



For better
mental health

How to...
cope with
exam stress



How to... cope with exam stress



"The day before the exam, I spent the whole night vomiting. I just remember going into the exam, turning over the paper, and my mind just going blank."

"I just felt desperate. I wanted to be somewhere where I didn't have to worry about the exams – or anything else any more."

"It felt OK to be in the routine of working some of the time and then going to the gym or for a run. I was still going out at night, but I was getting home at a reasonable time. I felt as if I'd got it under control, and so when the exams came, I'd done my best, and stayed sane."

People can face exams at any age. This booklet provides advice about how to prepare for exams, how to recognise if stress is getting out of hand, and what to do about it.



Can I avoid getting stressed before an exam?

Taking exams is bound to be stressful because of what's at stake. You may be feeling a weight of expectation from your family, school, university or workplace to succeed. You may be afraid you're not good enough, or haven't worked hard enough. You may be scared of letting yourself down, or that you'll miss out on a job, university place or career move.

Your pre-exam nerves may seem much worse if you are doing exams for the first time or after a long gap, if English is not your first language or if you have particular learning difficulties. Nor do exams exist in isolation; there may well be other events going on in your life that are putting you under pressure (see p. 11).

If your stress levels rise too high for too long, it can be harmful both to you and to your chances. Everybody's stress 'threshold' is different. A situation that is too much for one person to tolerate may be stimulating to another. Controlled at the right level, however, stress can work to your advantage, because it can help you to produce your peak performance.

How do I minimise exam stress?

Exams bring out the best in some people, and the worst in others. Whatever the case, you may be in a situation where you have to do them. Remind yourself that you can only do your best – and your best is all that you can do.



Being organised

If you find out exactly what you're facing, you can work out a plan for dealing with it, and this will go a long way towards putting your mind at ease. Get hold of the right information, from the start. Make sure you know how you will be examined, and what you'll be examined on. If you can, get a copy of the syllabus. Catch up with anything you've missed, so that you've got all your notes up to date.

Find out about the resources available to help you. School and university teachers are an expert resource, although they may not have a lot of time to give you. There are also many good revision guides, TV revision programmes and a wide range of internet sites to use – the BBC has a range of revision tools for school pupils and the Open University has advice for older students. (See 'Useful websites', on p. 13.)

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Plan a timetable

Try to start your revision in plenty of time. Take time to plan a revision timetable that's realistic and still flexible, and linked to your exam timetable, so you revise subjects in the right order. In planning it, give yourself clear priorities and try to balance your revision with other demands on your time – meals, sleep, chores or other commitments, as well as time for relaxing. Identify your best time of day for studying.

If you are on study leave, one way to structure your work might be to divide each day into three units (morning, afternoon and evening), giving you a total of 21 units per week. Then make a list of all the topics you need to cover. Estimate how long you think it will take you to revise each one, allowing more time for things you find most difficult. Then add on plenty of extra. Finally, divide the topics up between the units.

Everyone needs time off, and it's a bad idea to abandon your social life and sporting activities, but for a period near the examinations, you may need to cut down. This may involve making hard choices. Always leave yourself a minimum of six units of free time per week.



What's the best way to revise?

It's not always possible to find peace and quiet, and a comfortable place to revise. Try to arrange with those at home a set time and space where you can work without being disturbed. Failing that, think about whether you could use other facilities at school, college, or your local library. If you study in a room where you also eat or sleep, try to keep the work area separate, so it's not always confronting you when you're not studying.

There's no 'right' way to revise, it's largely a matter of what suits you best and the particular exam you're taking (multiple choice answers, calculations, short-answer questions, or essays). Methods might include making notes from text books, writing quick summaries of topics (in the form of mind maps or spidergrams perhaps), reciting facts out loud, learning dates, formulae or vocabulary by heart, and reading revision books or watching revision programmes. Switching between methods helps you hold your interest and absorb information better. Mix dull subjects with more interesting ones, for the same reason. If it's hard to get started, begin with something easy.

Actively think about, sift and question what you're writing and reading, and test yourself afterwards. Writing endless notes is probably a waste of time. If you come to something you don't understand, try reading about it somewhere else. If that doesn't work, then ask someone who knows the subject well.

If you have a problem with concentration, you can improve it by starting with short bursts of study, then adding an extra few minutes to each session. Don't try to study for longer than 45 to 60 minutes at a stretch.

It may be less stressful to do the work than it is to worry about it. If you find it hard getting motivated, set yourself measurable goals for each revision session, and tick them off when you've achieved them. After each session, acknowledge the achievement, and reward yourself with something. Have a break between sessions, or if you find things getting on top of you. Get a soft drink, read a magazine or take some exercise (see 'How can I de-stress?', overleaf). Bear in mind that drinks containing caffeine, such as cola, tea and coffee, are stimulants, and may make you feel more agitated.

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It's worth practising timed exam questions and papers. This can give you some idea of what the real exam will be like, and of how to divide your time between questions. Although exam papers are never the same, they're similar enough to be useful. There's a good quote that goes, 'the more I practised, the luckier I got'.



How can I de-stress?

