

LEARN TO MANAGE EXAM ANXIETY



Exam anxiety

Learning to manage the physical symptoms of anxiety

Challenging unhelpful thinking

Focusing on the task

Preparing adequately

Remembering self-care

Top tips for managing exam anxiety

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COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

Do you feel like your mind 'goes blank' during exams? Do you find yourself thinking 'I can't do this' or 'I'm stupid'? Does your heart race or do you find it difficult to breathe during exams? If this sounds familiar then keep reading.

It is normal to experience some anxiety both in preparation for and during exams. A moderate level of anxiety helps us to perform optimally.

Experiencing little or no anxiety can leave us feeling unfocused and unmotivated, while high levels of anxiety can tip us over into disorganization. The challenge is to recognize when anxiety levels have increased past an optimal level and then learn to manage anxiety so it doesn't hijack performance.

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WHAT IS EXAM ANXIETY AND WHY DO I EXPERIENCE IT?

Exam anxiety is the experience of intense fear before and/or during exam situations. It is characterized by a pattern of physical sensations, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. The physical sensations involved are those of acute anxiety or the fight or flight response. Some examples include a racing heart, sweaty hands, shortness of breath, and nausea. The fight or flight response is our bodies normal and adaptive response to threat and while unpleasant it is not harmful. It is very useful when it occurs in the appropriate context, for example, in the face of physical danger (e.g. running away from a tiger, jumping out of the way of a car). It can help to increase our attention to the threat and enhance effective performance. However, it is not so useful when the threat we are faced with is psychological.

The thoughts involved in exam anxiety typically include negative predictions about performance or the physical sensations being experienced; for example, 'I'm going to fail', 'I can't do this', 'My heart is pounding so fast I can't concentrate'. The feelings involved are of panic or fear and the behavioural component is escape/avoidance (or the urge to). A number of factors contribute to exam anxiety. Some common causes include:

- Undue alarm in response to the normal fight or flight response (triggering a cycle of physical symptoms and increased anxiety)
- Anticipatory anxiety and avoidance, for example, having a bad exam experience can result in worrying and avoiding preparing for the next exam
- Lack of adequate preparation (which can be linked to anticipatory anxiety and the urge to avoid)
- Unhelpful thinking
- Poor self-care (including poor sleep and nutrition, and lack of exercise/relaxation)

Exercise: Have a think back to the last time you experienced exam anxiety. Which of the above factors do you think might have contributed?

HOW COULD LEARNING TO MANAGE MY EXAM ANXIETY IMPROVE MY LIFE?

Exam anxiety may interfere with your ability to show you're academic competencies. Learning to manage exam anxiety can have a number of positive effects including;

- Improved academic performance
- Reduction in stress and distress
- Increased sense of control/sense of mastery/confidence
- Decreased frustration

WHAT SKILLS COULD HELP ME MANAGE EXAM ANXIETY?

Skills useful in managing exam anxiety fall in to two broad categories - those which improve study skills, and those which help you to manage your emotional response to the situation. The skills you find most helpful in managing your exam anxiety will vary depending on what factors are contributing to it.

✓ LEARNING TO MANAGE THE PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY

It is important to know that the physical symptoms associated with the fight or flight response are unpleasant but not dangerous. Interpreting these symptoms as dangerous can work to keep them going. Shallow breathing can also keep these physical symptoms going. While not dangerous these symptoms can make it more difficult to focus your attention both while studying and during an exam.

Learning techniques such as calming your breathing or progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) can work to decrease the physical symptoms of anxiety and facilitate general relaxation. A guided breathing and a progressive muscle relaxation exercise are available online.

Practice these techniques first in situations that don't make you anxious and then, once you've mastered the technique, try them out in situations in which you feel anxious. Like learning to ride a bike, it helps to master the skill before going in a bike race!

✓ CHALLENGING UNHELPFUL THINKING

The way we think about something can influence how we feel and behave. However, often our thoughts are automatic and we are not necessarily aware of them or the impact they are having on our feelings. Unhelpful thinking is not based on evidence and can include exaggerations and/or selective interpretations. Challenging thoughts involves treating them like hypotheses rather than like facts.

The first step in the process of challenging unhelpful thinking is becoming aware of it. Asking yourself **'what just went through my head?'** when you notice you feel anxious can help identify automatic thoughts.

