Exam: Managing Anxiety

Feeling nervous before an exam is *normal*

Worrying about whether you will be able to answer exam questions is a common experience and a sign of exam nerves or performance anxiety. A moderate level of anxiety can help you stay alert and focused, but excessive anxiety can undermine confidence, concentration, and performance. The good news is that there are practical strategies that can help you manage anxiety and use it to support, rather than hinder, your performance.

Before the exam

- Establish a regular revision routine that includes time to relax, particularly before bed. Experiment with different strategies such as exercise, listening to music, taking a bath, or using a mindfulness app to find what works best for you.
- Learn and practise a relaxation or stress-management technique. Having strategies to calm yourself can be invaluable during periods of high pressure.
- Prepare thoroughly for both the content and practical aspects of the exam. Consider where you will sit the exam, whether your internet connection is reliable, and whether you need to plan to minimise interruptions or distractions.
- Visualise success. Imagine yourself feeling calm, confident, and focused throughout the exam. Positive mental rehearsal can help replace unhelpful thoughts with a more constructive mindset.
- Stay hydrated and eat regular, nourishing meals before your exam. Your brain performs best when it has sufficient fuel and hydration, helping you maintain concentration, energy, and mental clarity.
- Avoid studying right up until the start of the exam. Last-minute cramming can increase feelings of stress and leave you feeling overwhelmed or unfocused.

During the exam

When you are ready to begin your exam, take a moment to settle yourself and focus on the task ahead:

- Take a deep breath in, followed by a slow, steady breath out.
- Breathe in again and straighten your posture, as though a string is gently lifting you from between your shoulders.
- Focus on a neutral object nearby, such as a wall, picture, or clock, and as you breathe out, remind yourself: "I *can* do this exam."
- Take one more deep breath in and a long breath out, then return to a natural breathing rhythm.
- Read each question carefully and make sure you understand what is being asked before you begin answering. Take the time available to plan your response and review your work where possible. If you are unsure, pause, re-read the question, and focus on answering what has been asked.
- If your concentration starts to drift or you notice anxiety building, repeat the breathing and refocusing steps above. Taking a few moments to reset can help you regain focus and approach the next question with confidence.

Anxiety management techniques

Developing effective strategies for managing anxiety takes time and practice. Be patient with yourself and continue to use these techniques regularly, as they become more effective with repeated use.

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Thought stopping

When anxiety starts to trigger unhelpful thoughts such as *"I can't do this"* or *"I'm going to fail"*, try using a thought-stopping technique. Mentally say *"STOP!"* to interrupt the thought or imagine a stop sign or red traffic light. Once you've broken the cycle of negative thinking, refocus your attention by taking a few deep breaths or returning to the task at hand.

Use a mantra

A mantra is a simple word or phrase that you repeat to yourself to help stay calm and focused. Repeating words such as *"calm"*, *"relax"*, or *"I've got this"* quietly in your mind can help reduce anxiety, interrupt negative thinking, and refocus your attention on the task at hand.

Shift your focus

When anxious thoughts start to take over, gently redirect your attention to something around you. Notice the sounds, sights, or sensations in your environment, or focus on a simple task such as counting objects nearby. Once you feel calmer and more grounded, bring your attention back to the exam and the question in front of you.

Bridging objects

Carrying or wearing a meaningful object can provide a sense of comfort and reassurance during stressful situations. This might be a piece of jewellery, a photo, or another item that reminds you of a supportive person, positive experience, or personal strength. Taking a moment to hold or touch the object can help you feel calmer, grounded, and more confident.

Self-talk

Positive self-talk can help build confidence, reduce anxiety, and keep your attention focused on the task at hand. When anxiety rises, it's easy to fall into negative self-talk such as *"I can't do this"* or *"I'm going to fail"*. Challenge these thoughts by replacing them with calm, encouraging reminders:

- "This is anxiety, and it will pass."
- "Take a breath and focus on one question at a time."
- "I have prepared for this."
- "I'm doing my best, and that's enough."

Different strategies work for different people, so experiment to find what works best for you. With regular practice, these techniques can become powerful tools for managing anxiety, maintaining focus, and approaching exams with greater confidence. believe in yourself – you can do it!

Related helpsheets

- Time Management
- Exams: Multiple Choice Questions
- Exams: Short Answer Questions