



The Teenagers Guide How to Cope With Exam Anxiety

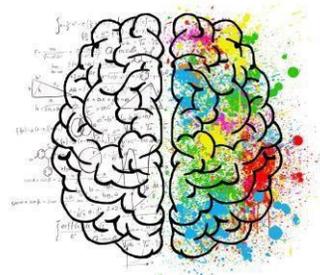
Coping with Exam Anxiety

Exam anxiety is very common and is experienced by many students, but it is manageable if you follow these helpful suggestions. It is not difficult to understand and usually relates to excessive worry about upcoming exams, fear of being assessed in an examination and worry about the consequences. The whole situation can result in students feeling very overwhelmed and suffering from exam anxiety.

Four main areas that can contribute to your exam anxiety are:

Psychological and emotional factors:-

- feeling that you have little or no control over the exam situation, rather than saying "I know and can apply exam strategies to get me through"
- sinking into negative thinking and self-criticism, rather than "I've done the work, I can do the exam, I can look after myself!"
- irrational thinking about exams and outcomes "If I don't pass, my (family/ boyfriend / girlfriend / friends) will lose respect for me";
- making unrealistic demands of yourself "I have to get at least a 10 GCSE's, 4 A's or a 2.1 or I am worthless."
- making catastrophic predictions "I'll fail no matter what I do— there's no point." "I will never get a university place."



Not looking after yourself / lifestyle issues:-

- burning the midnight oil; inadequate rest
- poor diet; skipped meals; dehydration
- caffeine overload or too many stimulants
- lack of physical exercise
- poor organisation and not scheduling available time
- not prioritising commitments
- forgetting to have fun!

Information needs:-

- strategies for revision and exam-taking
- timekeeping information such as exam dates and exam location
- academic course requirements, teachers' expectations
- anxiety reduction techniques while studying for any exam and how to develop useful skills to apply them

Poor studying styles:-

- Doing too much in one go; binge studying; 'all-nighters' studying before exams
- Inefficient: inconsistent content coverage; trying to memorise the whole textbook;
- Ineffective: reading without understanding; cannot recall the material; not making revision notes; not revising
- Not asking for timely help from tutors
- Falling behind-panic!

General exam anxiety-busting tips

Develop self-belief. If you prepare for the exams properly you should do fine, meaning that there is no need to worry excessively.

- Accept that you are not perfect. It's great to succeed and reach for the stars, but keep things in balance. If you think that "anything less than an A* or 9 means I've failed" then you are creating mountains of unnecessary stress for yourself. Aim to do your best but do recognize that none of us can be perfect all of the time.
- Search for solutions. If you find you don't understand some of your course material, getting anxious won't help. Instead, take action, to address the problem directly by seeing or talking to your Tutor or getting help from your classmates or from the internet. Take things step by step.



- Talk out your stress. Confiding in someone you trust and who will be supportive can be helpful and is a great way to alleviate stress and worry. It might be a friend or family member, or your Tutor or Head of Year. You might be able to access a school Counsellor just for some initial advice or if you feel you want to take things further. The most important advice is don't try to cope alone.
- Keep things in perspective. The exams might seem like the most crucial thing right now but, in the overall picture, they are only a small part.



- Interrupt negative thoughts with positive self-talk. Examples: "I can get through this", "I will do my best", "I can pass this exam", "I will just focus on the question in front of me.", "I have done it before, so I can do it again." Actively challenge your irrational thoughts. "Life will be worth living regardless of this exam." "This is just one moment in my life- I can do this." Respect yourself for taking this course and getting this far, regardless of the outcome. Try saying "I am excited" rather than "I am stressed", this becomes a self-perpetuating prophesy!

DO YOU THINK YOU HAVE LEFT IT TOO LATE TO REVISE?

IT IS NEVER TOO LATE UNTIL YOU ENTER THE EXAM ROOM

One of the biggest mistakes that students make is not allowing enough time for revision. This usually results in demotivation and the attitude that there is no point in doing anything as the task is too big. Leave plenty of time to revise so that you don't have to do last minute cramming. Giving yourself adequate time will help to boost your confidence and reduce any pre-exam stress as you know you have prepared well. With revision a little knowledge is better than none at all and could make the difference between a pass and fail.

When should I start?

Get accurate information. Well before the exam, make sure you know where it will be held, the start time, how long it will last, whether extra time will be allowed. Ask your tutor/subject teacher any questions like when the marks will be available, what materials can or should be brought into the exam room. Get your examination timetable from your examination secretary. If you have an electronic calendar, such as on your phone, put all your exam dates on the calendar. Make sure that you have the morning and afternoon sessions correctly entered and preferably go through it afterwards with a friend or family member and double check everything. It is also a very good idea to share your examination timetable either on paper or electronically with your parent.

