Dealing with Exam Anxiety

Exam anxiety is a feeling of uneasiness and distress that many students face before, during or after an exam, sometimes resulting in lower performance. Students who experience exam anxiety report difficulties with concentration, mental blocks and distractibility. Exam anxiety is a common problem that many university students face, and there are ways to overcome or manage the symptoms.

The Facts

• Two types of exam anxiety include anticipatory anxiety, a feeling of distress when preparing for an exam, and situational anxiety, stress experienced while writing an exam. Both are very real and can have a significant impact on performance.

• Exam anxiety can manifest itself in different ways, in different people. Symptoms may include:

  Emotional symptoms:
  worry, fear, panic
  self-defeating thoughts (I can’t do it)
  frustration, anger, depression
  hopelessness, helplessness

  Cognitive and behavioural symptoms:
  inability to make decisions, trouble concentrating
  difficulty in organizing thoughts, racing thoughts
  difficulty in remembering and recalling information
  difficulty in reading and understanding
  avoidance behaviors
  excessive drinking, gambling, sexual promiscuity, or other unhealthy or sub-optimal coping strategies

  Physiological symptoms:
  increased heart rate
  perspiration, dry mouth
  tensed muscles (stiff back & neck)
  cold hands, upset stomach
  tight chest, difficulty breathing

• Stress is a normal part of everyday life. However, it helps motivate us to improve our performance. All students feel some level of stress when writing exams. When your stress level becomes too high or prolonged, determine what you can do to keep anxiety down to a manageable level.

Flip over for tips on how to keep your stress levels under check and how to manage exam anxiety.

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Tips for Managing Exam Anxiety

• Do your research about the exam in advance. What types of questions can you expect on the exam? When and where does the exam take place (double check!)? How much time will you have to write the exam, and what materials you can use in the exam? With final exams, determine what your term mark is going into the exam.

• Set up a study plan and schedule for each of your courses. Develop an index of topics for your courses and create study material for each section. Studying in small spurts or chunks over time with regular breaks is often more effective rather than long marathon study sessions, or cramming.

• Test yourself. Answer end-of-chapter questions, teach others, create practice exam questions, look for old exams. If you were creating an exam, what questions would you include? Aim to understand material, going beyond memorizing, whenever possible.

• Put the exam into perspective. Keep in in mind that one exam is not going to make or break your whole future.

• Keep an eye on your health and wellness. Stay hydrated, eat, sleep, exercise, and do activities that you enjoy. Eat low fat, high protein foods before you write the exam. This will help keep you sustain your energy and concentration during the exam.

• Take a few deep, relaxed breaths before you begin to write and during the exam. Shallow, rapid chest breathing tends to increase anxiety.

• Survey the exam and write down important facts and formulas that you’ve memorized before starting to write the exam. Make note of the number of marks and relative difficulty of the questions. Tackle the easy questions first. This can set the groundwork for more difficult questions and will help build your confidence.

• Read questions carefully and underline key terms. Avoid spending too much time on any one question. If you don’t know the answer to a question, skip the question and come back to it later.

• After the exam, REWARD yourself, do something you enjoy.

• If you experience a mental block during an exam, pause, take a few deep breaths and write anyways. Jot down whatever you know about the question. You may be surprised by the knowledge you’ve gained throughout the term (and, you may receive partial marks for your answer).

• Incorporate stress management techniques during the days leading up to and including the day of the exam. Deep (abdominal) breathing, mindfulness, and visualization are examples of stress management techniques. Create a mental image of what success looks like before studying and during the exam.

• Look for support. Contact Student Counselling and make an appointment with a counsellor who is familiar with exam anxiety or an Academic Advisor who may be able to provide some tips for balancing your classes.

• Check your thoughts and beliefs. Change negative self-talk into positive self-talk. Transform “I’m going to fail” into “I’ve got this one!”

Exam Anxiety is COMMON! You are not alone!