

Exam Anxiety

How to Deal with Exam Anxiety



Exams can be a significant source of stress for many students. Exam anxiety can affect performance and overall well-being. Understanding how to manage this anxiety is crucial for academic success and mental health. This guide provides strategies to help you cope with exam anxiety effectively.

Understanding Exam Anxiety

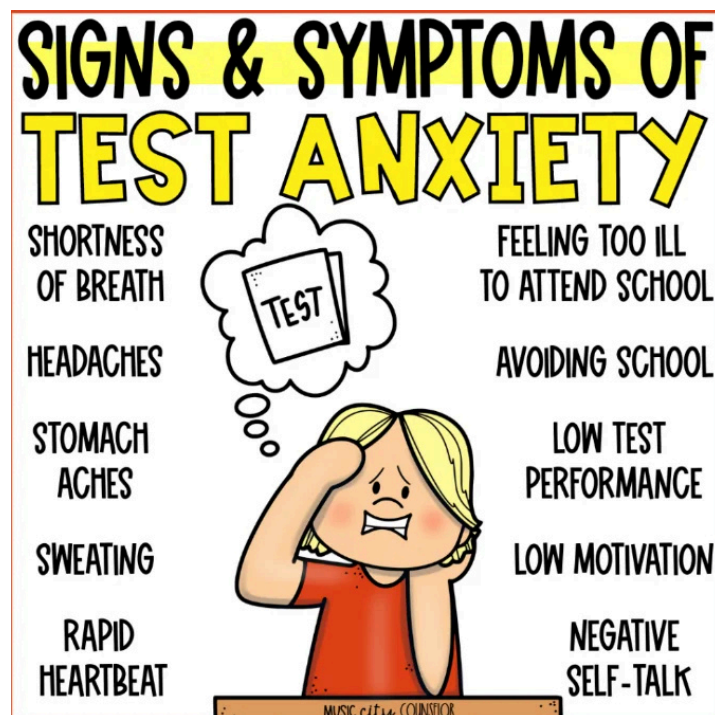
Exam anxiety is a common experience and is remarkably common, over [60% of students](#) report experiencing test anxiety at some point, and over 25% report experiencing it regularly. It is characterized by feelings of tension, nervousness, and worry before or during an exam. It can affect your ability to perform well, but understanding it is the first step towards managing it.



Exam anxiety is a type of performance anxiety characterised by excessive worry, fear, or nervousness before or during an exam. Symptoms may include:

- **Physical Symptoms:** Headaches, sweating, rapid heartbeat, and nausea.
- **Emotional Symptoms:** Feelings of fear, panic, or helplessness.
- **Cognitive Symptoms:** Difficulty concentrating, negative thoughts, and forgetfulness.

Recognising these symptoms is the first step towards managing them.



Can you Identify the source of the anxiety: In many cases students are internalizing anxiety from an outside source and making it their own. Sometimes parental anxiety can manifest as student anxiety. In cases such as these it can be helpful for parents to remove some of their attention from the testing process and outcomes by hovering less and giving the student more space. Taking external pressure off of the student can help decrease the student's anxiety.

Learn a little about your biology and neurochemistry: Students who understand how anxiety [functions](#) in the brain and in the body will have an edge on self-regulation. Students should

understand the amygdala's primary function, how it spots threats and activates [stress hormones](#) to rally the body's defenses. Students who understand how stress hormones affect the body and mind will be able to quickly identify the earliest signs of anxiety and begin to use interventions to regain their center.

Mel Robbins talks about reframing our thoughts -

'I'm excited to take this exam as it means I'll be able to study Law at Warwick University;

'I'm excited about Media this afternoon as I love the fact this is good practice and will mean I can apply for that BBC apprenticeship'

🌐 Mel Robbins: How Saying 'I'm Excited' 🧠 Can Change Your...



Effective Strategies to Manage Exam Anxiety

1. Preparation is Key

- **Create a Study Schedule:** Break your study material into manageable sections and allocate specific times for each. This will prevent last-minute cramming.
- **Practice with Past Papers:** Familiarize yourself with the exam format and types of questions by practicing past papers or sample tests.
- **Seek Clarification:** Don't hesitate to ask teachers or peers for help if you're confused about any topic.

