



Feeling Anxious about Exams?

It is normal to feel tense and worried before exams. And it may even help! Anxiety initially helps you to stay alert and focussed. However, if you freeze up during exams, can't concentrate, have non-stop negative thoughts, a very tense body and poor sleeping patterns, you need to develop and practice effective coping strategies ahead of time.

There are two main ways of coping:

- Strategies which we use to manage the problem causing the stress
- Strategies which we use to regulate our emotional response to the problem

Strategies To Manage The Problem

- **Share the problem with others** by having a study buddy for each of your subjects.
- **Organise** your notes and **give priority to what is essential** in the course
- **Work hard** yet effectively in short bursts in a clearly organized way
- **Seek expert help** if you don't understand the material you must learn. Speak with tutors, latter year students or lecturers. Consider paying for a tutor if a large proportion of the material is beyond your capacity. Go to Student Support Services in the Baldwin Spencer Building and ask about how to locate a private tutor for the relevant subject.
- **Seek information** on the time, place and format of the exams and plan how you will get there.
- **Consult the Learning Skills Unit Website** for more ideas on studying and writing exams: www.services.unimelb.edu.au/lisu/index.html

Strategies To Help Regulate Your Emotional Response To Exams

- **Regularly discuss how you feel with a good friend** or a family member and seek their support.
- **Actively try to reduce the level of muscle tension** you feel by taking breaks, getting sufficient rest, having a period of relaxation every day and engaging in exercise twice a week. (See below).
- **Be positive.** Remember all the times in the past when you have faced challenge and succeeded. Don't ruminate on the possibility of failure. Be encouraging of yourself.
- **Yell "STOP!"** if your thoughts are incessantly negative and you feel you are spinning out of control. Then take a slow deep breath and start again.
- **Visualise success.** Daydream about what it will be like to succeed. Create detailed pictures in your mind of how you will manage the situation well. Imagine a capable and supportive friend with you in the exam room. Imagine yourself breathing calmly through possible difficulties.

Feeling Anxious About Exams (cont.)

- **Learn to Focus.** Each day take a few minutes to focus your attention on a specific object. Concentrate all your attention on this. When distracting anxiety ridden thoughts occur take your attention to your object and its particular sight, touch, scent, and sound. The idea is to calm your mind by occupying it with a particular sensory sensation. When in the exam room use this technique by focussing on the wood of your desk or the sound of the lights to regain your focus.
- **Seek expert help** from medical doctors or counsellors if you are worrying in ways that lead to illness, giving up, or despair.
- **Spend some time each day on an enjoyable activity.** Tell yourself clearly that this short time away from your studies aids your capacity to concentrate effectively by giving you time out to relax.
- **Teach yourself to consciously relax.** It is physiologically impossible to have a stressed mind if your body is relaxed.

Learn to Relax

Breathe

Anxious and tense people breathe in very quick shallow ways that set up physiological reactions that create more stress and fussy thinking. You can calm these run-away physical sensations by focussing on your breathing, and making it deeper and slower by pushing your diaphragm out as you breathe in. Take 2 to 5 minutes each day to observe your breathing and to breathe in a slower, calming way.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Lie down, or sit in a comfortable chair. As you breathe in, clench your fist making it tighter and tighter, feeling the tension in your fist. Now relax as you breathe out. Feel the looseness in your hand and notice the contrast with the tension. Repeat this with your other fist. Then go through each muscle group - shoulders, lower back, abdomen, neck, arms, legs, face, remembering to breathe out as you relax.

Over time, you will become accustomed to checking how tense your body is, and learning to relax the muscle group that is tight when consciously breathing out. Do this routine for 20 minutes every day, until you have learned to relax by merely scanning the muscle group and breathing the tension out. Your muscles will now be well trained in letting go of tension in a very short space of time, and your mind will be free of fear.

