

Overcoming Exam Anxiety



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*"I've suffered a great many catastrophes in my life. Most never happened."
- Mark Twain*

Almost everyone feels nervous before an exam - it's normal.

- "Butterflies" in the stomach
- "Will I be able to answer the questions?"
- "Have I done enough preparation?"

Can some exam anxiety be helpful?

A certain amount of exam anxiety keeps us energized, motivated, alert, and focused. But too much anxiety can interfere with exam performance by blocking our recall or thinking abilities, by fostering negative frames of mind, or even by promoting panic reactions.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal reaction - **apprehension, tension, or uneasiness** - to any perceived threat or anticipation of danger. If we believe something important to us is being threatened, and we overestimate the threat, underestimate our ability to cope with it, or underestimate the resources we have available to cope with it, then we'll feel anxious.

Exam anxiety often involves apprehensions of performing at levels below those at which we'd like to perform, or even apprehensions of failure. This type of anxiety may be a product of our underestimating our abilities to perform or of the resources we have available to help us to perform to our desired levels on exams. Conversely, exam anxiety may be a natural reaction to insufficient exam preparation.

Exam anxiety can result in:

Physical Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Perspiration, sweaty palms, feeling too hot or cold- Headaches, upset stomach, nausea- Rapid heart beat, shallow/irregular breathing, dizziness- Muscle tightness
Emotional Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Feeling guilty, angry, depressed or unsure
Behavioural Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Procrastination and avoidance- Excessive study- Over/Under eating; Poor nutrition- Sleeping too much or too little- Fatigue or inability to relax- Alcohol or drug misuse
Cognitive Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Negative or defeating self-talk- Excessive worry- Difficulty with concentration or focus- Difficulty retrieving or selecting key terms or concepts- Difficulty organizing, integrating or expressing your thoughts- Going blank on exam questions- Remembering the correct answers after the exam is over

Some things that can increase exam anxiety are:

Insufficient Exam Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cramming the night before the exam - Inadequate time management - Inadequate study skills or study habits
Worrying About...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Past exam performance - Poor present performance - Negative consequences of poor performance - How others are doing on the exam compared to you - Exam anxiety indicators themselves
Stimulant Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Caffeine - Nicotine - Amphetamines - Cocaine

If the anxiety is severe, persistent, or generalized beyond exam situations, you may benefit from seeing a physician or counsellor.

Medical conditions like hyperthyroidism, hypothyroidism, vitamin B12 deficiency, or hypoglycaemia can increase anxiety levels if left untreated. As well, counsellors can work with you to reduce the levels of anxiety or stress that you experience. The Health, Counselling, and Career Centre at SFU has physicians and counsellors available for SFU students who want to reduce the levels of anxiety that they experience.

What are some things that can reduce exam anxiety?

There are a number of things you can do to help reduce exam anxiety and turn those uncomfortable and unhelpful thoughts, feelings, and behaviours around.

In the weeks before the exam:

Study Habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Study so you may recall material even when stressed - Study throughout the semester to avoid last minute cramming - Learn to concentrate on the material you are studying <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Generate questions from textbooks and lecture notes ▪ Focus on key words, concepts and examples - Make charts and outlines that organize information - Take short breaks while studying to refresh yourself - Learn and practice good time management habits - Avoid procrastination, too frequent daydreaming, and unproductive time-filler activities
Stress Reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Practice methods of relaxation and stress reduction - Listen to relaxing music
Healthy Living	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Practice good nutrition and maintain regular exercise - Create a balanced schedule that includes some breaks, exercise and social activity - Sleep well - Set realistic study goals - Identify, evaluate and replace unhealthy, inaccurate or irrational thoughts (REC exercise)

On the day of the exam:

Prepare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eat a moderate and healthy breakfast (and lunch) - Take it easy on caffeine and other stimulants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ You may already feel light headed or jittery on the day of the exam and don't need any extra stimulants - Arrive at the exam location early <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Choose a seat that is comfortable and away from distractions
Relax	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do something relaxing the hour before the exam <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Last minute cramming may cloud your course knowledge - Avoid classmates that could upset your composure by wanting to chat or go over last minute information - If anxiety increases while you wait for the exam to begin, use relaxation and visualization methods or distract yourself by thinking of your after-exam plans
Reflect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reflect on whether what you're experiencing could partly be excitement rather than anxiety (The physical indicators of excitement are almost identical to those of anxiety)

