

## Managing exam anxiety

Tests and exams are one of the most stressful things about school, and they are something you will continue to face well into adulthood if you go on to further study or get a job that requires you to pass particular tests. So while tests are unlikely to go away, you can learn to manage your test anxiety and even effectively channel that nervous energy into performance.

If you experience test anxiety, it is almost as if your body interprets the test as an imminent danger. Your muscles tense up, and you can't think clearly, no matter how much you've studied, and so you freeze up or answer quickly without thinking, just to get something onto that blank page.

*Think of a test you go anxious about. What happened in your mind and body?*

*What helped you get through it?*

*Think about a time a test went well. Describe that situation, how you felt, how your body felt, and what your mind was like.*

## Being prepared

Read these suggestions, then put a tick next to the ones you already do and a star next to the ones you could try. Add your own ideas.

- As a method to try to help manage your anxiety and stress around exam time try to start every day with 5 minutes quiet sitting with a mindfulness practice, as part of your daily routine.
- Make a study plan. Try to set a positive intention to study and look forward to success.
- Study in advance to avoid cramming the night before
- Eat a healthy dinner the night before
- Get a good night's sleep the night before
- Avoid too much caffeine
- Eat a healthy breakfast in the morning
- Wear comfortable clothing
- Get some exercise before the exam (studies have shown that light exercise can boost test scores, so you might try a jog around school or up and down the stairs during a test break)
- Focus on your breath (mindful breathing practice)

- Visualise success
- Give yourself a pep talk, or give your friends a pep talk
- Listen to calming music
- Watch a funny video or listen to a funny podcast
- If you have nerves, fear, worries about your exams and revision share your experience with a sympathetic person who will listen with understanding.
- During your revision periods try sitting in a relaxed and comfortable posture, recalling out loud or to yourself the material you have just studied. Recalling information helps to cement it to memory and will help recall on the day of the exam. It also confirms to yourself that you know the material and this raises confidence.
- Allow yourself time for relaxation, cooking and eating well and positive socialising.
- You may wish to gently repeat a positive phrase to yourself ('I have achieved well today') to help your mind switch off from your studies, it works like counting sheep and has the added benefit of affirming the positive. It will set up a habit of feeling good and those good feelings will start to become automatic.
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Be mindful that having the determination to go through with the exam is a great success in itself.

### **In the exam room**

Once you're in the room with the exam, there are a few more things you can do. First of all, waiting for the test papers to be handed out can be unbearable, so that is the perfect time to use some of your mindfulness skills. Focus on your breath as you wait, and each time you notice your mind wandering to the future or the past, gently bring it back to the sensation of your breath. Ideally, you want to have a level of anxiety that keeps you focused and alert, but not so much you can't think straight.

This practice can help you stay focused and calm when you are actually taking a test.

#### **Mindfulness Practice: counting sounds**

Right now, just take a moment to become aware of all the sounds in the room. You might even want to close your eyes. If you have trouble noticing all the sounds, start with those nearest to you, and gradually work your way outward. Try this for a minute, writing down the sounds as you notice them.

How do you feel after trying this practice?

How is the anxiety in your mind and your body?

Practice this at home when you are studying so that you can use it with confidence the next time you have to take an exam. Simply lean back in your chair, close your eyes, notice 3 sounds, and then lean in again and go back to your work. You can write the sounds down or not, but just noticing them and then coming back to what you need to focus on will make your mind a little sharper and your body a little more relaxed.

### **Writer's block**

When this happens, there is no easy solution, but mindfulness could help get the creative juices flowing. In the next practice we are noticing sensations in our bodies. This can get us out of our heads, where our thoughts are blocked up, and into our bodies, where we may find a little more creativity and comfort.

#### Mindfulness Practice: counting sensations

- Sit up straight and take a few deep, mindful breaths
- Now bring your attention back to your body, quickly scanning from your feet up to your head and becoming aware of any sensations in your body.
- Pay attention now to sensations deep inside your body, as well as light sensations on the surface of your skin. Try to just notice these without interpreting or judging.
- Notice your body temperature and any subtle movements your body might be making unconsciously.

*Write down 5 sensations:*

*How are you feeling now in your mind and body?*

*Try this again, noting or writing down any thoughts or emotions that arise with the sensations and then return to your attention to your body.*

### **Seeing your positive qualities**

Many people can list what they think are their negative qualities much more quickly and easily than their positive ones, and their negative lists tend to be longer as well. Viewing yourself as a valuable person with qualities you like and are proud of means

you have high self-esteem. High self-esteem can make it easier to manage stressful moments because you are not likely to complicate situations by adding negative thoughts about yourself. When you find yourself focusing on negatives about yourself, you can counter it with something positive or realistic. Affirmations are positive statements you can say to yourself. You can use affirmations to talk back to negative thoughts that come to your mind.

Write 3 affirmations for yourself:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

*What was it like to say nice things to yourself?*

If you find it difficult to say nice things to yourself, try imagining that you are talking to a friend.

### **Focusing on the positive**

There may be times in your life when you feel overwhelmed. During these times it can often happen that we allow one negative event to outweigh the positives of a day. We might not always notice the good moments if we are caught up in the negative or too busy thinking about the past or future. We need to look for the good moments and pay attention to the things that made us happy.

Notice one pleasant event every day for the next week and add it to the table on the next page. First, tell what the event was. Then describe any thoughts or emotions you experienced before, during, or after the event. Tell what you felt in your body before, during, and after the event. Finally, tell how you feel and what you are thinking right now.

	<b>The Event</b>	<b>My emotions or thoughts</b>	<b>What I felt in my body</b>	<b>What I feel and think now</b>
Example	I went to the cinema with my friend	I was excited and happy. It was a really funny film and I loved spending time with my friend	As a I sat down in the chair I felt all my tension melt away so my muscles relaxed	I'm really pleased that I took the time to see the film with my friend and it's nice to be able to talk about our favourite bits together.
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				