

# LSE Student Counselling Service

## Exam Stress Management Tips

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This handout aims to give practical guidelines to handling the time leading up to examinations, as well as some tips about the exams themselves. Many of the suggestions are simple or 'obvious', yet at times when we are under pressure we can easily forget these basics. If anxiety or particular difficulties with study skills are a problem, you can also find information on anxiety, procrastination and perfectionism and other student problems at [www.studentcounselling.org](http://www.studentcounselling.org).

### 1. Preparing for exams

Start a revision programme in good time before the exams. Whilst you do not want to 'peak' too early, leaving revision too late is an excellent recipe for stress. Doing the work takes less effort than thinking about doing the work!

A certain amount of pressure is good for us and helps us perform well. But this is different from the popular game of "look how stressed I am" which is supposed to impress others with how hard one is working. Similarly, maintaining some balance in life and some perspective on the exams is different from that other popular game of "look how cool (and on top of my work) I am"!

### 2. Organising your space

Most people preparing for exams know they should organise their time - and we come to this in the next section - but fewer people know that it helps to organise their space too.

Think about where you work. See if you can separate out the places where you work from the places where you relax. Even if this all happens within one small room, create a 'working place' (around a desk/table?) which contains your papers, books, etc. and everything you need for your work.

Move all distractions out of your work area - pictures, music, TV - and put these into your 'relaxation areas'. Similarly, keep work out of the latter, so that when you are relaxing or sleeping your working is not intruding into this space.

Get used to working when you are in your work area, and 'switching off' when you get up from this place. Creating a physical separation of this kind will help you to do the same mentally.

### 3. Organising your time

People are different in how they react to revision plans. When these go wrong - as they often do - it is usually because they were planned too tightly and did not allow for sufficient flexibility: plans need plenty of blank space to allow for the unexpected.

Bearing in mind that plans need to be flexible, draw up a weekly timetable for yourself, firstly putting in everything you need to do: meals, sleep, lectures, supervisions, shopping, laundry etc. Then allocate time for revision and time for relaxing and enjoying yourself.

Be realistic about how much time you can aim to spend revising. As a guide, if you divide the week into 21 units (one per morning, afternoon and evening) you should aim to work in total for no more than 15 units per week, as it has been shown that ability to work effectively over a prolonged period decreases over this level. Therefore, you should have 6 units (e.g. 2 full days or 1 full day and 3 evenings) to do other things.

Allowing yourself time every week for relaxation, recreation, socialising and rest will help you feel less stressed and make it more likely that you will stick to your timetable. This is not wasting time; it helps you work more effectively.

Plan how you will use your time during your revision periods. You might want to list all the topics you want to revise, decide what order to learn them in, and how much time to spend on each. If you have other tasks to complete (e.g. reading, note-taking) you need to decide how much time to spend on these.

Be realistic about what you can achieve and stick to your deadlines. If there is too much work to do in the time available, use the following questions to help you prioritise:

- which are the most important topics?
- which subjects do you know best already, or are easiest to get 'up to scratch'?
- which topics are compulsory?
- for which subjects do you already have the most information/research/material?

Set specific goals for each revision period. Make a list of your goals; keep them realistic; and tick them off as you achieve them so you can see what you have done. Allow more time for subjects you find difficult. Check out what you do not understand.

Some people find it helpful to work in groups - perhaps arranging to meet a few friends to discuss particular topics. You can use this to test each other's memory or talk through aspects you have not understood.

#### 4. Motivation

Some people struggle with a lack of motivation. These simple strategies may help:

- plan rewards for yourself when you have achieved goals
- start with easier/more interesting subjects
- and establish a work routine - once started, a routine becomes easier to maintain
- remind yourself why you have chosen to do these exams - if you do not want the qualification you do not have to do them!

#### 5. Improving concentration

People vary in how long they can concentrate, so experiment and find a work pattern that suits you. Take regular, short breaks when you are working - for example, 10 minutes out of every hour you work - is likely to help you concentrate for longer.