During the exam:

First Impression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Read the directions first, review the entire exam, then read the directions again - Think of the exam as an opportunity to show off what you know (which may be more than you first think)
Organize Yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organize your time efficiently - work on the easier portions of the exam first <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This can increase confidence and reduce anxiety - Pace yourself throughout the exam <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Check to see if you are rushing or getting behind
Tackling Exam Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Essay Questions: construct an outline to organize and avoid rambling, repetition, and missed information - Short-Answer Questions: answer only what is asked and keep it short and to the point - Multiple Choice Questions: read all alternatives then eliminate those that are incorrect <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Watch for qualifying words - "only", "always", "most"
Possible Fears	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulty with a question: show the material that you do know - Think you're unable to finish the exam: concentrate on those portions that you can answer well - No time to review exam: review your answers as you go and recheck answers only if you have time

If anxiety begins to interfere with exam performance:

Overcoming Anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Slow down and become intentional about your physical movements, this can increase your sense of self-mastery and control - Use relaxation and visualization methods (ie. controlled breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, visualizing peak performance) - Stretch, stand up or walk around to relax tight muscles
Calming Distractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on an inanimate, calming object (ie. Wall, floor, pen) - Perform a calming action (ie. Rubbing a stone) - Use a mantra (ie. Silently, slowly repeat a calming word/phrase) - Use affirmative self-talk (ie. Relax, concentrate, it's okay) - Create a mild, harmless pain that can override over other thoughts and impulses (ie. Pressing fingernails into palm) - Have a drink of water or a snack - Wear, touch or look at something with positive associations; this can trigger a calming response (ie. Photo, special stone)

After the exam:

Learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learn from the experience - Keep notes about what does and doesn't work for reducing exam anxiety - It helps to be strategic, intentional and creative in developing and applying an anxiety reduction plan
Reward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It's not helpful to punish yourself and mull over what didn't go well - Treat yourself well and give yourself a reward for your efforts
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review what worked well for you and increase your awareness of those assets and resources for the future - Review what didn't go as well so that you can develop new strategies - Continue to practice and develop relaxation and visualization methods

Some of the material above has been adapted from:

<http://ub-counseling.buffalo.edu/stresstest anxiety.html>

<http://www.potsdam.edu/coun/brochures/test.html>

<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/student/services/health/exam.html>

Relaxation Methods

The body and the mind are interconnected, as a result, becoming relaxed physically helps us to relax mentally, and becoming relaxed mentally helps us to relax physically.

The following physical and mental relaxation methods can help ease exam anxiety since it's very hard for the body or mind to carry on with the anxiety at the same time the body or mind is becoming relaxed.

Concentrate on Your Breathing

Anxiety can lead to shallow, fast, or irregular breathing. Likewise, shallow, quick, or irregular breathing can increase physical sensations of anxiety. Those breathing patterns can create an imbalance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the body and brain, heightening physical indicators often associated with anxiety and, in turn, increasing our cognitive interpretations that what we are experiencing is due to anxiety.

→ Controlled Breathing Strategies:

Practice this method of breathing for at least 4 minutes because that's roughly how long it takes to restore the optimal balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide.

- Breathe in slowly and deeply to a count of **4**, hold the breath for a count of **2**, and breathe out for a count of **8**.
- With one hand on your upper chest, and the other on your stomach; the hand on your stomach should move in and out as you breathe, the hand on your chest should remain stationary.
- Breathe either through your mouth or nose; whichever is more comfortable.
- Breathe gently, slowly, and deeply and avoid taking big gulps of air.
- Practice this method of controlled breathing a few times each day in situations in which you feel anxious

Relax Your Muscles

Tense muscles can be a result of anxiety as well as a cause of anxiety. Although most people carry muscle tension in different areas of their bodies, most people report increased levels of relaxation and decreased levels of physical tension and anxiety on completing the progressive muscle relaxation exercise.

→ Progressive Muscle Relaxation Strategies

- Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique where the body's major muscle groups are alternately tensed and relaxed
- The process can proceed from head to feet or feet to head
- Tense and relax the muscles in the forehead, eyes, jaw, neck, shoulders, upper back, biceps, forearms, hands, abdomen, groin, hips, buttocks, thighs, calves, and feet.
- Tense the first muscle group for **5** seconds and then relax for **10-15** seconds; repeat, and do the same for the next muscle group until all muscle groups have been tensed and relaxed

Relax Through Visualization

Visualization (or imagery) methods are techniques for learning to relax and reduce anxiety. Imagery involves actively visualizing scenes that are tranquil and relaxing for you.

