

Tips for Dealing with Exam Anxiety

What is Exam Anxiety?

Exam anxiety is a fairly common phenomenon that involves feelings of tension or uneasiness that occur before, during, or after an exam. Many people experience feelings of anxiety around exams, and some find it helpful as it can be motivating and create the pressure that is needed to stay focused on studying. However, in some cases, anxiety can become so intense that it leads to disruptive symptoms that ultimately lead to a negative impact on one's performance. In these cases, it is important for students to attend to their symptoms and find a way to cope effectively, so that their schooling does not suffer any further.

What are the Symptoms?

Although anxiety can affect each person in different ways, there are several symptoms that are quite common. Some of these are emotional, which include feelings of fear, disappointment, anger, depression, or helplessness. Other symptoms are more behavioural, ranging from fidgeting or pacing to substance abuse or other self-destructive behaviours. There are also physiological symptoms, which include fast heartbeat, feelings of nausea, headaches, lightheadedness, sweating, and other disruptions in bodily functions. Finally, many people experience cognitive symptoms, such as negative thinking about oneself and racing thoughts.

Other symptoms include:

- memory blocks or "blinking out" on things that you have studied;
- fear of failing before the exam is even written;
- lower reading comprehension; and
- poor attention and inability to concentrate.

Some of the strategies for coping with exam anxiety are practical and relatively easy to implement, such as contacting a tutor to discuss course material, avoiding people who speak negatively, arriving early to the exam, and reading exam directions carefully. Also, make sure you are practicing good time management skills and managing your stress on a daily basis through exercise, good nutrition, and enjoyable activities. If you work on what you have control over, you can help minimize exam anxiety. Following are some specific tips for easing exam anxiety.

Exam Anxiety Tips

Tip 1: Be prepared early

The most common cause of exam anxiety is lack of preparation for the exam. Set up a study schedule at least three weeks before your exam. You may find that you actually need to start studying even earlier due to other commitments. Planning ahead also helps you to avoid cramming, which can be a major cause of exam anxiety.

Tip 2: Sleep well

Regular sleep is one of the best ways to control stress. Getting up and going to bed each day at the same times ensures that your body and brain are getting the rest they need for optimal functioning. Students who follow a regular sleeping pattern have been shown to perform 30% better than students who stay up late or get up early to study.

Tip 3: Same caffeine & sugar intake

Keep caffeine and sugar intake the same during exam time. Don't increase or decrease the amount of coffee, tea or cola that you normally drink, as your body and brain are accustomed to getting a certain amount. Keep things in your life as stable as possible, especially during exam time.

Tip 4: Learn relaxed breathing

When you display any symptoms of anxiety during studying or during the exam, use relaxed breathing to calm yourself. Take your attention away from the task and take a few slow breaths. Say to yourself, "calm and relaxed" as you exhale. Practice relaxed breathing before the exam.

Tip 5: Don't study the night before

Studying the night before an exam causes your anxiety level to increase. Unfortunately, it doesn't decrease when you go to sleep. Reduce anxiety by taking the evening off to relax — watch TV, see a movie, read a novel, etc.

Tip 6: Review main themes

If it causes you anxiety NOT to study the night before an exam, review the main themes of the course earlier in the day. Of course, that implies that you should have already studied well.

Tip 7: Have a plan before the exam

As part of your studying, think about how you will approach the exam, and what you will do when you run into trouble. Having a plan in place will assist you to worry less about failing, and help you to concentrate more on passing.

Tip 8: Aim to do your best

Often, students start thinking negatively when things aren't going well on an exam. This can lead to lower self-confidence and increased self-doubt. Recognize and turn off your negative internal dialogue. Focus on the task instead of on yourself. Do not try for perfection — aim to do your very best.

References

The Real Estate Division gratefully acknowledges the input of the University of Alberta for providing tips to reduce anxiety.

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