

Dealing with Exam Anxiety

Students who experience exam anxiety report difficulties with concentration, mental blocks and distractibility. Exam anxiety is a feeling of uneasiness and distress that many students face before, during or after an exam, which sometimes results in lower performance. Exam anxiety is a common problem that many university students face; however, there are ways to overcome or manage the symptoms.

The facts

Two types of exam anxiety include anticipatory anxiety, a feeling of distress when preparing for an exam, and situational anxiety, stress experienced while writing an exam. Both are very real and can have a significant impact on performance.

Exam anxiety can manifest itself in different ways, in different people. Symptoms may include:

Emotional symptoms: worry, fear, panic, self-defeating thoughts (I can't do it), frustration, anger, depression, hopelessness, helplessness

Physiological symptoms: increased heart rate, perspiration, dry mouth, tensed muscles (stiff back & neck), cold hands, upset stomach, tight chest, difficulty breathing

Cognitive and behavioural symptoms: inability to make decisions, trouble concentrating, difficulty in organizing thoughts, racing thoughts, difficulty in remembering and recalling information, difficulty in reading and understanding, avoidance behaviors, excessive drinking, gambling, sexual promiscuity, or other unhealthy or sub-optimal coping strategies

Stress is a normal part of everyday life. It helps motivate us to improve our performance. All students feel some level of stress when writing exams. When your stress level becomes too high or prolonged, determine what you can do to keep anxiety down to a manageable level.

Tips for managing exam anxiety

Do your research about the exam in advance. What types of questions can you expect on the exam? When and where does the exam take place (double check!) How much time will you have to write the exam, and what materials can you use in the exam? With final exams, determine what your term mark is going into the exam.

Set up a study plan for each of your courses. Develop an exam task list to identify topics/chapters for review and estimate the time you will need to study each topic. Studying in small chunks of time with regular breaks is often more effective rather than long marathon study sessions.

Test yourself. Answer end-of-chapter questions, teach others, create practice exam questions, and/or look for old exams. If you were creating an exam, what questions would you include? Aim to understand material, not memorize.

Put the exam into perspective. Keep in mind that one exam is not going to make or break your whole future. Think of the exam as a challenge where you are able to share what you've learned.

Keep an eye on your health and wellness. Stay hydrated, eat, sleep, exercise, and do activities that you enjoy. Eat low fat, high protein foods before you write the exam. This will help keep you sustain your energy and concentration during the exam.

Take a few deep, relaxed breaths before you begin to write and during the exam. Shallow, rapid chest breathing tends to increase anxiety.

Write down important facts and formulas that you've memorized and survey the exam before starting to write. Make note of the number of marks and relative difficulty of the questions. Tackle the easy questions first. This can set the groundwork for more difficult questions and will help build your confidence.

Read questions carefully and underline key terms. Avoid spending too much time on any one question. If you don't know the answer to a question, skip the question and come back to it later.

After the exam, REWARD yourself, do something you enjoy. If you experience a mental block during an exam, pause, take a few deep breaths and write anyways. Jot down whatever you know about the question. You may be surprised by the knowledge you've gained throughout the term (and, you may receive partial marks for your answer).

Incorporate stress management techniques during the days leading up to and including the day of the exam. Deep (abdominal) breathing, mindfulness, and visualization are examples of stress management techniques. Create a mental image of what success looks like before studying and during the exam.

Check your thoughts and beliefs. Change negative self-talk into positive self-talk. Transform "I'm going to fail" into "I've got this one!"

Get support. Contact Student Life and make an appointment with a counsellor or study skills specialist who may be able to provide some tips for finding a school and life balance.

Exam anxiety is COMMON! You are not alone!

Student Learning Centre

Call: 905.721.8668 ext. 6578

Email: studentlearning@ontariotechu.ca Downtown Oshawa Location: 61 Charles St.
Website: ontariotechu.ca/studentlearning North Oshawa Location: Student Life Building