Learning how to relax is crucial. Straightforward, effective, self-help techniques are going to be very helpful in the run-up to the exams, and even when you're sitting in the exam room.

Breathing techniques

Stress can make you start breathing with quick, shallow breaths and make your heart beat faster than usual. If this happens, sit down somewhere comfortable, if possible. Place one hand on your stomach and check how quickly you are breathing. If it's one breath every couple of seconds, take a deep breath and start counting steadily. Breathe out slowly and try to get the last of the breath out on about five seconds. Carry on doing this until you are doing it naturally.

Relaxation routine

- Close your eyes and breathe slowly and deeply.
- Locate any areas of tension and try to relax those muscles; imagine the tension disappearing.
- Relax each part of the body, from your feet to the top of your head.
- As you focus on each part of your body, think of warmth, heaviness and relaxation.
- After 20 minutes, take some deep breaths and stretch.

Physical activity

Regular exercise is an excellent way of coping with stress. As little as 10 or 20 minutes a day spent walking, cycling, or at the gym can make a big difference. (See *The Mind guide to physical activity* for more information about the benefits.)

Complementary therapies

There are also various herbal preparations or homeopathic remedies, but it's a good idea to talk to qualified practitioners about this. Practitioners work holistically, to take into account your whole situation and your general health, and can advise you accordingly. Contact the British Complementary Medicine Association (BCMA) for a list of qualified practitioners (See 'Useful organisations', on p. 13.)

Yoga, meditation and massage all have proven benefits in reducing stress and promoting relaxation. Ask at college about what's available, find out about local classes from your library, or contact the BCMA. (Also see, *The Mind guide to series of booklets*, listed under 'Further reading', on p. 14.)

Sleep

If you're tired, worries can get blown out of proportion. If you've been finding it difficult to get to sleep, try cutting down on stimulants (tea, coffee and alcohol, for instance) and make sure you have time to unwind before bed. A warm bath, with perhaps some added aromatherapy oils, can help. Some people feel very stressed about not getting enough sleep. It's worth remembering that people can still function very well without any sleep for short periods of time. (See Mind's booklet *How to cope with sleep problems*.)

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Support groups

Think about getting together in a study group with fellow students. It can help with revision and give you an opportunity for talking to each other about what is worrying you. Sometimes, people are reluctant to open up for fear of what others might think of them, but everybody is in the same situation.



What's the best approach to the actual exams?

Be sure you're clear about what exam is coming up when, so that you don't prepare for the wrong one. Working through the night before an exam may save you on the day, but it's not a good strategy to rely on. It's possible to work effectively without having had enough sleep, occasionally, but getting a good night's sleep is arguably a better option. If you usually take the last-minute approach, it may be worth reflecting on why it's necessary for you to tackle exams this way.

To reduce the scope for anxiety, have everything you need ready in advance, with any spares. Do have something to eat before the exam, however queasy you are feeling. It doesn't need to be a huge amount, but you will function better with fuel inside. Set off in good time!

Once in the exam, if you feel panic rising and your mind going blank, take a minute to do a breathing routine (see p. 6) and give yourself time to calm down. The biggest mistake people make in exams is not to read each question carefully; so they don't answer it in full. (The second biggest is making sweeping statements without backing them up with evidence.)

After the exam is over, it's tempting to think about all the answers you gave and if they were good enough. This will only stress you further. Try to forget about the last exam, and focus on the next one, instead.

Keep things in perspective. Be realistic about what can be achieved. We are all different, achieve at different levels, and have different qualities and skills. Exam success isn't a valuation of you as a whole person. Be positive about what makes you the individual you are. If you do end up doing badly, it won't be the end of the world. Facing up to the worst will enable you to look at how you might cope and what you could do next. There may well be another chance to take the exam, or an altogether different option may open up.

What are the signs of too much stress?



Feeling stressed is a natural response to such pressure. We all respond to pressure as if it were a physical threat. The body releases chemicals into the bloodstream that make you feel nervous and edgy. Muscles tense, ready for action and the heart beats faster to carry blood to the muscles and the brain. You breathe faster, sweat more and your mouth becomes dry. Hormones, such as adrenalin, cause these physical reactions. This automatic response is known as the 'flight or fight' reflex.

These are some of the early signs that you might be under too much stress:

- headaches
- sleeping badly
- loss of appetite
- being unusually bad tempered
- feeling tired all the time
- feeling sick

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You may also be feeling restless, finding it difficult either to relax or to concentrate. You may be drinking or smoking too much. Or you may be being very disorganised, with a sense that you and your life are in danger of getting out of control.

Panic can sometimes produce physical sensations, such as chest pains, muscle cramps, pins and needles, dizziness or fainting and stomach problems, which may worry and alarm you.

Sometimes, too much stress can be a trigger or fuel for other problems, including panic attacks, depression, drug abuse, eating distress or self-harming behaviour. It's important to talk to someone about these, and to get appropriate help, if necessary. (See 'Useful organisations', on p. 13, and 'Further reading', on p. 14.)



What should I do if things are getting on top of me?

Try to get an accurate picture of your situation. Ask someone who knows your work, and the standards required, for their opinion. You may be worrying unnecessarily and setting yourself much too high a standard.