2. Develop Healthy Study Habits

- **Study in Short Bursts:** Use techniques like the Pomodoro Technique, which involves studying for 25 minutes then taking a 5-minute break.
- **Stay Organised:** Keep your study area tidy and have all necessary materials on hand.
- **Use Active Study Methods:** Engage with the material through summarising, teaching others, or creating mind maps. (See the Study Skills help booklet on the website for more

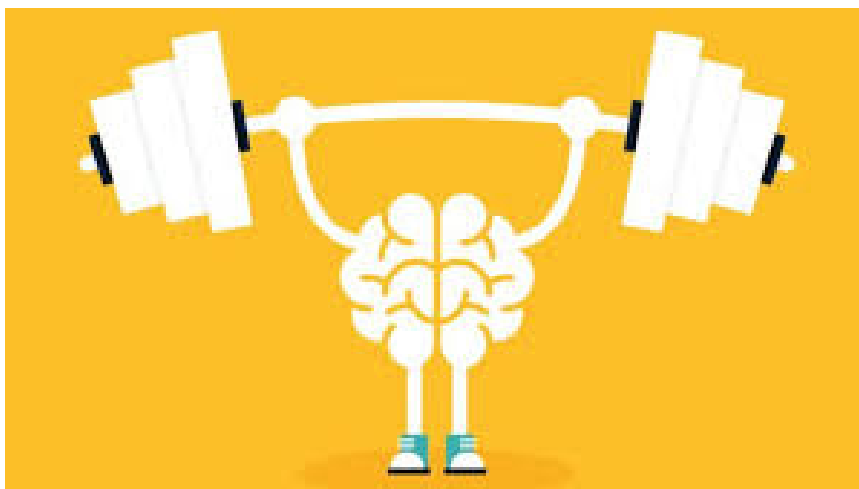
details and options).

3. Adopt Relaxation Techniques

- **Practice Deep Breathing:** Take slow, deep breaths to help calm your mind and body.
- **Engage in Mindfulness or Meditation:** Spend a few minutes focusing on your breath or a simple mantra to reduce stress.
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Tense and then slowly relax different muscle groups to relieve physical tension.

4. Maintain Physical Health

- **Get Adequate Sleep:** Aim for 7-9 hours of sleep per night to ensure your brain functions well. Sleep is key to reducing anxiety. Sleep helps to heal the brain, clean out toxins and waste products, process memories and regulate emotions. You may notice that you are edgier when you are sleep-deprived. If you focus on healthy sleep hygiene, this can help reduce anxiety. Be sure to get a restful night sleep a couple of nights preceding a test day.
- **Exercise Regularly:** Physical activity can boost mood and reduce stress. Exercise is a natural anxiety reliever. Research shows that as little as 30 minutes of exercise three to five times a week can provide significant anxiety relief. Exercise is protective in that it boosts endorphins and neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin, which may reduce symptoms of depression and elevate mood; it also suppresses the release of the stress hormone cortisol.



- **Eat a Balanced Diet:** Fuel your body with nutritious foods to enhance concentration and energy levels.
- **Get outside in nature:** Look up at the sky and breathe. Listen to the sounds around you and relax. Getting out into nature can help lower levels of anxiety. A quick walk in the woods can change activation patterns in the brain and lower rumination and focus on negative emotions. Another study found that teenagers exposed to water fountain sounds at the dentist's office experienced reductions in anxiety levels! Emotional regulation increases when we are more connected to nature.

5. Cultivate a Positive Mindset

- **Challenge Negative Thoughts:** Replace anxiety-provoking thoughts with positive affirmations. Flip your thoughts - human nature will always go to the negative - change your channel.



- **Visualize Success:** Imagine yourself completing the exam confidently and successfully. If you have had many experiences of anxiety during tests, it may help to visualize yourself taking a test without suffering the effects of anxiety. It's a practice known as cognitive rehearsal, or guided imagery taking a mental walk-through in advance of a performance event. Athletes do it all the time, imagining themselves performing at their peak level, in advance of the high-stakes event. Imagine yourself walking through the test, missing problems and staying calm and centered: Lay down a new template of you as a peak-tester, and make the images as vivid and sensorily rich as possible, so your mind believes them. Imagined practice can be as powerful as actual practice.
- **Set Realistic Goals:** Focus on doing your best rather than achieving perfection - all practice leads to progress.
- **Draw from other domains of competence:** You should adopt a strength-based approach, examining other areas of your life where you've been able to effectively regulate anxiety and stress. What works for you that you can borrow and bring to testing? How do you manage stress before a sporting event or performance? What techniques already work for you? Let's import those and put them to work.
- **Reframe the physical symptoms in a more positive light:** Researchers have found that telling yourself that physiological responses often associated with anxious reactions (e.g. sweaty palms, rapid heartbeat) are beneficial for thinking and reasoning can significantly improve performance on high stakes tests! Don't sweat the sweaty palms: a little boost in cortisol and norepinephrine can help you focus and do better when it counts.



