



# LEARNING SUPPORT

Many students in the Blue Coat School feel very anxious about tests and examinations. The pressure to do well is not easy to cope with at times. TO support your son or daughter, we hope that this information will help you to support them.

The following information has been produced by:

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

## 1. Managing Exam Anxiety and Panic

Almost everyone feels nervous before an exam. That is natural.

Butterflies in the stomach and worrying thoughts - 'Will I be able to answer the questions?' 'Have I done enough revision?' - are indications of exam nerves that are probably familiar to all students. In fact, a certain amount of nervous tension probably helps us perform to the best of our ability, producing a rush of adrenaline that helps us to feel alert and focused.

However, too much anxiety can BLOCK thoughts, create a negative frame of mind, and lead to panic and potentially poor exam performance.

There are a number of things you can do to help manage exam anxiety and turn uncomfortable, panicky thoughts into more creative tension.

### Before the exam

- It's hard not to panic if you are feeling relaxed. Try to establish a pattern of revision that gives you time to relax, especially last thing at night. Experiment until you find the best way of relaxing to suit you - a long bath, exercise, listening to music, a relaxation download or CD.
- Relaxation and positive stress management techniques can be learned and acquired with practice (see *Stress Management: A Guide for Students*). Knowing how to relax is invaluable in the lead-up to exams, and on the day itself. If you think you are underperforming in exams due to exam anxiety or panic, do think ahead and seek help. • It helps to feel as well-prepared as possible. As well as thinking about the subjects you are revising, it can be useful to pay attention to practical aspects of the exam. Find out where it is scheduled to take place and how long it will take you to get there. It's a good idea to go and look at the room/building so that it feels more familiar. Make sure

you know the rules and regulations about what you can take into the exam room etc. • Put yourself into a positive frame of mind by imagining how you would LIKE things to go. Imagine yourself turning up for the exam feeling confident and relaxed try to picture it in as much detail as possible. Rather like rehearsing for a part in a play, this can replace negative, anxious thoughts with more positive ones.

- Don't work to the last minute on the night or morning before the exam. Last-minute revision may leave you feeling muddled and anxious.

## In the exam

Here are some tried and tested remedies to the 'I can't answer anything' feeling and other worrying thoughts about exams.

When you get into the exam room and sit down, the following approach can help settle your nerves:

- Take a deep breath in and a long breath out.
- Breathe in again and straighten your back - as if someone were pulling a lever between your shoulder blades.
- Look straight ahead at something inanimate (the wall, a picture, the clock. .. ) and focus your mind on the positive thought 'I CAN DO this exam' as you breathe out.
- Take another deep breath in and a long breath out. Then breathe normally. • You have 15 minutes to read the paper, so do so thoroughly. If you begin to feel panicky again, repeat the focusing exercise. Panicking will stop you reading carefully, so it is important to keep yourself focused and positive. Read the whole paper once, then read it again and mark the questions you think you can answer. Then read those questions carefully - make sure you understand what is required - and select the ones you are going to answer.
- Decide on the order in which you'll answer the questions. It is usually best to begin with the one you feel most confident about. Think about how you will plan your time, and stick to your plan.
- Plan out your answer for each question as you go. If you find that thoughts or ideas about other questions come into your head, jot them down on a separate piece of paper - don't spend time thinking about them now.
- If your concentration wanders or you begin to feel panicky, you could try the focusing exercise again, or use one of the following techniques to help you overcome anxious thoughts. If you are worried that you haven't got time to spare on this, remember that taking 5 or 10 minutes NOW may save you spending the rest of the exam in a state of panic.

# Anxiety management techniques

## Thought-stopping technique

When we become anxious we begin to have negative thoughts ('I can't answer anything', 'I'm going to panic' etc). If this is happening, halt the spiralling thoughts by mentally shouting 'STOP!'. Or picture a road STOP sign, or traffic lights on red. Once you have literally stopped the thoughts, you can continue planning, or practise a relaxation technique.

