

# MANAGING EXAM STRESS

Tips and information



Exam stress is completely normal and very common among students. Enough stress can help you to stay focussed, motivated, and efficient, and can even supply your body with the extraordinary ability to handle an emergency.

Too much stress can lead to feeling overwhelmed, anxious and confused, “going blank” and unable to concentrate, and to experience a physical reaction. Negative and self-critical thoughts, catastrophising and perfectionism can interfere with your ability to concentrate and focus.

## Stressful thoughts can sound like:

- ▶ “I always do badly in exams”
- ▶ “If I don’t pass, I will never get a degree or a career”
- ▶ “I’m going to fail. What’s the point in trying?”
- ▶ “Everyone else is well prepared”
- ▶ “Unless I get a 7, I am worthless/hopeless”
- ▶ “I need to know everything”.

However, you have set yourself the challenge to come to university. Exams are part of this challenge and are an opportunity to communicate your knowledge. They are not a measure of your self-worth, or an opportunity for social comparison. Let’s look at some ways that you can learn to manage your stress both before and during exams.

## *In the leadup to exams*

### Organise your time and study space

- ▶ Develop a timetable and study plan and leave plenty of time to revise so the exams don’t sneak up on you. Make sure you include study breaks (e.g. 50 minutes study/5 – 10 minutes break, as this will improve your focus and concentration), and time for sleep, relaxation and any other commitments.
- ▶ Use an app like [Focus Booster](#) to help you stay on task and prompt you to take timed breaks.

- ▶ Mark your exam dates on a calendar and double check the time and venue of your exam.

### Study tips

- ▶ Break a large task, like a chapter or module, into small parts.
- ▶ Minimise distractions by being unavailable on social media during study times. A website blocker like the free [Self Control app for Macs](#) allows you to block websites on your machine for a set period of time. [Freedom for PCs](#) works similarly, but has a small fee.
- ▶ When you feel like you are losing concentration take a short break by getting fresh air, a short walk, or having a drink or something to eat.

### Look after your body

- ▶ Feeling stressed can take a toll on your mind and body. Getting outside and having regular exercise (even a short 10-minute walk can be effective), can clear your mind, increase your energy, allow you to discharge stress and help you to sleep.
- ▶ Tiredness increases anxiety and decreases concentration. Get regular sleep and don’t stay up studying all night. Inadequate sleep affects acquisition, consolidation and recall of information.

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## **Personal coping strategies**

### **Monitor your thinking**

When you notice unhelpful thoughts, find ways to challenge them. Ask yourself questions like:

- ▶ "What's the best thing that can happen? The worst thing? The likely thing?"
- ▶ "What would I tell a friend who was thinking like this?"
- ▶ "How would the most calm, rational, supportive person you know react to this thought?"
- ▶ "Is this thought helpful to me? Will it help me in any way?"
- ▶ Try some coping statements like:
  - ▶ "I can do this. I've passed exams before"
  - ▶ "I choose to sit this exam because the goal is important to me"
  - ▶ "I know the material, I've done the work"
  - ▶ "I might be anxious but I can cope."

### **Use some tactile distraction**

Squeeze a stress ball/stone or special object. Physically ground yourself by noticing what is in contact with your body.

### **Talk to someone**

Sometimes we need to seek out a supportive person to get some perspective.

## **Tips for exam stress**

### **Look after yourself**

Eat a moderate breakfast and avoid excess caffeine. Prepare water and sweets (if allowed).

### **Get ready for the exam early**

Set up your computer and exam space. Relax, breathe and collect your thoughts.

### **Avoid interacting with anyone either physically or online that generate anxiety.**

## **During the exam**

### **Read the exam instructions carefully**

Make sure you understand what is being asked of you.

### **Allocate time spent on each question**

A 20-mark question warrants more than a 5 mark.

### **Leave a question you are stuck on**

If the online exam system allows you to return to an unanswered question, go back when you've finished the others.

### **Attempt all questions**

Put something down rather than nothing.

### **Pace yourself**

If it looks like you will not finish, and the exam system allows you to move through the questions, answer those questions you can first.

### **If you go blank jot down some notes to help free up your thoughts**

If allowed, get a drink or eat something.

## **If overwhelmed or your mind goes blank, breathe to calm yourself.**

- ▶ close your eyes, take a deep breath and hold for a few seconds
- ▶ exhale deliberately while dropping your shoulders
- ▶ gently let go of tension in your body
- ▶ repeat 3 times
- ▶ think "I can do this"
- ▶ open your eyes and focus.

## **Quick tricks for grounding and focussing:**

- ▶ rotate shoulders forward and back
- ▶ turn head slowly from side to side, and then ear to shoulder
- ▶ feel your feet on the floor. Raise and lower heels one at a time
- ▶ consciously relax jaw, neck and shoulder muscles
- ▶ look around the room and name each object you see.

## **After the exam:**

- ▶ Reassure yourself that you did your best. Don't criticise yourself for what you think you did wrong. Talk to friends and/or family.
- ▶ Reward yourself by enjoying a coffee, or a get together with friends. Relax and take a break before studying for the next test.