

IDEAS FOR MANAGING STRESS DURING AN EXAM

From Dr Carla Humphrys

It is natural to experience nerves on exam day. Times when you might notice that your stress is becoming overwhelming include:

Waiting to enter an exam space;

Soaking in the stress of others within the environment (feelings are contagious) or being influenced by the negative self-talk of others.

Entering the exam and waiting for it to start;

If you are making negative predictions like how hard it is going to be, the consequences of not doing as well and you hope or setting yourself up by failure by thinking that you did not study hard enough, labelling yourself by calling yourself dumb etc.

During the exam;

If your mind goes blank or you are confused about how a question is phrased. You might notice physical symptoms like feeling sick, racing heart, shaky hands, dizziness/lightheadedness, hot and sweaty, trouble breathing. While these physical symptoms, along with negative thoughts, do not feel nice, they are common. The physical symptoms are not dangerous and will reduce reasonably quickly, as you face the exam.

WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOU ARE FINDING IT TOUGH?

Limit contact with stressed peers just before an exam. Their negative thinking can impact your helpful self-talk and their stress can be contagious. It is your right to set a boundary at this time and focus on yourself. This will give you the chance to use the strategies which help you to manage your thoughts and feelings.

Name It To Tame It.

When your emotions are really strong, the emotion part of the brain takes over, and the thinking part of the brain goes offline. Naming emotions switches the thinking part back and helps to reduce the emotion intensity. The two steps for the 'name it to tame it' strategy are:

1. Stop and notice how you feel (name the feeling and the body symptoms)
2. Remind yourself what is actually happening

Example 'name it to tame it' statements:

I am feeling really nervous right now. I notice my heart is racing and my hands are sweating. It's just a feeling and it can't hurt me.

My tummy feels sick and I am feeling worried. I can feel this and still do the exam anyway.

My heart is racing and I am feeling stressed. That's just my body doing its thing.

Slowed breathing

This can be used at any stage before or during an exam. However, it is necessary to include practicing it as part of your study routine so that you know how to do it well enough to be effective when needed.

1. Start by breathing in and holding for a count of 5, then exhale slowly
2. Work towards breathing in for a count of 5, pausing for a count of 2 and then breathing out for a count of 6
3. Repeat for a few minutes

Thought Challenging

Sometimes our thinking can exaggerate the worst possible outcome. The good news is we can learn ways to change our thinking so that we feel less stressed.

Steps to thought challenging:

- Identify the event and the feeling
- Identify the thoughts causing stress
- What exactly do I think will happen?
- Look for evidence for that thought
- What facts do I have that indicate this thought is true?
- Look for evidence against the thought
- What facts do I have that indicate this thought is not true?
- What other options are there?
- What else might happen?
- What happens to other people?
- Identify the true consequences
- If this did happen, would I be able to cope?
- Come up with a helpful thought based on the evidence

Once you have identified some helpful thoughts (prior to the exam) write them down and practice using them as much as possible. This will help you to be able to use them in the exam. Thought challenging can be tricky. If you need some pointers please reach out for support!

Remember

To a certain level stress actually improves performance so it is helpful to have some stress in exam situations. Certain levels of stress help us stay motivated, perform at our optimal level and increase the alertness of our mind. The key is to manage the AMOUNT of stress experienced.