If you are finding it very difficult to concentrate, start off by setting yourself a small, manageable goal. When you have achieved this, give yourself some reward. Keep repeating this goal setting and rewarding yourself. As you achieve your goals, gradually increase what you set out to do. In this way you can train yourself to concentrate more effectively. Here are some other ideas:

- Make notes as you read. Keep questions in your mind as you work. Speak out loud. Record yourself.
- Mix topics frequently. Mix easy and difficult topics, and interesting and dull topics.
- Try to work in a comfortable environment (not too cold, hot, noisy) and remove distractions if possible. Find out where you work best, e.g. in the library with a friend, or alone in your room - see the earlier section on 'organising your space'.

## 6. Active learning

Try to revise in an active way: do not just read notes through, but perhaps make a list of key points (writing reams of new notes is very time-consuming and is not an effective method of revising!). Test your memory as you go along and try to devise questions/answers concerning the information you are learning.

Some people find it helpful to use memory aids such as memorising a trigger word which is associated with a 'chunk' of information, making a trigger word out of the initial letters of key points or names, or finding a way of visualising information.

## 7. Practising

Spend some time going through past exam papers and practise answering questions within the allotted time. It doesn't matter if your attempts go wrong to start with - in fact, now is the time to make these mistakes! Such practice will give you a good idea of the format of the exam, the sorts of questions you could get, and will give you invaluable practice in planning and structuring answers under time pressure. It makes no sense to get your first 'practice' at this during the real examination!

Remember that you are not expected to produce an essay under examination conditions which looks like it took a week to carefully polish. So, be realistic: people tend not to be able to write 'perfect' essays during exams. Keep focusing your attention on the task in hand (i.e. answering the question) rather than being distracted by 'what if's'.

## 8. Sleeping better

- Don't work in or on your bed - keep bed for relaxation and sleep.
- 'Switch off' before going to bed: stop working at least an hour before you intend to sleep and spend the time doing something more relaxing e.g. listening to music, talking to a friend, having a bath, doing relaxation exercises, taking a stroll.
- If you stick to a regular bed time and getting up time it will be easier to maintain good sleeping patterns.
- Too much alcohol will prevent you from sleeping properly and will tend to make you tired the next day.
- Do not 'catastrophise' about not being able to sleep well i.e. stop telling yourself that you will not be able to do anything the next day if you cannot get to sleep. Even when you are not sleeping much, you will still be able to function well, think logically and do difficult mental tasks. It is mundane, vigilance-type tasks and mood (e.g. irritability) which are mainly affected

by lack of sleep. Most people manage to sustain sleep deficit over a few days (but not weeks!) before needing to 'catch up'.

#### 9. Panic the night before

You're relaxed during the revision period. Panic sets in the night before, or on the day of the exam, but you can cope once you're in the exam room.

- Learn in advance how to relax; then you will feel confident that if you panic, or your mind goes blank, you can regain control.
- Try using humour to beat the negative thoughts (I'm definitely going to fail, I haven't the foggiest what this is all about). Watch a good movie, read a comic or magazine, or remember your favourite jokes.
- Do your best to be well prepared (see previous section).
- However anxious you feel, try to avoid working too close to the exam, like the night before or in the morning before. Take a walk, have a bath, talk to someone, go for a swim. Do something relaxing!.
- Eat something, even if you feel sick. Bread, crackers or cereals are good tummy settlers.
- Make sure you know where and when the exam is. Try not to arrive at the exam hall too early, or too late. Seeing and talking to other anxious people will only raise your anxiety. Arriving late may also increase your anxiety!
- Have everything ready to take with you. Does your calculator need a fresh battery?
- Have some light reading to browse through while you are waiting to go into the exam room. Leave textbooks and notes at home!

#### 10. On the day of the exam

Looking after yourself - for example, getting enough rest and eating reasonably - is more important and effective than trying to do some last minute cramming. This is a day to have planned beforehand and to take things gently in order to conserve your energy for the examination(s).

Don't get up very early, as this will just make you more tired. Eat breakfast, but do not drink too much liquid! If you have spare time, do something you find relaxing - have a bath, go for a stroll - and keep away from those whose stress levels are contagious.

Rather than trying to learn any new material, perhaps just look over a few key points.

Arrive at the exam hall comfortably in time but not too early; the tension hanging over this short period of waiting just before the exam is highly contagious so you do well to minimise your exposure to it!