Often exam anxiety is characterised by anxious thoughts about the physical symptoms of anxiety and/or anxious thoughts about performance. For example, imagine you're waiting for an exam to start and notice your heart pounding and hands sweating. You think to yourself **'Oh no, here it goes again, I'm going to blank out, I'll Fail. It'll be a disaster...'** Thinking like this is going to increase your anxiety and physical symptoms.

If on the other hand you identify these thoughts as anxious thoughts and remind yourself that these physical symptoms are just that, physical signs of arousal which can be managed, you will be better able to manage your anxiety. In the above scenario you might instead say to yourself **'I'm about to start, its ok. I am experiencing physical symptoms of anxiety but they are just that and I can continue with them. I'm well prepared, there is no need to get more anxious'**.

Some questions you may find useful for introducing a more balanced perspective to negative thoughts include:

- ***What's the evidence for that thought?***
- ***What alternative views are there?***
- ***How likely is it?***
- ***How much would it really matter?***
- ***Is that thought helpful?***

Challenging negative thoughts is a bit like practicing to be your own coach. Rather than undermining and discouraging yourself it's about talking to yourself in a way that will help you to give your best performance.

In identifying patterns of unhelpful thinking you may notice that you have unrealistically high expectations of self and/or you equate performance with self-worth.

✓ FOCUSING ON THE TASK

Exam anxiety focuses our attention on how we're feeling, taking it away from the task at hand. The practice of becoming aware of when your attention has wandered and refocusing it on the present moment can be useful in managing exam anxiety.

It can be particularly hard to direct our attention back to the task at hand when we feel that we first need to 'get rid off' or control how we are feeling (physically or emotionally) or what we are thinking. Rather than getting tangled in trying to change how we are feeling it can be more helpful to change how we relate to how we are feeling. That is, rather than fighting your anxiety in an exam, you may find it more helpful to accept that you feel anxious and direct your attention back to the task of the exam paper.

You can practice developing your attentional focus and relating to your thoughts and feelings with an attitude of acceptance with a mindfulness exercise (above). Remember the practice of mindfulness is a skill, and like any skill improves with practice.

In a nutshell, during exams:

- Try not to judge what just happened or will happen. Rather motivate yourself, observe your mind wandering and bring your attention back to the task.
- Try not to second-guess how you are going as your perception will probably be inaccurate. Self-judgment during a task is futile because it takes you out of the present, into the past or future. Aim to stay in the moment. When you notice your attention has been hijacked by self-judgment, bring it back to the task at hand.

✓ PREPARING ADEQUATELY

Nothing helps reduce anxiety like confidence! Being well prepared for an exam and confident in your knowledge of the material can help to reduce exam anxiety. In order to prepare adequately for exams:

- Start studying early and allow plenty of time to cover the material. Avoid cramming.
- Prioritize the most important material to study
- Break down study tasks into smaller manageable chunks
- Make a study plan using a weekly/monthly planner and daily priority lists
- Make studying a mentally active process. Where possible don't just read or highlight the information - recite it and ask yourself questions about it. Aim to understand and be able to recall the information, not just recognize it.
- Study in bursts and take breaks.
- Where possible practice the performance. Get hold of a past paper or brainstorm possible questions and have a go at answering them under exam conditions.

An important aspect of preparing adequately for exams is having good time management skills. If you have difficulties with time management you may find it useful to have a look at NUIG Student Counselling Service information sheet on Time Management in the appendix or online at http://www.nuigalway.ie/student_services/counsellors/self_help_fact_sheets/index.html

Sometimes feeling anxious about exams can lead to avoidance of studying. If sitting down to study makes you worry or feel anxious, then not studying can feel good in the short term, but keeps anxiety going in the medium term. Get on top of avoidance by:

- Noticing when you are avoiding
- Breaking down tasks into smaller more manageable chunks
- Practicing strategies for managing your anxiety while studying

If procrastination is something that gets in the way of studying for exams you may find it helpful to have a look at the NUIG Student Counselling Service information sheet on Procrastination in the appendix or online at

http://www.nuigalway.ie/student_services/counsellors/self_help_fact_sheets/procrastination.html

or the video presentation at

https://nuigalway.mediaspace.kaltura.com/media/SCS+Asks+About...Procrastination/1_wqpimov6

REMEMBERING SELF-CARE

It may sound obvious but an important aspect of managing exam anxiety is taking the time out to get enough sleep, eat well, and balance studying with taking breaks. For your brain to perform at its best it needs fuel and rest. These basic needs can be hard to prioritise with an exam looming, but remember optimal performance is about moderate stress.