Sort out your priorities

If you think there's too much work, and not enough time left to do it, write down everything you need to do, and sort it into order of priority. You can then work out what action you need to take for each task, and work your way through your list. You need to take into account which topics are the most important or compulsory, which you already know best, and which you have enough information on. If you have a tutor or mentor, he or she can advise you and help you organise your work realistically.

Non-academic problems

Often, exams aren't the only stressful event going on in people's lives. You may have ongoing personal or emotional problems (including lack of confidence) that are hampering you. Research reveals that up to a third of students have serious, non-academic problems. These include serious illness, bereavement, caring for another member of the family, holding down a job, coping with divorce or separation, drug and alcohol abuse, or other social problems, such as discrimination or housing problems.

Coping with such problems can require practical help, support and advice. It may be important to tell the educational institution the pressure you're under, so that this can be taken into account, if necessary. They can then help and advise you.

Talking treatments

Discussing your problems can be a great relief and can often throw up solutions you wouldn't come up with on your own. Bottling up your feelings may make them worse. If it's difficult to talk to friends, family or staff, a more structured form of talking may be the answer.

Sometimes, people under stress don't want to talk about their problems because they are afraid of being overwhelmed or losing control of their emotions. But talking to a counsellor or therapist, in confidence, can help you to contain those feelings. It can lead you to understand why you feel as you do, and find the means to do something about it. Some schools and colleges have their own counselling services (via the college welfare officer, for instance).

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You could also talk directly to your GP. Many surgeries now offer counselling on the premises. There are also other professional organisations that may be able to offer information, advice and low-cost schemes. (See 'Useful organisations', and 'Further reading'.)

Medication

Occasionally, a GP may prescribe antidepressants or minor tranquillisers as well as, or instead of, talking treatments. Both these types of drugs can have side effects and may cause withdrawal problems. They should only be prescribed, when absolutely necessary, to provide relief for a limited period. (See Mind's *Making sense* series under 'Further reading'.)



What can family and friends do to help?

A student who is under stress needs to know that they have the support of family and friends. It's important that others should be sensitive to the extra strain they may be under, and allow them the space and time to study. Regular meals, appropriate opportunities for relaxation, and emotional support are all going to help. So is offering plenty of positive feedback, which can demonstrate your confidence in their abilities.

Friends and family should keep distractions to a minimum and do as much as possible to ease any additional pressures. They may find it difficult not to let their own frustrations and anxieties about the outcome influence their responses, especially if it's meant putting limits on their own activities. It isn't for long.

If it does look as if the stress is getting too much for the person taking the exams, encouraging them to seek appropriate help could be vital. It's important to reassure them that this is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Useful organisations

Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: www.mind.org.uk or Mindinfoline on 0845 766 0163.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

tel. 0161 797 4484 web: www.babcp.com

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

tel. 01455 883 316 (for help with finding a therapist)

tel. 01455 883 300 (general enquiries) web: www.bacp.co.uk

The British Complementary Medicine Association (BCMA)

tel. 0845 345 5977 web: www.bcma.co.uk

Childline

helpline: 0800 1111 web: www.childline.org.uk

International Stress Management Association (ISMA)

tel. 01179 697 284 web: www.isma.org.uk

Useful websites

www.bbc.co.uk

www.open.ac.uk (The Open University)

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Further reading

- Conquering fear* D. Rowe (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with panic attacks* (Mind 2008) £1
- How to cope with sleep problems* (Mind 2008) £1
- How to cope with the stress of student life* (Mind 2006) £1
- How to increase your self-esteem* (Mind 2007) £1
- How to stop worrying* (Mind 2006) £1
- Making sense of antidepressants* (Mind 2008) £2.50
- Making sense of counselling* (Mind 2008) £2.50
- Making sense of sleeping pills and minor tranquillisers* (Mind 2008) £2.50
- The Mind guide to food and mood* (Mind 2008) £1
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2009) £1
- The Mind guide to massage* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to physical activity* (Mind 2008) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2009) £1
- Mind troubleshooters: panic attacks* (Mind 2009) 50p
- Mind troubleshooters: sleep problems* (Mind 2008) 50p
- Mind troubleshooters: stress* (Mind 2008) 50p
- Understanding addiction and dependency* (Mind 2007) £1
- Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2009) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2008) £1
- Understanding eating distress* (Mind 2007) £1
- Understanding self-harm* (Mind 2007) £1
- Understanding talking treatments* (Mind 2009) £1

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Mind's mission

- Our vision is of a society that promotes and protects good mental health for all, and that treats people with experience of mental distress fairly, positively, and with respect.
- The needs and experiences of people with mental distress drive our work and we make sure their voice is heard by those who influence change.
- Our independence gives us the freedom to stand up and speak out on the real issues that affect daily lives.
- We provide information and support, campaign to improve policy and attitudes and, in partnership with independent local Mind associations, develop local services.
- We do all this to make it possible for people who experience mental distress to live full lives, and play their full part in society.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, Mindinfo:line: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.00am to 5.00pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, Mindinfo:line has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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