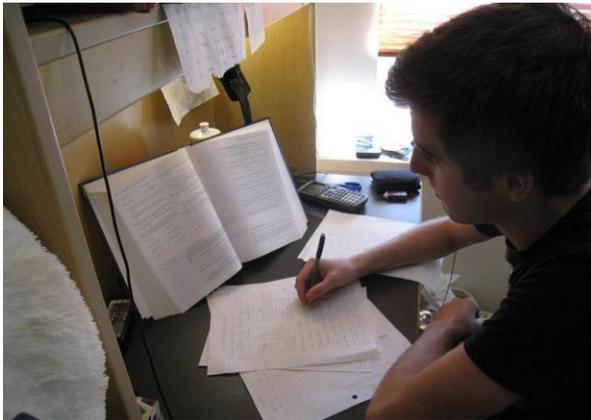
Please make absolutely sure that no critical family events are happening during your exams such as holidays, weddings etc. that could cause your absence or distraction from your exams.



Develop a revision timetable

A timetable is crucial, so that you can track and monitor your progress. Having a well thought out revision schedule and starting in good time will prevent overload. Make sure you allow time for fun and relaxation so that you avoid burning out but avoid drugs and alcohol. When you start preparing your timetable for your revision decide which subjects you will revise on which days. This should definitely be done by the start of the Easter holidays. You can always change it later. The last few weeks, when you are actually sitting the exams, this should be quite easy. Work back from your last exam.

What should I revise?



For each subject make a list of every topic/skill in the course. If you have a good text book for the course this is likely to be the headings that occur in each chapter and section. If you don't, look up on the internet the syllabus details for the subject specification that you are doing. You will need to get the syllabus details from your subject teacher or examination secretary.

Once you have the list, go through it. Mark each topic with a tick if you are

confident that you can do it, a cross if you definitely can't do it and a question mark if you think you know some but not all of it.

To start with you should concentrate your revision on the topics which have a question mark. The ticks you already know and the crosses are likely to take you longer to understand and you may never get to that stage. Hopefully as you revise you will start being able to change some of the question marks to ticks.

Have a quick look at the topics with a cross. Read through your text book or your notes to see if there was something you missed previously. Check on the internet to see if there is a better explanation somewhere else.

How should I revise?

Get yourself into exam mode. Practice on sample tests in the textbook or study guide. Look at past exams. Ask for suggestions from your subject teacher what to expect in the exam; what course materials should be emphasized; how to prioritise study time for the course. As soon as you have time try to do an examination in your subject. In most cases past papers are the best practice, but check that the past papers are still appropriate. For some subjects at GCSE and A level, this is the first year of a new syllabus. Check with your teacher whether any old past papers still cover the entire syllabus. If they do use them, if they don't you will have to find another examination such as a specimen paper from your exam board.

As you approach the actual exam you should try to do the exam in as near exam conditions as possible, but this is not necessary for your first attempts - you are just trying to see what you can do and what you can't do. Obtain a copy of the mark scheme for the examination and mark each question. Once you have done this you should be able to go back to your topic list and check whether your ticks, crosses and question marks need changing.

Once you have amended your topic list, go back to the mark scheme and have a good look at it. Check what exactly each mark is given for and see which items score the highest marks. It is also a good idea to see if you can obtain the Examiner's Report for

that paper. Examiners' Reports give you a good idea of what the students who sat the paper did correctly and what they did wrong.

Continue this process throughout your revision period. Hopefully your list of question marks and crosses will steadily reduce until you are just left with some of your hardest topics. At this stage have a good look at the examination papers again. If you have an examination where you can choose your questions you may be able to avoid these topics. If you have to answer every question on your paper see how many marks these topics are worth. It may not be worth spending lots of your valuable time on topics that will take you a long time to understand and which you may never get right.

Plan your actual study time



If you try to take in too much material over too short a time, you will experience anxiety! Research shows that we retain information best in 20minute bites. Plan your studying with regularly scheduled study slots of no more than 60 minutes. Nothing extra is likely to sink in if one subject is revised for much longer. Separate this time into roughly 3 x 20 minute sessions.

Between sessions take a quick walk, carry out a 5 minute meditation, have a drink or comfort break then get back to work. Be careful that you don't get caught up during this time with 10 minutes of TV or checking your e- mail or Facebook. A few minutes can easily turn into an hour before you know it. At the end of the hour reward yourself with a healthy snack before starting the cycle again. You will then come back to your revision refreshed. When revising during the evenings plan 1 or 2 subjects only. Allow some days off, but not in the few weeks just before the exams and remember to leave some time for relaxation.