- Use a mantra  
Derived from meditation, a mantra is a word or phrase which you repeat to yourself. Saying something like 'calm' or 'relax' under your breath or in your head, over and over again, can help defuse anxiety.
- Focusing  
Looking out of the window, noticing the number of people with red hair, counting the number of desks in each row... all help to distract your attention from anxious thoughts and keep your mind busy. Mental games such as making words out of another word or title, using alphabetical lists etc are all good forms of distraction.
- Bridging objects  
It can help to carry or wear something with positive associations with another person or place. Touching this bridging object can be comforting in its own right, then allow yourself a few minutes to think about the person or situation which makes you feel good. This can have a really calming effect.
- Self-talk  
In exam anxiety or panic we often give ourselves negative messages, 'I can't do this' 'I'm going to fail' 'I'm useless'. Try to consciously replace these with positive, encouraging thoughts: 'This is just anxiety, it can't harm me', Relax, concentrate, it's going to be OK', 'I'm getting there, nearly over'.
- Creating mild pain  
Pain effectively overrides all other thoughts and impulses. Even very mild pain - such as lightly pressing your fingernails into your palm - can block feelings of anxiety. Some people find it helpful to place an elastic band around one wrist, and lightly twang it when they are becoming anxious.

*Whichever of the distraction techniques has worked for you, finish by going through the refocusing exercise (it only takes 30 seconds or so, but may have a profound effect on your ability to believe in yourself and the task in hand).*

*Different techniques work for different people, so it's worth experimenting to find the ones that are right for you. Developing techniques for managing panic can take time, so it pays to keep practising.*

## 2. Minimising Exam Stress

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 below).

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 organisations.)

### 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?'). Bear in mind that drinks containing caffeine, such as cola, tea and coffee, are stimulants, and may make you feel more agitated.

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".

"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."

## 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.

### 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. for a list of qualified practitioners (see Useful organisations).

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 British Complementary Medicine Association (BCMA).

## 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*.)

## 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, letting off steam and reducing tension. 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 above) 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.

# 3. Stress management

Stress is the physical and mental response of the body to demands made upon it. It is the result of our reaction to outside events, not necessarily the events themselves.

Not all stress is bad. We each function best and feel best at our own optimal level of physiological arousal. We need some stress to get everyday things done. Too little can lead to boredom and "rust out" - but too much can produce "burn out".

Adaptive stress helps us rise to life's challenges. Adrenaline, nor-adrenaline and glucose flow into our blood: we get a buzz of energy and feel alert, focused, and creative. Negative stress occurs when our ability to cope with life's demands crumbles. If we don't break down the stress chemicals (e.g. through physical activity) they stay in the blood, preventing us from relaxing. Eventually this results in a permanent state of stress. That initial buzz turns to worry, irritability or panic. Challenges become threats; we doubt our ability to do even simple things and problems appear insurmountable.

## What causes stress?

Different things cause stress in different people. Some of the things students commonly cite as causes of stress include: examinations, deadlines, returning to study, pressure of combining paid work and study, difficulty in organising work, poor time management, leaving assignments to the last minute, out of control debts, poor housing, overcrowding, noise, adjusting to life in a new environment or country, difficulties with personal relationships (e.g. splitting up), balancing the demands of a family with studying, parents or problems at home. Very often stress results from an accumulation of many different pressures which build up gradually without us noticing.

## How too much stress affects us

**Physically** The heart pumps faster, making the heart pound and blood pressure rise; some people experience palpitations. Muscle tension increases, leading to headaches, dizziness, jaw ache and even insomnia. The mouth goes dry, digestion slows causing "butterflies" in the stomach. Breathing is faster and less efficient which can lead to over breathing

(hyperventilation) and breathlessness. Changes in the flow of blood to the skin can cause sweating, blushing or clammy hands and feet.

**Mentally** A certain amount of stress can be mentally stimulating but too much can affect our thinking ability. Thoughts may become jumbled and confused. Thinking becomes focused on worrying. We may become preoccupied with problems. It becomes much harder to make decisions or find solutions to problems. Thinking negatively and fearing the worst increases worry and stress.

**Emotionally** People respond to stress in many different ways. Common emotional effects are irritability, impatience, anger, frustration, fear, anxiety, self-doubt, panic, despondency, feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, hopelessness, unhappiness, emotional withdrawal and depression. **Behaviourally:** Stress can change people's behaviour towards one another. We may become less sociable, less caring, more hostile and insensitive towards others. When stress is accompanied by anger we may become less tolerant, fly off the handle easily and provoke rows. Many people respond to stress by eating, drinking or smoking much more than is usual: some engage in risk taking behaviour. Students often complain that when they feel stressed they find it



hard to concentrate, feel tired all the time, perhaps start to miss lectures and deadlines and feel they can't cope.

## Managing stress

The key to success is to think positively; take control of your stress and anxiety by learning effective techniques to combat it. Relaxing bodily tension in order to reduce the physical sensations of stress is a good place to start. If your body is free of tension your mind tends to be relaxed. This helps you concentrate and study, take decisions and solve problems. When you are relaxed, you can view each task as a positive challenge, and use stress as a stimulus to help you to carry it out giving you a relaxing glow of achievement afterwards.

