

If you start to panic in the exam

In an examination situation it is not uncommon for one's mind to go blank for a moment, or to be confused by a question put in an unfamiliar way. At these times it is easy to begin to panic. This is likely to take the form of doom-laden thoughts as well as physical symptoms such as feeling your heart racing, feeling faint, hot or sweaty. Although these symptoms are disturbing, perhaps even frightening, they are in fact very common and are not at all dangerous.

First, pause for a few moments: put your pen down and sit back; slow your breathing down a little. Let your body relax. Relaxation and breathing exercises will help to reduce these symptoms. Reassure yourself that you are not going to collapse or lose control - these things never happen because of anxiety. Push upsetting thoughts to the back of your mind and re-focus your attention on relaxing, and then back on the exam itself. No matter how bad the anxiety feels, do not leave the exam as the anxiety level will fall within a short space of time. Panic is always time limited and the symptoms will reduce in a short while.

Try some of these Anxiety Stopping Techniques

Thought-stopping technique

When we become anxious we begin to have negative thoughts ('I can't answer anything', 'I'm going to panic' etc). If this is happening, halt the spiralling thoughts by mentally shouting 'STOP!'. Or picture a road STOP sign, or traffic lights on red. Once you have literally stopped the thoughts, you can continue planning, or practise a relaxation technique.

Creating mild pain

Pain effectively overrides all other thoughts and impulses. Even very mild pain - such as lightly pressing your fingernails into your palm - can block feelings of anxiety. Some people find it helpful to place an elastic band around one wrist, and lightly twang it when they are becoming anxious.

Use a mantra

Derived from meditation, a mantra is a word or phrase which you repeat to yourself. Saying something like 'calm' or 'relax' under your breath or in your head, over and over again, can help defuse anxiety.

Focusing

Looking out of the window, noticing the number of people with red hair, counting the number of desks in each row... all help to distract your attention from anxious thoughts and keep your mind busy. Mental games such as making words out of another word or title, using alphabetical lists etc are all good forms of distraction.

Bridging objects

It can help to carry or wear something with positive associations with another person or place. Touching this bridging object can be comforting in its own right, then allow yourself a few minutes to think about the person or situation which makes you feel good. This can have a really calming effect.

Self-talk

In exam anxiety or panic we often give ourselves negative messages, 'I can't do this' 'I'm going to fail' 'I'm useless'. Try to consciously replace these with positive, encouraging thoughts: 'This is just anxiety, it can't harm me', 'Relax, concentrate, it's going to be OK', 'I'm getting there, nearly over'.

Whichever of the distraction techniques has worked for you, finish by going through the refocusing exercise (it only takes 30 seconds or so, but may have a profound effect on your ability to believe in yourself and the task in hand).

Different techniques work for different people, so it's worth experimenting to find the ones that are right for you. Developing techniques for managing panic can take time, so it pays to keep practicing. When you are able, get back to work - remember that it is better to put something down rather than nothing.