

Exam Stress

Most students feel a bit anxious about their studies from time to time; worrying about whether you study enough, or prepare for the right things, whether you will pass the course or get the results you want, are all very common problems. Anxiety is our response to a perceived threat, and as well as worry, common symptoms include nervousness, palpitations and sweating.

During revision and exam times, these feelings can often increase and at times feel unmanageable. It's easy to feel stuck in this anxiety, unable to think clearly and start panicking. But, whilst some stress is inevitable, there is plenty you can do to help you keep it at a manageable level.

We will look at some of the common triggers for exam stress, to help you identify your individual ones- there may be a main one or maybe you experience all of them. We will then move on to look at ways that can help you to overcome, or manage, your exam stress.

What are my exam stress triggers?

Everyone is different, but there are some common triggers that can really serve to ramp up the exam stress and panic:

- Spending too much time comparing yourself to others. It's very hard not to compare yourself at all, but spending a lot of time focusing on how far others have got in their revision, or what in particular they have revised, whether this is in person or on social media, can be really unhelpful and lead to your anxiety spiralling.
- Unhelpful expectations or predictions, such as 'my life will be ruined if I don't do as well as I'd hoped in this exam', 'this is my only chance', 'I'll let my family down' or 'I have to know absolutely everything, or I will fail'
- Putting things off (procrastination)- if it feels like everything depends on your exam results, it's easy to feel so anxious that you avoid doing any work at all, in an attempt to cope. Not doing your work may feel like the better short term option, as you don't have to confront the stress. It's then easy to get stuck in a cycle of continued avoidance as the work builds up, exam time gets closer, and the anxiety increases even more.

Exam stress strategies

During the revision period

- Work out a study plan- even if you've left it late. It's usually better to start late, than not to start at all. Create a plan for each week or day, depending on how much time there is left. Include lesson/revision time, time for sleeping, eating and relaxation. Leave some 'free' time, as life tends to throw unexpected challenges in our way, so this way you can be flexible and change things if needed.
- Try to limit the time you spend speaking to others about exams and revision if this stresses you out and focus on your own study plan.
- Balance your time- be honest with yourself about how much time you can afford to have away from studying, but don't cut downtime out completely. Try to get the basics right, such as eating regularly, drinking enough water and getting sufficient sleep (for further help, see the INTO sleep leaflet).

- Try relaxation/ mindfulness exercises-you can find links to this in the 'Sources of help and support' section below.
- Try to avoid unhelpful revision 'strategies' such as relying too much on caffeine, too little sleep or staying up all night revising to catch up.
- If you have unhelpful thoughts about having to achieve a certain outcome, try to focus on the task (revision/ exam), rather than the outcome (exam results). Sports psychologists use this strategy with athletes, and it can be very helpful when dealing with perfectionist thinking that increases your stress levels.
- Be kind to yourself- this is not about being 'soft', or letting yourself get away with things, but about not criticising yourself when things don't go to plan. If this is difficult to do think, 'what would I tell a friend in this situation?' and 'would I be as critical of them?'
- If it's difficult to keep revising until you've achieved a certain task, set a time limit instead, e.g. study in blocks of 20-30 minutes then take a short (5 minute) break. This may feel more achievable, as it has a clearer end point.
- Try to examine unhelpful all-or-nothing thinking such as 'If I don't get the result I want on this exam, I will fail my course and my life will be really bad'. Are there other, more helpful, ways of thinking about this?
- Familiarise yourself with the exam location- go and have a look at the venue/room before if possible, so you know what to expect on the day.
- Ensure you have everything you need to bring ready to go, such as ID cards, pens etc. Prepare this the day before, so that you don't have to stress about it on the day of the exam.

On the day of the exam

- Have breakfast and make sure you stay hydrated.
- Do a simple relaxation exercise (details below)/ go for a short walk/ listen to calming or uplifting music.
- Beware of turning up for the exam too early and hearing others talk about what they have revised- if you haven't revised the same it can be easy to get into a panic and take your focus away from what you do know.
- Plan a reward for after the exam.

During the exam

- Simple breathing exercise (see below)
- Take time to understand the question or task before you start to answer it.

Sources of help and support

- The Counselling Service at INTO Manchester- if you want to talk to someone else in confidence and get help to manage revision/ exam stress, you can make an appointment by speaking to a member of the Welfare Team, or emailing the counsellor directly at lisabrinktherapy@gmail.com .
- Wellbeing podcasts- <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/podcasts-and-videos/podcasts-for-your-wellbeing>

- Breathing exercise-
<https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/~media/CCI/Mental%20Health%20Professionals/Panic/Panic%20-%20Information%20Sheets/Panic%20Information%20Sheet%20-%2004%20-%20Breathing%20Retraining.pdf>
- Muscle relaxation-
<http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/~media/CCI/Mental%20Health%20Professionals/Anxiety/Anxiety%20-%20Information%20Sheets/Anxiety%20Information%20Sheet%20-%2004%20-%20Progressive%20Muscle%20Relaxation.pdf>
- Overcoming Procrastination self help modules from the University of Manchester-
<https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/mle/packages/counselling/procrastination/>