Looking after yourself. Be kind to yourself. Give yourself "me time" in which you can choose what you want to do: Rest; do nothing; try a relaxation technique, massage or yoga; have a long hot bath; spend time with friends; treat yourself to something special. Taking proper breaks and eating well do help to combat stress.

Confronting the problem. Try to stand back and look at the problem carefully. Break it down into manageable parts. Talk it through with someone else, brainstorm solutions, or get help if you need it. Try to manage your time effectively and learn to say "NO". Avoidance won't make the problem go away and can often make it worse. Leaving everything to the last minute is a major source of stress for students. Think about why you are finding it hard to get started: uncertainty about how to do the assignment, fear of being judged or failing? Starting a piece of work effectively reduces stress levels as it frees your mind, putting the thoughts of failure back into perspective. If you've had a row or a misunderstanding with someone, it rarely helps to avoid the issue. Talking it through with the other person or with someone outside the situation, often helps you express your feelings, regain a sense of proportion, and identify a way of resolving the differences.

Find some distractions. Sport and physical activity helps you to relax physically and also releases endorphins in the body which produce a real feeling of well-being. Walk, cycle, swim, join a gym or a sports team. Joining a club or society, maintaining an existing hobby or learning something new, talking to other people... can all help you to take a mental and physical break.

Express yourself. Talk about it, write about it, shout or moan about it: expressing your feelings can help to relieve stress. Acknowledging a problem to yourself and to others can be the first step in dealing with it. Sometimes having a good cry or bashing a pillow can release emotional pressure and calm your feelings of anxiety.

## 4. Tackling Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal response to danger or stress: it prepares us for coping with stress.

Anxiety is only a problem when it is out of proportion to a situation or goes on for too long.

Then our thoughts may become muddled and we may experience physical symptoms such as rapid breathing, racing heart, sweaty palms, tense muscles. Anxiety can lead to panic attacks. Learn how to breathe efficiently and practise it in order to prevent over breathing (too much oxygen in the blood). This causes a series of unpleasant physical symptoms i.e. tingling hands and face, muscle cramps and tremors, dizziness, breathing difficulties and feelings of fatigue. These sensations can be controlled by breathing slowly and smoothly through the nose, filling the lungs completely.

## Breathing Exercise

Place one hand on your chest and one on your stomach. As you breathe in through your nose allow your stomach to swell. This means that you are using the diaphragm to breathe in and allowing air right down into your lungs. Try to keep the movement in your upper chest to a minimum and keep the movement gentle. Slowly and evenly breathe out through your nose. Repeat and get a rhythm going . You are aiming to take 8-12 breaths a minute: breathing in and breathing out again counts as one breath.

Practise until it becomes a habit and switch to regular breathing when you next become anxious. Learn how to really relax and develop a skill which will enable you to reduce unnecessary physical tension whenever you need to. Information sheets and relaxation tapes are available from the Medical Centre. Learn how to combat worrying thoughts because worrying thoughts keep the anxiety going then the symptoms of anxiety maintain the worrying thoughts. Try simple distraction techniques such as physical exercise or refocusing your mind by concentrating hard on one thing to absorb all your attention.

## Panic Attacks

A panic attack is the body's natural "fight or flight" reaction to a sudden threat. If there is no real external threat, the adrenaline pumping around the body is experienced as a panic attack: the heart beats fast and hard, we may sweat, feel faint or nauseous. All these symptoms can be very frightening. If you experience a panic attack, it is important to remind yourself that none of these feelings can harm you - you are not going to have a heart attack, faint, or be sick. Although you may feel very strange, no-one else is likely to notice anything wrong. Try to deepen your breathing and relax. Distract yourself by thinking about something else or focusing on an item in the room. Block any panicky or worrying thoughts. As you manage the panic in this way, your brain and body begins to recognise that there is no real danger, the supply of adrenaline to the blood is cut off, and the symptoms will subside. Follow the breathing exercises above to help you manage your panic attack.

# 5. And finally...

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 path may open up.

[http://www.mind.org.uk/mental\\_health\\_az/7994\\_how\\_to\\_cope\\_with\\_exam\\_stress?gclid=CN3P6arYjbcCFdHMTAodQVYAMA](http://www.mind.org.uk/mental_health_az/7994_how_to_cope_with_exam_stress?gclid=CN3P6arYjbcCFdHMTAodQVYAMA)