Try to make time for:

- Getting a good night's sleep, both while studying and the night before an exam
- Good nutrition. Beware of the use of excessive caffeine and energy drinks to enable you to keep studying, because they can interfere with sleep and may mimic symptoms of anxiety.
- Regular exercise. Vigorous exercise can help release endorphins and manage the physical arousal associated with stress/anxiety
- Taking some time out each day to do something enjoyable and relaxing
- Regularly talking to a friend or family member about how you feel.

TOP TIPS FOR MANAGING EXAM ANXIETY

- Prepare adequately
- Identify avoidance early. Break tasks down and use doing them as opportunities to practice skills for managing anxiety
- Identify unhelpful thoughts and try replacing them with more encouraging self-talk
- Practice recognizing physical symptoms as just that
- Practice focusing your attention on a task rather than getting tangled in anxiety
- Learn some skills for reducing the physical symptoms of anxiety
- Remember good self-care. Pay attention to sleep, nutrition, exercise, relaxation, and good social support

Appendices

Time Management

Academic success is not simply achieved through constant studying, rather it is achieved by keeping a sensible balance between academic and non-academic interests. On the one hand, you will not want to feel a slave to a rigid timetable, but on the other, if you fall behind with your studies you will have to work even harder than usual to catch up.

A number of time-management techniques are described below. As different people have different time clocks and prefer different time-management strategies, what works for another student will not necessarily work for you. The idea is to experiment with a variety of techniques and discover the ones that suit you best. You can also test and modify a particular plan or compile your own. The first step is to monitor how you can use your time, and then work on planning it.

Monitor how you use your time during the week

First, calculate how much time (in hours) you spent on the following activities during the last week: sleeping, eating, self-care, travelling, errands, hobbies, exercise, lectures, homework, study, socialising. Then consider the following questions:

- Which of these do you need to spend more time on?
- Which do you need to spend less time on?
- Were you surprised at the activities you spent so much time on?
- Were you surprised at the ones you spent so little time on?

How to plan your time

Use a List of Things to Do.

This is a short-term planner, covering a 24 hour period.

1. It is better to prepare this the night before.
2. Prioritise the various tasks: A - very important, B - important, C - fairly important.
3. Tick off items when you complete them

Use a Timetable

1. Schedule fixed blocks of time. Start with class time and work time. These time periods are usually determined in advance. Other activities must be scheduled around them. Then schedule essential daily activities such as eating and sleeping
2. Include time for shopping, doing laundry, etc.
3. Schedule time for fun. Fun is important. Brains that are constantly stimulated by new ideas and new challenges need time off to digest them.
4. Set realistic goals: don't set yourself up for failure by telling yourself you can do a four-hour job in two hours!
5. Allow flexibility in your schedule: recognise that unexpected things will happen and allow for them. Perhaps set aside some 'open time' each week.
6. Avoid scheduling marathon study sessions. When possible, study in shorter sessions. If/when you study in long sessions, stop and rest for a few minutes every hour. Also, work on several subjects and avoid studying similar subjects back to back.
7. Set clear starting and stopping times for specific tasks and stick to them.

Use a 'Things to do list' for the week

The same principles as compiling a timetable apply here. In addition:

1. Set study goals for the week, and include some time for recall and review.
2. Monitor your schedule at the end of the day and decide if it needs to be changed for the next day.

Remember you do have enough time for the things you want to do. All it takes is learning a few ways to manage your time.

How to get the most out of time

- Study difficult subjects first (or at least second!) as we are often more alert and receptive earlier on. Also, you may feel more motivated to continue with your work after completing a difficult task.
- You can use waiting time, such as waiting for a bus, commuting, waiting for the dentist, etc. to complete short tasks. For example, learn or revise formulae and definitions, or listen to tape-recorded summaries and notes.
- Use a regular study area or the library
- In most situations we study where we are alert. Therefore, avoid sofas, beds or easy chairs as your body will be getting the wrong signal. Good lighting and low noise levels are also essential features you need to consider for your study environment.
- Monitor your attention and concentration. If extraneous thoughts impinge on your studying you may decide whether to deal with them now or make a note to do so later. Also, consider the use of concentration strategies.

