

# Strategies for Reducing Exam Anxiety

Sometimes people feel they do not perform to their potential on exams. For some, this may not be because of what they know or do not know, but because of what, or how, they feel while writing an exam. Here are some ideas to help manage your thoughts and feelings while preparing for and writing exams so that you can perform closer to your potential. Consider the suggestions below and choose new strategies that fit best for you and that you can implement most readily.

## 1. Study Effectively

- Reduce anxiety by being well prepared.
- Know what to expect on the test – material covered, format of test, length, how much it is worth.
- Study for a test over an extended period. Review regularly in between tests, so that studying for any individual one is more manageable.
- Study actively by engaging a variety of the senses. Underline or highlight headings or key words, rewrite or summarize notes, read aloud, quiz yourself by covering information and asking questions related to the notes, make flash cards.
- Study in short blocks of time with breaks. Try 30 – 50 minutes at a time, then do a 10 min. activity (exercise, have a snack, listen to or play music, have a conversation, etc.), or take a longer break (eat supper, switch to another subject).
- Avoid staying up late to cram. Losing sleep means a tired brain, decreased memory performance and poorer recall later.
- Study by getting comfortable with what you will have to do in the exam. Write answers to practice questions under a time limit while sitting at a desk.
- Learn memory enhancement techniques such as mnemonic devices (acronyms, visualizations, songs, rhymes, chunking of information, etc.). See your teacher or counsellor for more details about these strategies.

## 2. Prepare to Write the Exam

- Get as much rest as possible the night before the test.
- Eliminate additional anxiety by being prepared for school before leaving home in the morning.
- Arrive on time, or a couple of minutes early (but not too early in order to avoid meeting anxious students).
- Wear a watch to monitor your time.
- Have proper clothing so that you can adjust your temperature if it feels too hot or cold.
- Think about what commonly distracts or bothers you during exams and develop strategies in advance to deal with these things (e.g. frequent clock-watching, noise from other students, etc.).
- Do deep breathing when sitting in the test-taking room before the test begins, or before you start writing.

### 3. Develop a Productive Attitude and Change Unhelpful Thoughts

- Maintain an attitude of doing the best you can under the circumstances, rather than requiring perfection from yourself.
- Plan a reward for yourself after the exam. Praise yourself as you write the exam (e.g. “half done and so far, so good”).
- Learn, and practice over time, how to challenge negative thoughts (such as “I’m going to fail”).

### 4. Use Test-Taking Strategies

- Record information you think you might forget on the back of the exam as soon as you receive it.
- Scan the entire exam before beginning to answer. Figure out how much time to spend on each section or question, depending upon how much it is worth.
- To build confidence, begin with questions you know rather than focusing on the ones you don’t know. It’s okay to skip questions and to return to them after you have had opportunity to gain clues from other questions.
- Start with the multiple-choice or True/False questions to gain clues that might help you answer other questions.
- Take 30-second mini-breaks at specified points during the exam to use a relaxation strategy such as closing your eyes, relaxing body parts (hands, shoulders), using positive self-talk, and breathing deeply.

*If your thoughts are racing and your mind becomes cluttered with worries, do the following:*

- Don’t focus on getting rid of the anxiety because that will only feed the anxiety.
- Mentally yell “Stop” to break the cycle.
- Take a 30-second mini break.
- Concentrate hard on a specific sensation to clear your mind of anxiety (e.g. the air flowing from the heater in room, the hum of the lights, the sound or movement of your breathing), OR
- Be with your anxiety – concentrate on our physical symptoms. If you can completely experience a physical sensation it often disappears.

### 5. Use Anxiety-Reduction Techniques

- Learn, and practice on a daily basis, relaxation and visualization techniques so they will come easily to you when you need them. Common and easy to use strategies include deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and mindfulness meditation. See your counsellor to learn more.
- While preparing for the exam, visualize a positive exam-writing experience.

### 6. Maintain a Healthy Lifestyle

- Get aerobic (medium intensity) exercise on a regular basis.
- Sleep well and eat a healthy diet.
- Continue to get adequate sleep and exercise, and to eat a healthy diet, when school gets busy and you have more tests and due dates for assignments.
- Avoid substances that increase anxiety such as caffeine, sugar, nicotine and cannabis.