

Exam and Performance Anxiety

When faced with something we perceive as a challenge, like doing an exam or giving a public performance, it is normal to experience some physical arousal such as an increase in blood pressure and heart rate, or ‘butterflies’ in the stomach. In fact, a certain amount of arousal or alertness can enhance our performance. However, if overly aroused, we start to feel ‘anxious’ and our performance can suffer. So here are quick tips to manage your anxiety and keep arousal at an optimal level to achieve your best.

Manage your thoughts or ‘head talk’

How you think or your ‘head talk’ has a direct impact on how you act and feel. If you think that an exam or giving a public performance of your skills is a danger or threat rather than a challenge or chance to demonstrate what you know and understand, your body can become more anxious than it needs to be. It is, therefore, important to **identify, challenge and replace** unhelpful thinking:

- Challenge and replace any negative thoughts such as ‘I will fail’, with positive, realistic ones like ‘There is no evidence that people think me a fool’ or ‘I have prepared well for this task’.
- Replace ‘black or white’, inflexible thoughts such as ‘I must get a HD’, with more flexible ones like ‘It’s okay to be nervous during my talk’ or ‘I am learning from this task no matter what the result’.
- Replace any gloom and doom, catastrophic thoughts such as ‘If I fail, my world will fall apart’ with positive ones like ‘I can seek help to ensure I do as well as I can’.

Manage your behaviour or ‘act calm’

Apart from thinking in a positive and realistic way, you can change your behaviour or ‘act calm’ by taking practical steps that will minimise your anxiety:

- If feeling anxious, let others know but don’t panic others or let them panic you; fit leisure and pleasure into your daily routine, as variety and breaks in the day help you learn.
- Avoid putting things off or staying in bed longer than you have to; eat moderately rather than over or under eat. Check that your diet includes essential vitamins – especially B and C and iron. Pace yourself rather than rush around.

In the case of exams:

- Prepare a revision timetable for the 6 weeks leading up to the exam (for each topic within each of your units). Spread your revision over the first 5 weeks, and leave the 6th to go over your work again.
- Summarise all the information for each topic within your units. Identify the gaps in your knowledge. Keep summarising your summaries until each one fits onto half to one side of an A4 page.
- Look at and practice old exam papers under exam conditions.
- Practice writing quickly and legibly in long hand in the lead up to any exam.
- Check the time, date, venue and materials needed for each exam.
- Arrive to your exam on time and avoid meeting people who might panic you.
- Read the whole exam paper to fully understand the question(s), and to organise how much time you need for each question. Attempt all questions, move on if stuck, and come back later.

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In the case of performances/presentations:

- Know what is expected of you.
- Look at your presentation as something you can offer an audience rather than as something to survive.
- Ensure your audience can follow your presentation by providing a simple and clear structure. This can be done by giving an overview, using visual cues, emphasising main or key points, and by speaking slowly.
- Use uncluttered handouts or 'PowerPoint' slides to summarise points and give visual information.
- Write your presentation in spoken language, and avoid jargon or complex sentences.
- Watch your body language, make eye contact, don't mumble, and keep to time.
- Get your audience involved by including open questions and discussion starters.
- Rehearse your presentation or performance out loud and in front of friends.
- Have notes on hand to remind you of what to cover.

Manage your physical responses for 'body ease'

Not only can you change how you think and act in order to stay calm, you can also put your body at ease by teaching it to relax. Firstly, it is important to recognise when your body is anxious. Notice if you have tightened muscles, trembling, shallow and/or rapid breathing, a furrowed brow or pursed lips, difficulty sleeping, skin complaints, headaches, increased blood pressure and pulse, stomach complaints, sweaty palms, and frequent urinating or diarrhoea.

- Release body tension with movement - exercise, stretch, dance, walk, swim.
- Use a simple 'centering' technique - relax your muscles by letting them go floppy (especially jaw, shoulders, arms and hands). Take 5 deep, slow, yet comfortable breaths, and tell yourself to be calm as you breathe out.
- In an exam, tighten your muscles by putting your hands under your seat, pull the bottom of the seat up towards you, hold for a few seconds, then let go, consciously releasing all muscle tension as you do.
- In between exam questions, use the 'centering' technique, stretch your hands and arms, and empty your mind of the last question so you can move onto the next.
- Try positive imagery rehearsal – spend time seeing yourself in the exam or giving a performance, and see yourself being calm and doing well. As you do, breathe slowly and deeply.

For further free support or information contact UNE Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS):

Phone: 02 6773 2897 for an appointment

Email: studentcounselling@une.edu.au or via AskUNE

<http://www.une.edu.au/current-students/support/student-support/counselling>

The support you need to succeed