Concentration Strategies

- Discuss your schedule with your housemates and secure agreement on suitable studying times.
- Get off the phone. Simply say 'I can't talk too long, I'm up to my eyes in a project' or use an answering machine.
- Prepare certain tasks the night before: references, books, telephone numbers etc. This tactic helps you get in gear faster the next day.
- Try not to be self-critical. Instead, acknowledge your efforts and accomplishments in taking on this study.
- Make time for other things that are important, that sustain you and keep your energy levels high. Exercise regularly, cook nutritious meals and spend time with family and friends.

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Procrastination

What is Procrastination?

It means putting off until tomorrow something that would benefit you to do today. It may be an assignment, studying for exams, a phone call, a visit to someone etc. Students say that they would be less stressed out and more productive if they could just stop procrastinating.

What causes procrastination?

Difficulties in being productive may stem from various sources and the causes of procrastination may be different for different people. Here are some of the most common reasons that make people procrastinate:

1. People often put things off because they don't feel like doing them or because they are not in the 'right' mood. They believe that motivation precedes productive action, whereas in reality it is often action that leads to motivation, which leads to more action. As motivation plays a vital role in determining academic success, you can train yourself to work efficiently instead of waiting until you 'feel like it!'

One way to improve your motivation is through goal setting. Try the technique SMART:

S - Specific. Get started by getting clear and specific goals. Put down a specific time and day that you are planning to do some study.

M - Measurable. You need to measure progress towards your goal. For example, count pages or tick off items from a 'To Do' list.

A - Action Related. Specify and identify the necessary steps required to accomplish your goal. If you have to write an essay, the first step might be to choose suitable books. The second step would be to do some preliminary reading on the subject, the third, to decide on a particular topic, and so forth.

R - Realistic. Make sure that your study goals are realistic and achievable.

T - Time Based. It is often best to work back from a deadline when planning your study. Incorporate some flexible time in your schedule.

Other actions that will help to improve your motivation include:

- o Establish a study routine
 - o Finish your study by preparing for the next time.
 - o Give yourself credit or rewards for accomplishing study goals.
2. An unrealistic view of how a productive person really functions is a characteristic of many procrastinators. They believe that successful people always feel confident, easily accomplish their goals without having to endure self-doubt, frustration or failure; and furthermore they are likely to conclude that there is something 'wrong' with them and give up when things get tough. Adopting a 'coping model' of success is the alternative however. This means starting to view achievement as something that can be stressful, accept that life will be frustrating at times and that obstacles and failures are part of things.
 3. *Fear of failure* is another cause underlying procrastination. If success is overly important to someone, then instead of risking failure he/she may prefer to do nothing at all. People who are afraid of failure usually base their self-esteem on their accomplishments. If you think that failing at your work will mean that you are a failure as a human being, you need to confront this attitude and challenge certain cognitive distortions accompanying the fear of failure.
 4. Being a perfectionist contributes to procrastination. The underlying belief of perfectionists is that they should always try to do things perfectly. They put enormous pressure on themselves and

subsequently feel so stressed that they procrastinate and do nothing at all. A healthy concern for quality and excellence differs from compulsive perfectionism. In the former case, one is enthusiastic about the creative process itself, gets a sense of accomplishment by his/her efforts, and does not feel that he/she has to 'earn' self-esteem by impressing people with success. On the other hand, perfectionists are usually motivated by a fear of failure, are never satisfied with their accomplishments and feel that they must always be successful to be loved.

5. Procrastinators usually put themselves down and discount the value of their efforts. They tend to think about their work in a critical, negative way, telling themselves that what they did 'wasn't good enough'. They make themselves feel unappreciated and unmotivated. It is important to give credit to yourself for what you do and this in turn will make you feel more excited and involved in your work.
6. People who procrastinate often tell themselves 'I really should get started'. 'Should' statements, however, are usually ineffective as they make one feel guilty and resentful so one avoids the task on hand. Every time you tell yourself 'I should do X', try to replace 'should' with 'could' or with a phrase such as 'It would be desirable for me to do X'.
7. People sometimes procrastinate when they feel annoyed or upset with people, but avoid expressing these feelings openly and directly. They may deny how they feel by pushing 'negative' feelings out of their mind and say 'I will just forget it'. To become more aware of the cause of your procrastination you can ask yourself if a family member, friend, lecturer feels frustrated because of your procrastination and if so, ask yourself if you feel annoyed or upset with them as this could also cause your procrastination.
8. Many people procrastinate because they agree to do things they don't really want to do, but find it hard to say no in the first place. Of course, there are times we all do things we don't want in order to help others, but being too nice means that we may compulsively say yes in order to please everybody and meet their expectations. If this is the case for you, you may consider the development of assertiveness skills.
9. Finally, one of the most common causes of procrastination is genuine lack of desire to do whatever it is that you're putting off. A task or goal that you don't really feel committed to or ready for may result in your putting it off. Admitting this to yourself will help you to re-examine whether a certain task is right for you. You may have good reasons to procrastinate and becoming aware of them may help you to see things from a different perspective.

