

Understanding and Overcoming Exam Anxiety

Coping strategies

Things I do - ✓

Strategies to try

Balanced lifestyle

1. Eat a well-balanced diet
2. Avoid excess caffeine, sugar, salt
3. Drink water
4. Good sleep cycle
5. Regular exercise
6. Socialize with family and friends
7. Enjoyable interests, hobbies and activities
8. Time out for myself
9. Ask for help

Study and time management skills

10. Setting SMART goals
11. Scheduling /planning (long, mid-range and daily)
12. Breaking tasks into manageable (doable) bits

Relaxation, stress management and mindfulness techniques

13. Controlled breathing
14. Progressive muscle relaxation, body scan
15. Helpful imagery and rehearsal
16. Soothing strategies-bath, candles, music
17. Mindfulness Strategies know the 'mindful STOPP'

Cognitive strategies – see next page for details

18. Understand ABCD model
19. Recognize my unhelpful thoughts
20. Have helpful responses ready and available

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Cognitive strategies -- What we say to ourselves heading into and during exams can make the difference between failure and success (or just misery and resilience). But it's not just simple 'positive thinking' it needs to be believable for you. Consider these examples -



"I know I'll forget something, I always do, if I can't answer I'll fail ...my parents will be so upset...I won't be able to tell them, and it will get worse, and I'll fail the course, people will think I'm stupid, I'm a loser..."



"I know I'll forget something, I always do...Exams make me nervous, but I *don't* always forget things...and I have done my best to prepare. If I don't know something or if I've forgotten something, I'll remind myself that's normal, you can't know and retain everything. I'll slow my breathing, calm myself down and remind myself what I know. I've done this before, I can do this again. If I worry, it makes it worse. If I calm myself down I'll think better and do better. I'm worth more than my exam mark.



Same thought– *worry about forgetting*- but different response to that thought. We have thousands of automatic thoughts a day, most we easily ignore. But some hook us and set up cycle of thoughts / emotions / sensations cycle discussed in Smart Sparrow module. ABCDE can help you see and change this cycle

A – Activating event (or trigger) *What's happening right now for me, where am I, is anyone else here, why am I no longer working on my studies/your exam/your assignment- what thought or trigger 'hooked' me?*

B – Belief underlying the event. It might be hard to figure out at first. Invite yourself to think deeper "*What is the worst thing I think can happen? What does it mean about me? How do I think people will see me? For example "I'll forget something.."* "Okay, what do I think is the worst thing that can happen?" *I'll fail the exam ...I'll get kicked out of university....I'm stupid and worthless...* It now is clearer why one thought so quickly makes it hard to study.

C-Consequence – This is the reaction to those beliefs (stop studying, blank out, increased fear/anxiety)

D-Disputing the unhelpful core belief – Talking back to the thought with a believable response. You can see this in the second example above. It is important to have identified possible responses ahead of the exam time.

I have coped with exam anxiety before. I can do it again.

I may forget something, I can't remember everything, but I won't panic and I can recover.

Exams make me nervous, but I am prepared for them because I know my stuff inside out.

If I blank, I just need to breathe and focus on something I can do.

I have passed other tests for the course already.

I am more than my exam performance.

E-emotion regulation – soothing your emotions –If you are panicking during an exam consider taking a Mindful

STOPP (**Stop**, **Take** a few slow breaths, **Observe** – 3 things you see, hear, touch, **Perspective taking**, (helpful ways to think about situation) and **Positive self-talk** (I CAN do this).

