

Exam Stress

The run –up to exams and the exam period is a stressful time for all students. It is normal to feel nervous and some nervousness is actually helpful in enhancing performance. But excessive worrying and overwhelming stress makes it difficult to think clearly and recall information leading to a decline in performance.

If you are prone to reacting to exams with high stress levels it is helpful to start putting in place good coping strategies well before the examination period starts.

If these good foundations are well established then you can approach the exam period with greater confidence and it will go much more smoothly.

Helpful coping strategies include;

- Take care of yourself physically by eating well, sleeping well and exercising regularly (at least every other day).
- Your brain needs wind-down time (2 hours is suggested) in order to put itself to bed. So 2 hours before bed put work away out of sight, dim the lights, have a warm bath, listen to music or watch some relaxing TV. The more you can develop a 'wind down' routine the more easily sleep will come. In terms of revision, sleep time is not wasted time but is the time when the information learnt during the day is fixed in the memory
- Develop a balanced routine of work, time off to see friends and relax and time to exercise. Your brain cannot revise effectively for more than 2 hours at a stretch and 6 hours in a day (according to experts in study skills); you will notice productivity declines the longer you sit with your books. It is much more effective to take regular breaks and return refreshed to your studies. Exercise helps to oxygenate the brain, release tension and tire the body making sleep easier.
- Make a revision timetable and stick to it. Your time needs to be well structured. Remember that the first 50% of marks in any question are the easiest to achieve. In terms of maximising marks gained for effort expended it is much better to revise everything partially than a couple of topics very thoroughly!
- Ask for help if revision is not going well. Your tutors may be able to help you and the Study Skills Centre provides support for revision techniques and exam preparation.
- Take care of yourself emotionally by acknowledging and expressing your feelings.

- Experiment with relaxation techniques, yoga and meditation and see what helps you. Try the Mindfulness Meditation Taster sessions ran by the Student Counselling Service (see our website for details). Free downloadable podcasts are available on our website:
www.bangor.ac.uk/studentservices/counselling/relaxation_mindfulness.php.en
- Learn to say no to demands from others
- Give yourself regular treats as encouragement

You may also want to think about more practical ways to prepare well for the exams.

In the term before your exams you can:

- Decide what you need to know, check the syllabus, look at old exam papers, find out the standard required
- Analyse any problems/mistakes made in previous exams
- Improve exam style, develop an exam vocabulary, (i.e. know the difference between examine, interpret, explain)
- Organise your notes including all sources; lectures, tutorials, own reading etc. Make revision 'key cards'. Use skeletons, mind maps, spider diagrams if they help you.
- Discover your ideal revision environment-the best place, the most productive time of day and plan around this. Keep a diary of work accomplished.

In the week before an exam you can:

- Check the structure of the exam paper-multiple choice or essays, number of questions to attempt, marks value of each and decide the time to allocate to each.
- Revision; vary subjects and difficulty level to avoid boredom. Set realistic targets. Spend time on recall as well as reading. Practice answers.
- Take preventative action on predictable health problems e.g. to avoid allergies, period pains, stress headaches.
- Avoid additional stress-don't end a relationship or see your bank manager.

The day before an exam you can:

- Check date, time and place of exam and arrangements to get there
- Check equipment needed for exam
- Review revision cards. Don't attempt to learn new material
- Think through the exam situation-a mental rehearsal-and prepare strategies if problems arise
- Use relaxation techniques to get a good night's sleep

On the day you can:

- Stick to your normal routine. If you can't eat take glucose or sweets with you in case you get 'light-headed' in the exam. Use relaxation techniques to keep calm.
- Briefly read revision cards if this helps your confidence.
- Arrive on time and take a watch.

In the exam

- Read through the paper, plan your time, decide priority order of questions, and plan your answers.
- Ensure answers are relevant.
- Don't waste time being stuck but change to another answer.
- Attempt the right number of questions (more marks are gained in the first half of a question than the second)
- If you have time check over your work

What is Exam Panic?

Despite good preparations you may, however, experience exam panic. Panic is frightening and unpleasant and interferes with ability to think and perform well. It involves a series of physical, emotional and cognitive responses to excessive anxiety or strain.

These changes may include physical changes;

- Feeling sick and stomach churning
- Hands are sweaty and tremble
- Feeling hot and cold
- Breathing quickly and shallowly
- Feeling dizzy and weak
- Heart thumping

Mental changes:

- Hard to concentrate
- Thoughts are blocked or racing
- Memory 'wiped'

And emotional changes;

- Feeling anxious, overwhelmed and afraid

How to deal with Panic?

It is important to know that although panic is very unpleasant it is not dangerous and the unpleasant sensations usually subside after several minutes.

If you sense yourself starting to panic give yourself 5 minutes to calm and settle. Focus on trying to relax your muscles and use calming breathing techniques. You might like to visualise breathing around a square box – breathe in along one side, take a pause along the next side, breathe out following the third side and then take a pause before following the edges of the square for the next breath. Shift your attention to external details in the room – the sensation of the chair and floor that are supporting you, patterns in the floor covering, and textures of fabric of the clothing of people around you.

Once you have calmed you might want to suck some glucose or a sweet if you feel light-headed or nauseous. Perhaps move on to a different question but try not to dwell on the experience of panic once you have acknowledged it is there.

For Further Help

- If you have experienced extreme panic in examination situations in the past the University makes provision for students to take exams in a less stressful environment. For further information about this contact your tutor and the University Mental Health Advisor:
<http://www.bangor.ac.uk/studentservices/mentalhealth/index.php.en>
- For further information about our resources including self–help links and podcasts to help with exam stress check the Counselling Service website:
<http://www.bangor.ac.uk/studentservices/counselling/index.php.en>
- Check out the 5 senses Exam Stress Buster drill on the Mindfulness for Students website <http://mindfulnessforstudents.co.uk/students/>
- The Study Skills service also offers assistance with Exam and Study Stress <https://www.bangor.ac.uk/studyskills/>

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