You can see by now that different components contribute to procrastination. You can thus look at procrastination problems by examining separately each of the components, Affect (emotions and sensations), Behaviour (actions) and cognitions (thoughts and beliefs), by using the ABC method:

Affect as emotion (eg: joy, anger, fear) can be experienced as positive (pleasant), negative (unpleasant) or somewhere in between. Affect as sensation (e.g. feeling tired, relaxed) can be either positive or negative. At times our emotions or sensations can be over-reactions to a situation such as heart palpitations when asked to speak in class.

Behaviour refers to actions that can be observed. As most behaviours are learned, one can modify them through practice.

Cognitions are the thoughts, ideas and beliefs that reflect our view of ourselves, others and the world. They can be positive as in thinking how great it will be when a goal is accomplished, or negative as in dwelling on a past failure. A common error is to confuse affect and cognitions. For example, the statement 'I feel stupid' is more accurately expressed as 'I think I am stupid'.

While Affect, Behaviour and Cognitions can be examined separately they are interconnected aspects of the whole person, and each component is constantly interacting and influencing another.

How to eliminate procrastination

- Identify it - Identify one activity you are currently putting off needlessly and want to start doing.
- Understand it - Using the ABC method ask yourself what feelings/affect (A) are supporting the procrastination. Does the activity cause you anxiety/tension? Are you annoyed at having to do it in the first place? Then ask yourself what thoughts/cognitions (C) are contributing to the procrastination. Do you believe that you work best under pressure and so you will wait until the last minute? Maybe you think that you are going to fail. Finally ask yourself what behaviours (B) are contributing to your procrastination. You may be substituting some other behaviour (competing behaviours) for the one you need to do. The competing behaviour may be a behaviour that is easier to do or you may receive immediate reinforcement for doing it. For example talking to your friend instead of going to the library.
- Observe the ABC interaction, determine which component is the trigger and in what order the other components follow. For example, you may think you are inadequate and feel anxious about starting an essay and then delay it. In this case the firing order is CAB and C begins the interaction.

By identifying the trigger for procrastination you may begin to change it. If A was the problem, relaxation and other stress management techniques may enable you to sit with the feeling and proceed with the task. If C is the problem, substitute your negative thoughts that are causing the procrastination with positive self-talk. Finally, if the difficulty is at B, use rewards to encourage the behaviour that you are avoiding make it worthwhile to complete it. Promise yourself that you can have a half hour break when you are finished or that you can watch a television programme etc.

Further suggestions on how to deal with procrastination

- Make it meaningful: Ask yourself what is important about the job you have been putting off. List all the benefits of completing it, including how you will feel when the task is done.
- Take it apart: Break big jobs into a series of small ones e.g.: if you have a long reading assignment, divide it into two or three page sections. Make a list of the sections and cross them off as you finish them.
- Write an intention statement: On a card, write, for example: 'I intend to complete the first two paragraphs of my essay by 1 pm.' put the card up in your study area where you can see it.
- Tell everyone: Tell your flatmates, classmates, family etc. what you intend to do. Make them your support group, they will ask whether you have completed your aim.
- Reward yourself: This is only if you complete the task. If you don't, withhold the reward.
- Settle it now: If you notice yourself procrastinating, dive right in. Do it now! Just like getting into the cold sea, it is often less painful to leap in.
- Befriend your discomfort: Acknowledge your discomfort by speaking it aloud, and stay with it without judging it as good or bad. This acceptance can rob the thoughts of their power over you.
- Sweeten the task: By changing your environment, sit in a sunny corner, for example.
- List the payoffs and costs of procrastinating: Weigh the payoffs of procrastinating against the costs.
- Do it later: Some tasks are best left till later when you have gathered all the necessary information. This, however, should be incorporated into your schedule and not used as an excuse to procrastinate.
- Say no: If you realise that you really don't intend to do something, stop telling yourself that you will. Just say NO. Then you are no longer procrastinating and you don't feel guilty about an undone task.

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