Experiment with alternative revision techniques

Ensure that revision is more fun and your motivation to study remains high. Try mind-mapping, use multi-coloured index cards or post-it notes on the wall, get yourself an assortment of highlighter pens and use colours to highlight key points. You might also find it useful to dictate revision notes onto your phone so that you can listen to them later, anytime, anyplace! When you have read through a topic, make brief notes on cards which can be used for further revision later. Break topics down in specific areas or aspects of a subject – for example, not just maths, but Algebra, Geometry and Measures, Number. Some students find working in pairs or in small groups to discuss a topic is useful.



Improving Your Chances

Look after your physical health

If you are tired, run down and overwhelmed you are more likely to experience anxiety. Regular moderate physical exercise will boost your energy, burn off adrenalin, clear your mind, help you to relax and reduce feelings of stress. Try out some yoga, pilates, tai chi or other relaxation techniques, they will help to keep you feeling calm and balanced, improve your concentration levels and help you to get regular and adequate sleep. Add to this a nutritious diet, high in vitamins, minerals and iron and a strong dose of challenging all negative thoughts/beliefs.



Plan for the big day

Rest well the night before the exam. Plan to arrive at the exam location early. If you get held up on the way to your exam centre, try to telephone ahead and tell them that you are late and when you expect to arrive. If you can pick your seat, choose one away from the doors, windows or other distractions. Plan to monitor the time during the exam so wear a watch or sit where you can see the clock. Plan to wear layers of clothing so you can adjust your need for more warmth or coolness. Check out the examination room ahead of time if you can, once it has been set up and before the exams are taking place. Remember the following important exam room rules:-

- No talking
- No electronic storage devices such as phones, iwatches, iPods, or MP3 Players
- Check whether you are allowed to bring in a dictionary or calculator for this exam, use a calculator that you are already familiar with.

Avoid bad things

Give coffee, tea or fizzy drinks and other stimulants a miss the night before the exam or on the day of the exam as the caffeine will 'hype' you and make your thinking less clear. Don't give in to a Saturday evening of binge drinking, either! Avoid anxious or talkative students. Avoid other people or things that may disturb your self-confidence, focus and level of relaxation.

Tips for the exam

Avoid panic

It's natural to feel some exam nerves prior to starting the exam, but getting excessively nervous is counterproductive as you will not be able to think as clearly.

The quickest and most effective way to eliminate feelings of stress and panic is to close your eyes and take several long, slow deep breaths. Breathing in this way calms your whole nervous system. Simultaneously you could give yourself some mental pep-talk by mentally repeating "I am calm and relaxed" or "I know I will do fine".

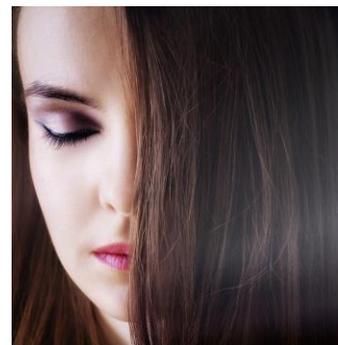
If your mind goes blank, don't panic! It will just make it harder to recall information. Instead, focus on slow, deep breathing for about one minute. If you still can't remember the information, then move on to another question and return to this question later.

Practicing breathing and relaxation techniques in advance of the exams, will help you to be proficient, so that when needed you can recall how to do it easily. It can also be helpful to practice these before you start revision and also before you go to sleep, especially if you are having trouble sleeping. Starting each morning with meditation and deep breathing can set you up for the day!

Some anxiety reduction techniques

Take a deep breath:-

- hold it for three seconds
- exhale audibly all at once and let your head, jaw and shoulders drop
- breathe easy 'into' your neck, jaw and shoulders and breathe again into the relaxed state
- repeat cycle once or twice
- if you try this in an exam, you will likely want to exhale more quietly so that you don't disturb the other students



Graduated relaxation (can be done lying down or sitting):-

- tense your whole body one part at a time
- lift your toes and tense both calves
- tense your thighs and buttocks tighten your abdomen
- tense your chest and back
- tighten your arms and clench your fists
- tense your neck and clench your jaw
- tightly close your eyes
- take a deep breath and hold it for five seconds
- let your breath and the tension in your body go all at once
- feel the tension leave your body

Smile!

Really feel that smile spread throughout your body then take a deep breath and exhale through your mouth.



Visualisation (useful in the exam):-

- focus on the inner screen of your mind's eye
- imagine your ideal, safe, relaxing place
- close your eyes
- in your mind, send yourself there for 15 to 30 seconds
- breathe easily and enjoy the relaxation
- go there whenever you need a quick relaxing break (make sure you don't fall asleep if you are in the middle of your exam, though!)

Take a small bottle of water into the exam with you. Have a drink of water. If you are really stuck, you might consider getting up and taking a short walk outside the room to compose yourself or going to the toilet. Ask the invigilator for assistance. When you are able, get back to work - remember that it is better to put something down rather than nothing.