→ Visualization Strategies

- The scenes you imagine can be scenes that may or may not exist. The important thing is that they are tranquil and relaxing for you
- The specific scene is less important than how the image makes you feel
- The more senses you incorporate in your image, the more relaxing the visualization is likely to be
- By imagining smells, sounds, tastes, and tactile sensations that go along with your image, you will increase your ability to relax
- ie. - If you imagine yourself walking along a tree-lined mountain path, notice the bird songs, the light through the trees, the fragrance and colour of the leaves, and the feel of the breeze on your skin.

Some of the material above has been adapted from Geenberger & Padesky's "Mind Over Mood"

Five Finger Relaxation Technique

Begin this relaxation method by closing your eyes and using the deep breathing method.

After a few deep breaths:

Step 1	- Touch your thumb to your first finger and think back to a time when your body felt a deep healthy fatigue (ie. After a long hike/bike ride) - Remember the feeling of your muscles relaxing and your heart beating slowly
Step 2	- Touch your thumb to your second finger and think back to a time when you had a big achievement in your life or when you had finished an important project - Feel the pride of accomplishing something important to you
Step 3	- Touch your thumb to your third finger and think back to the nicest compliment you have ever received. - Feel the warmth and happiness from the compliment
Step 4	- Touch your thumb to your fourth finger and go back to the most beautiful place you've been to or can imagine. - Allow the beauty to soak in. Feel safe and secure and let all the tension and stress go. Reflect and enjoy for a while.

Practicing this exercise everyday for a few weeks will set up an automatic relaxation process that you can activate whenever you begin to notice the stress or anxiety starting. Simply touch each finger to your thumb, or all four at the same time, and feel yourself relax. Do this several times each day to create brief "time-outs".

Some of the material above has been adapted from Davis et al.'s "The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook".

Visualizing Your Peak Exam Performance

When thinking of the upcoming exam, focus on your desired *performance* (i.e. your desired *process* during the exam) rather than on the *outcome* of the exam.

Fill in the following chart:

When you are working during the exam the way you would like to . . .

Visual	What will you and others see? 1. 2. 3.
Auditory	What will you and others hear? 1. 2. 3.
Affective	What emotions will you feel? 1. 2. 3.
Kinesthetic	What will you feel physically and where will you feel it? 1. 2. 3.

After you have finished the exercise:

- Find a way to relax: ie. Breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, or visualization
- Once relaxed, use your imagination to experience the various things you will see, hear, feel and sense that will let you know that you are performing the way you would like to during your exam
- Try to experience these things in detail and spend at least a minute on each. Do this twice a day and consider it as part of your exam preparation strategy.

(Adapted from the work of Dr. Lee Pulos)

"REC" Your Thoughts and Change Your Mood

Start by making a 6 column chart:

Title columns from left to right:

ie.

Event	Thought(s)	Feeling	Evaluation	Change	Feeling
↓ -past -present -future	↓ -words -images -memories	↓ -identify -rate	↓ -evaluate the thought	↓ -alternate -more balanced	↓ -rate again

The following explains how to use the chart as a means of changing your mood by Recording, Evaluating, and Changing your thinking.

- Feeling**
- The easiest place to start is with column 3
 - Try to identify the distressing emotion with **one** word
 - Rate the intensity of the feeling on a **0-100** scale
 - (0 = absence of the feeling; 100 = most intense feeling)
- Thought(s)**
- Try to identify the thought(s) that proceeded/accompanied the emotion
 - The thought could be particular words, images, memories, beliefs, convictions, rules, interpretations, or meanings
 - What went through your mind? What were you saying to yourself?
- Event**
- Were you remembering a past event, interpreting a current one, or reflecting on a future one?
 - Try to clarify the situational factors by asking yourself:

What happened?	Or	What do I think is going to happen?
Who was I with?	Or	Who do I think I will be with?
What was I doing?	Or	What do I think I will be doing?
When did it happen?	Or	When do I think it will happen?
Where was I?	Or	Where do I think I will be?
- Evaluation**
- When filling in the 4th column there are three effective ways to evaluate our thoughts
 - Weighing the cost
 - Weighing the evidence
 - Weighing the pattern

These different approaches will help you decide whether you need to modify your beliefs.

