is more to life beyond exams.

Don't take part in the exam 'post-mortem'. Comparing answers with friends after an exam, when it's too late to change anything you have written, serves no purpose and will only increase your worry.

***Best of luck!***