It is natural to feel some anxiety when you go into the examination room. Use the few minutes before you are allowed to begin to do some simple relaxation and breathing exercises; sit back and separate yourself mentally from those who are getting stressed.

Read the exam paper through slowly. When you have chosen your questions read them through twice to make sure you have understood and not misread the question. If you are allowed to do so, underline key words or phrases in the questions.

Answer the correct number of questions and divide your time equally between them - or according to the marking scheme if questions have different weighting. With essay questions, you will get more

marks overall by doing three (say) average answers, than by doing two brilliant ones but leaving the third question undone!

Some people write out essay plans to all the questions they need to answer at the beginning, so they can add things as they occur to them while working on other answers; others take each question in order. Which method works best for you, or is most appropriate to the format of your exams? After doing your plan, look back at the question and check you are answering the question asked - you do not get credit for a brilliant answer to a question you were not asked!

Take regular 'micro-breaks': whenever you pause at the end of writing a paragraph or stop to think for a moment, put your pen down and sit back, even if just for a moment.

#### 11. If you start to panic during an exam

You have just sat down in the exam hall and you feel your panic starting to develop.

- Make yourself comfortable. Have you been to the toilet? Check that you are not too hot or too cold. Adjust your clothing. Take a few deep breaths and sighs to reduce tension. Sit with your eyes closed for a little while. Then and only then, turn over the exam paper.
- Most people feel tense at this point. Whatever your state of preparation, your task now is to do your best.
- Take your time to read through all the questions and instructions carefully. Do it at least twice, to make sure that you get a firm grasp of the questions.
- Pick out the questions that relate well to your revision. Don't rush anything. Taking adequate time at this point will pay off handsomely. If you can't decide which questions to answer, pick out those you can answer and come back to the others later.
- Plan your answers. This is really important! Five minutes spent on a plan and rough notes will help your thoughts to flow.
- Do your best to ignore everyone else while you are at the planning state. Not easy, but it helps.
- Do you want to answer the "difficult" or "easy" question first? Doing an easier one can boost your confidence and relax you. Tackling a more difficult one while you are still alert may be best for you.
- Manage your time. Keep an eye on the time, so that you have enough time for your final answer. If you don't have enough time, make a skeleton answer in note form. At least you have put something down!
- Look after yourself. Do you need a snack? Are you getting enough fresh air? Feeling cramped?
- Avoid perfectionism. It's good to check spelling and punctuation, but no one is expecting posh prose!
- If you feel unwell, ask the invigilator if you may leave the room for a short while. Taking a few deep breaths of fresh air or a drink of water may be just what you need to calm down. In an examination situation it is not uncommon for one's mind to go blank for a moment, or to be confused by a question put in an unfamiliar way. At these times it is easy to begin to panic. This is likely to take the form of doom-laden thoughts as well as physical symptoms such as feeling your heart racing, feeling faint, hot or sweaty. Although these symptoms are disturbing, perhaps even frightening, they are in fact very common and are not at all dangerous.
- If you are having bad panic attacks: pause for a few moments: put your pen down and sit back; slow your breathing down a little. Let your body relax. Relaxation and breathing exercises will help to

reduce these symptoms. Reassure yourself that you are not going to collapse or lose control - these things never happen because of anxiety. Push upsetting thoughts to the back of your mind and re-focus your attention on relaxing, and then back on the exam itself. No matter how bad the anxiety feels, do not leave the exam as the anxiety level will fall within a short space of time. Panic is always time limited and the symptoms will reduce in a short while. When you are able, get back to work - remember that it is better to put something down rather than nothing.

## 12. After the examination

Before the day of the exam, it can be a good idea to decide what you are going to do immediately after the exam ends. Standing around and joining in with others' delight or dismay is almost always discouraging. If you have something already planned you can simply leave others to do the post-mortem, while you go and do something more enjoyable.

If you are exhausted, some food or a sleep may help; if you are still wound up, you could do something physical, such as go for a run or a swim. If you are going to meet up with someone, you could agree with them that you will only talk about the exam for 5 minutes - or even not at all.

The suggestions in this leaflet may be sufficient to remind you of some common-sense good practice. Help is also available through your Tutor, as well as the LSE Student Counselling Service, Mental Health and Wellbeing Advisor, Deans and GP's and nurses at the Medical Centre.