

Advice for Exam Stress

In our clinic we have had several cases of severe exam stress and anxiety. As we approach that time when young people up and down the country are preparing for exams, we thought we'd put together some top tips to help young people (and their parents/guardians) to cope!

- 1. Use positive self-talk.** When we use negative self-talk, such as "I'm going to fail so badly" or "This exam is going to be a disaster, I'm never going to pass/get top marks" then the body responds to this as a perceived threat. It releases adrenaline and gets us feeling anxious. Ironically, this makes our performance level fall (it's good to be a little anxious, as this helps us focus, but too much and we lose our concentration). Much better to say things to ourselves such as "All I need to do is give this my best shot, and I'm going to be just fine!" The effect of positive self-talk is to help us relax and feel more confident. Ironically, this actually boosts our performance. In both cases, we increase the chance of what psychologists refer to as self-fulfilling prophecies.
- 2. Learn some breathing and relaxation techniques.** One of the best ways to help us bring our anxiety and stress under control is to learn to relax our bodies. By slowing down our breathing, trying to breathe slowly from the belly instead of the chest (diaphragmatic breathing), and by relaxing our muscles from head to toe, we can lower our stress levels quickly. When combined with positive self-talk, we really start to boost our confidence and relaxation levels. There are various free websites, online videos and apps such as www.headspace.com that can help.
- 3. Exam time routines.** Our bodies love routine. The problem with exam time is that we often change our usual routines and habits. If you normally get up at 7am, but one day sleep in until 10am, we can feel a bit groggy. If you normally go to bed at 11pm but the night before an exam try to go to bed at 9pm, your body will find it difficult to get to sleep, as it is not expecting it. It's much better to keep to a similar routine. Get up at a similar time, eat breakfast at the same time in the same place (hopefully a healthy one that slowly releases energy through the day and not just a sugar rush!), drink what you normally drink (but see below about caffeine). Also, think about who you will speak to before an exam. Some friends will be relaxed and calm, others will talk nervously and ask lots of questions about your revision and possible questions you might get asked. Being around a nervous talker is likely to make you nervous, so perhaps avoid them before the exam (or learn to smile patiently, while not really listening!). When you're in the exam, don't rush to start. Take a few moments to breathe slowly, compose yourself and plan your strategy for answering your questions and allow time to review at the end. After the exam, it's good to go and celebrate by doing something relaxing and fun. When you are getting stressed about the exam, you can look forward to the time afterwards when you'll be able to relax and say it's finished. Once the exam is over, don't go over it in fine detail – there's no point. It's over and you can't change your answers.

- 4. Caffeine, exercise and sleep.** When we are trying to build ourselves up for an exam, our bodies need more energy. Being healthy and exercising regularly and getting plenty of sleep is very good for you. While you are sleeping, your brain is sorting through information and in fact, your memory will improve. Much better to revise, rest and sleep than cram all night and get very little sleep. However, because of your natural body clock, you can't suddenly start sleeping lots if you've been going for weeks on much less. Try to plan early nights for several days before your exam, so that if you have a bad night the night before, it won't be so bad. Many younger people now take high levels of caffeine. Research has shown that caffeine (found in tea, coffee, fizzy drinks, red bulls etc.) is not good for anxiety or sleep. Having a couple of cups a day is not a problem. Having 5-10 a day could be, especially if you drink it after 6pm in the evening. Caffeine stays in our bodies for several hours. Try switching to decaf or drinking something without caffeine (or too much sugar) in the evenings instead. Make these changes early on – don't suddenly stop the day before your exam, or you will get withdrawal symptoms.
- 5. Keep expectations reasonable.** This advice goes for parents too! Putting too much pressure on ourselves at exam time is counter-productive. Much better to take the night off before an exam (as long as you have studied already!) so that you unwind, relax and have the best preparation for the next day. Cramming is a panic response and not a good way to learn. It's also much better to have a goal of doing your best, rather than aiming for a specific percentage or mark, and don't compare yourself to others. The pressure to get straight A's or to have a specific mark will just make you stressed and anxious. If you do get good results, the feeling is more likely to be relief than joy. When studying, make sure you have regular breaks as well. Our brains need down time to make sense of all the data we've been forcing into our memories. Going for a walk, playing a game, watching a distracting programme on TV can all help. It's all about balance. Just do your best!

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