

# Managing Exam Anxiety

## Before the exam day:

- Practice breathing, relaxation and focusing exercises
- Know when / where exam is – if possible visit the room so that it feels a little familiar
- Have everything you need to take with you prepared before the day
- Take some light reading e.g. magazine... for before the exam

## On the day of the exam:

- Rest & eat properly - it's much more important than cramming
- Getting up too early will make you tired
- Strong coffee, energy drinks and no food can lead to feeling light-headed and add to exam nerves.
- Eat breakfast even if you feel sick (bread/ crackers/ cereal help to settle the stomach);
- Last minute revision may make you feel muddled and anxious
  - don't learn new information - review key points or focus on other things
  - Leave text books & notes at home
- If time do something relaxing (bath, walk, somewhere green if possible)
- Arrive in good time (not too late / early)
- Avoid anxious others – it's contagious!
- Anxiety = normal; use spare minutes to use relaxation / breathing

## In the exam:

- Read exam paper through twice slowly and carefully,
- Underline key words in question if allowed;
- **Plan time**
  - 10 minutes at the beginning to read exam paper and pick questions
  - 10 minutes at the end to read through answers and make corrections or add details
  - Check the number of questions to answer and divide remaining time between questions; better to give three average essays than two brilliant ones with the third not done
  - Stick to your time plan
- **Choosing questions**
  - Mark the questions you think you can answer
  - Choose questions that fit best with topics revised
  - Decide what suits you - difficult or easy question first? Difficult first whilst still alert? Easy first to boost confidence and relax?
- **Write out essay plans**
  - Either write all plans first and then add things as you go along or focus on one essay at a time (which ever works best for you and the format of exam)
  - Check the plan answers the question
  - **Plan your answer**
    - Beginning: how you interpret the question; show you understand the key terms
    - Middle: key points from revision summary notes in response to the question, build each paragraph on general point; logical sequence
    - Conclusion: pull argument together, provide an explicit answer to the question
  - Once the plan is written, the answer is done; you just have to write it out calmly.
  - If you leave the answer unfinished the examiner can see from your plan that you meant to go on.
- **Look after yourself** – wear layers so you can adapt to the temperature; take a snack and remember to drink water. Take short breaks to stop and think for a moment, breathe and have a drink.

## Managing the symptoms of anxiety and panic:

- **Focusing attention:**

By focusing your attention on something other than your fear and worry you will interrupt the panic spiral. Try the exercises below to find the most helpful to you. **Practice often** in advance of the exams

- **Focusing on a thought** – e.g. count backwards from 100 in 2s/Carefully describe to yourself your environment or someone's appearance who is sitting near you/Focus all your attention on any sounds in your environment and search for the very quietest sound.
- **Focus on the body** – do a relaxation exercise e.g. clench all the muscles in your body, stay with the tension and hold it as long as possible without causing pain, then slowly release the tension. Relax and pay attention to how different it feels when your body lets go of the tension.
- **Focus on the breath** – e.g. sit comfortably; place one hand on your stomach; breathe slowly and evenly through the nose imagining the breath going down into the stomach and around your back filling the whole rib cage. Notice how your stomach lifts as you breathe in and falls as you breathe out. Say to yourself on the in-breath: "Peace" and on the out-breath: "Calm".
- **Focus on a current task** – pay minute detail to what you are doing and how your body feels doing it (walking, washing up, sitting reading...)
- **Focus on the positives** – what you do understand, what you have prepared, what you can do. Repeat to yourself: "I am calm, I can do this".

- **Challenging thoughts**

- **Remind yourself**
  - "this is just anxiety, it can't hurt me, panic is not dangerous, panic is always time limited, it is passing, I am calm".
  - Allow the symptoms to be there in the knowledge that they will pass
- **Use positive, encouraging self-statements** 'it will be fine' 'I can do this'
- **Thought stopping** – notice when you are distracted by negative thoughts (I can't do this, I'm going to panic...) and mentally shout 'stop' or picture a road stop sign or traffic lights on red. Focus attention back on the task at hand or practice a relaxation technique

### **If you start to panic in the exam**

If your mind goes blank / confused by a question / worry that you can't answer anything...

- Put your pen down, sip your water, sit back and take a moment to manage your anxiety using a technique listed above
- Try doodling for a moment and write any words that come to your mind – this will begin to release the relaxation response. After a minute or two, do a spider diagram and in the middle write: "What do I think in response to this question?" with your thoughts coming from it.
- **When you are able, get back to work** – better to write something than nothing.

### **If nothing seems to be working or you feel unwell:**

- ask the invigilator if you can leave the room briefly to get some fresh air / go to the toilet.
- Shake your hands and body vigorously, jump up and down/ Turn around on the spot breathing in and out slowly to the count of 3 / Slowly bend forward, let your knees be soft and unclenched, let your arms and head hang down, relax the muscles in your neck. Take some slow breaths through your nose and then for a few moments on the in-breath straighten your knees a little (don't tense them) and on the out-breath bend them a little.

### **After the exam:**

Plan what you will do afterwards; don't talk about the exam or at least restrict time talking about the exam. If you feel wound up, do some exercise, if you feel exhausted, eat and sleep.