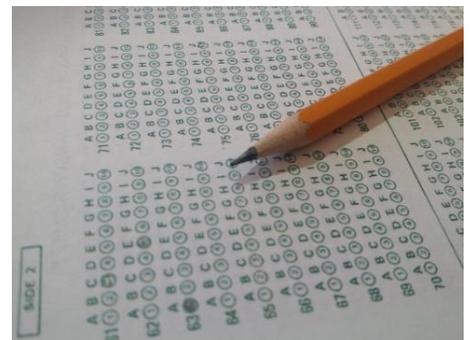
Remember that the invigilator is there to assist you (for instance, if you have a problem with distracting noises inside or outside of the examination room, if the sun is shining on your exam paper, if you need a drink of water, etc.).

Read what's in front of you

- Read the instructions carefully
- Quickly look through every page of the exam paper
- See what will be expected of you
- Re-read the instructions a second time (make sure you really understand what you are being asked for)

Prioritise what needs to be done

- When surveying the exam paper, place a mark beside all questions you know you can answer
- Divide up your time according to the importance of the questions
- Answer the easiest questions first to guarantee marks in the least amount of time. It will also boost your confidence to know you have started well.



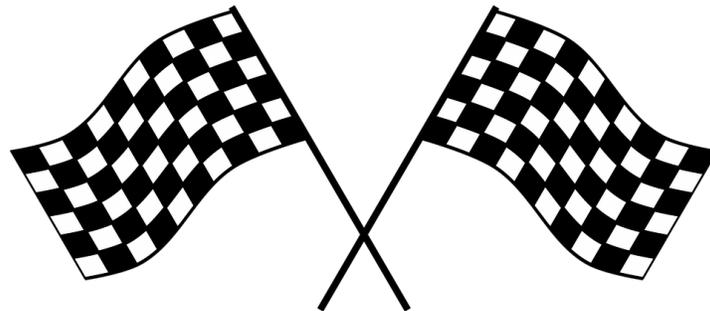
Pace yourself

- Do not rush through the exam
- Regularly check time left for the rest of the questions
- Give yourself time to proofread; ideally you should not still be writing in the last 5 minutes unless it is to make important corrections.

After the exam

The day before the exam, you might want to decide what you are going to do immediately after the exam ends. Standing around and joining in with others' delight or dismay is almost always discouraging. If you have something already planned you can simply leave others to do the post-mortem, while you go and do something more enjoyable. Whatever you do, don't spend endless time criticising yourself for where you think you went wrong. Often our own self-assessment is far too harsh. Congratulate yourself for the things you did right, learn from the bits where you know you could have done better, and then move on. The exam is over and you need to move on to the next one!

Plan to reward yourself for your hard work. After the exam, do something you enjoy, that makes you feel special: take a relaxing walk, have coffee with a friend, buy yourself a present, exercise, have dinner at a favourite restaurant, take a luxurious bath with candles, soft music and a good book (not a textbook). If you are going to meet up with someone, you could agree with them that you will only talk about the exam for 5 minutes - or even not at all. It's important that you let the stress of the exam go if you have more exams to sit over the next few days or weeks.



Some Useful Websites and Contacts

(Information correct at time of going to press)

General support for teenagers

- www.projecteducation.co.uk/gcse offers links to GCSE chatforums.
- www.bbc.co.uk
- www.childline.org.uk/explore/Pages/Explore.aspx
- www.youthaccess.org.uk/

General parent support

- www.parentlineplus.org.uk confidential helpline for parents on 0808 8002222
- www.projecteducation.co.uk

Exam boards

- www.aqa.org.uk the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA)
- qualifications.pearsons.com Edexcel-Pearson
- www.ocr.org.uk Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations(OCR)
- www.wjec.co.uk the Welsh Joint Education Committee(WJEC)

Coursework and revision

(Please read notes on the use of essay banks in 'revision').

- www.coursework.info
- www.sparknotes.com
- www.gcseguide.co.uk – Use the 'bookshop' option to see what revision guides are available in each subject area.
- www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize
- www.gcse.com

Careers

- <https://direct.gov.uk>. The governments' official careers information site. Visit the Education and Learning pages and choose 'Which way now? Years 10-11' followed by 'Your Choices in Year 9' to find out more about your options.
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/studentlife/careersandchoices/>
- Visit <http://nextstep.direct.gov.uk> and select Planning your career then Job profiles for free information on hundreds of different careers.
- www.Careersbox.co.uk - Careers films/videos – real people in real jobs
- www.icould.com - Career advice, HE choices
- www.opendoorsmedia.co.uk - Regional training prospectus – everything you need to know about college, apprenticeships, careers, training schemes and jobs in local area
- www.apprenticeships.org.uk - National Apprenticeship Service
- www.futuremorph.org - STEM careers
- www.targetjobs.co.uk - Careers info – construction, accountancy, banking, law, engineering, environment, media etc.