Find the one(s) that work for you:

a) **Weighing the Cost** - We can determine the cost by evaluating the positive and negative effects of our thinking.

List the Positive Effects	<p>Ask Yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What positive effects does this thought have on me and those close to me? • How does it help me? • How does it promote well-being? • What does it do for me? • What does it accomplish? • Does it protect me from something dangerous? • What evidence is there that it actually has these positive effects?
List the Negative Effects	<p>Ask Yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What negative effects does this thought have on me and those close to me? • How does it harm me? • How does it impede my well-being?
Determine the Costs	<p>Ask Yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do I feel about the price I am paying to think this way? • Do I want to continue to pay it? • How do I feel about the price others are paying when I think this way? • Do I want them to continue paying this price? • Do I want to modify my thinking so it is less costly and distressing?

At this point you might find yourself saying:

"I realize it's costing me and others a lot for me to embrace this belief, but it happens to be true!"

Okay then, you might want to go to the next section and weigh the evidence for its veracity.

b) **Weighing the Evidence** - Ask yourself the following questions:

- What evidence exists to support this belief?
- What evidence exists that would contradict this belief?
- Have I had any experiences that show that this belief is not completely true *all* the time?
- If my best friend knew I believed this, what would she or he say to me? What evidence might she or he point out that would suggest that this belief is not always 100% true?
- If I went to an expert to get an opinion on this matter, what would she/he say?

After asking these questions, you can further weigh the evidence for and against your belief by testing it out. This can be done through observation, conducting experiments, or doing some research (as in asking experts or surveying others).

Try an observational exercise, start by looking for one piece of evidence each day **that is contrary to** your belief. Try this for one week. In the second week look for two pieces of evidence each day. After this kind of observation ask yourself if your belief needs to be modified.

c) Weighing the Pattern - Is my thinking an example of unrealistic thinking that can cause people trouble?

Overgeneralization	- From one isolated event you make a general, universal rule (ie. "you failed once, you'll always fail")
Global Labelling	- You automatically use negative labels to describe yourself (ie. "I am such a loser")
Filtering	- You selectively pay attention to the negative and disregard the positive
Polarized Thinking	- You lump things into absolute, black and white categories, with no middle ground
Self-Blame	- You consistently blame yourself for things that may not really be your fault
Personalization	- You assume that everything has something to do with you, and you negatively compare yourself to others
Mind Reading	- You assume that others don't like you, are angry with you, don't care about you, etc. without real evidence that your assumptions are correct
Control Fallacies	- You either feel that you have total responsibility for everybody and everything, or feel that you have no control
Emotional Reasoning	- You assume that things are the way you feel about them
Disqualifying the Positive	- You reject positive experiences by insisting that they don't count for some reason, then maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences
Magnification or Minimization	- You exaggerate or discount the importance of things
Catastrophic Thinking	- You expect, even visualize disaster. You undergo "what if?" thoughts constantly
Shoulding	- You have a list of ironclad rules about how you and other people should act

(Some of this material is from "Self-Esteem" by McKay & Fanning and from "Feeling Good" by David Burns)

Change

- On the 5th column, you may find yourself wanting to modify your belief after your evaluation
- Look for alternate explanations of the event that are less costly, more accurate, and less troubling than the original interpretation
- Write your alternate belief on the chart
- Helpful questions:
 - Is there a different way of interpreting this situation that is less costly, more accurate, and less troubling?
 - If someone I cared about was in this situation, with these thoughts and this information, how would I suggest they view the situation?
 - If my best friend, or someone who really cares about me, knew I was thinking this thought, what would s/he say to me?

Once you come up with an alternate belief, think how you might test it out. Give it a test drive, try it out for several weeks and see how it feels. Also, ask yourself what behaviours would be consistent with this belief. Try one or two of these out as well.

Feeling

- On the last column, once you have written an alternate way of viewing the situation, rate the original feeling again
- How has that rating changed?

Use thought records as often as you can.

- With practice you won't require the formality of the chart; you'll find that you are able to go through the process just in your mind, wherever you happen to be.
- You'll become increasingly adept at seeing the connection between life's events, your thoughts, and your feelings.
- You'll be empowered to evaluate and alter your thinking, which will result in a more positive emotional existence.

Adapted from Greenberger & Padesky's "Mind Over Mood"