- **Change your inner dialogue:** Anxiety is sustained by inner dialogue. Our self-messaging is fundamental. When your inner critic is serving up a plate of harsh self-criticisms, consider this as simply another mental activity for you to notice, rather than as something fundamental about you. You can label these critical thoughts “judging, judging” or “doubting, doubting.” Or you can directly counter and challenge the inner critic. “Hey, play nice.” Never let negative self-talk run unchecked.

The inner conversation you have with yourself is the most important one.

Make sure it's always healthy and positive one.

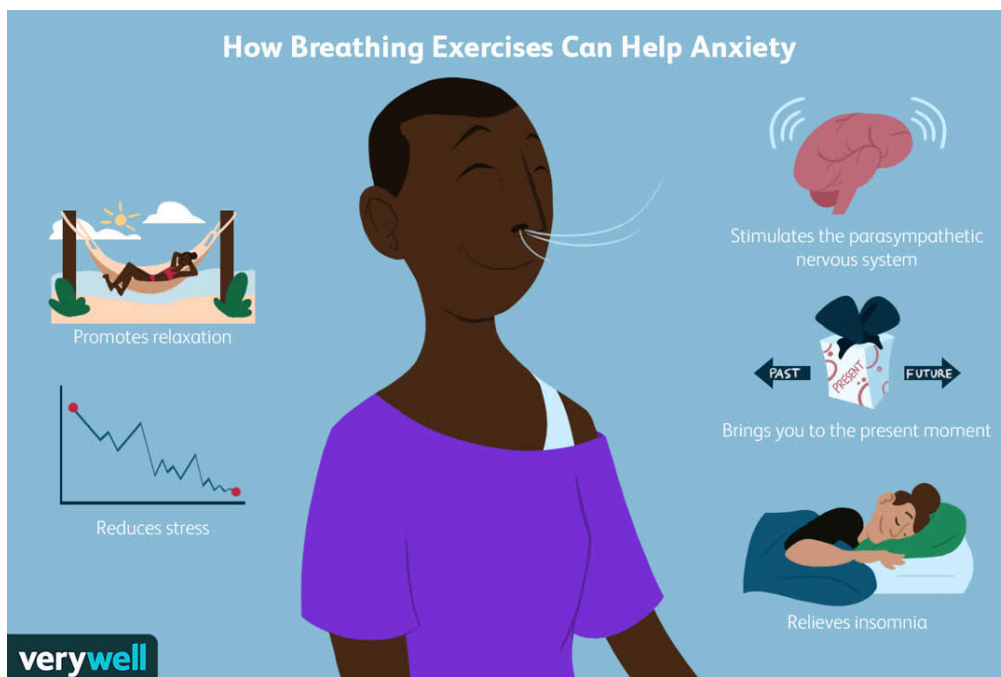
- **Correct maladaptive self-talk:** Be very careful about reinforcing negative self-beliefs. Don't run around telling people, "I'm bad at test taking." If you reinforce that message, something inside is listening, taking note. That thought can eventually become a thing, an obstacle, that will affect how hard you try when you encounter a challenging problem or test-section. Never make global, self-limiting statements to yourself or to others. Practice self-kindness and compassion with your self-talk.



- **Use “You-Statements” to bolster confidence:** Build yourself up on the inside by making supportive second-person “You” statements. Researcher have discovered the efficacy of “you” statements over “I” statements. Coach yourself: “Sam, you can do this, you’ve got this, you’ve studied hard for this.” Establishing the cognitive distance, the separation between your little ego and your supportive external voice. It makes a difference.
- **Externalize the Anxiety Monster:** If your critical/anxious voice is running wild on the inside, it may help to personify the negativity and give it a form, give it a name. “Oh, Worry Beast, there you are again. I knew you were going to show up here!” “Murray, you worry wart, of course you want to get into the action and show up during my ACT. But you need to leave for a while. We can talk later.” By naming the monster, you can help tame the monster. Creating some cognitive distance from the anxious thoughts allows you to achieve a measure of control over them.



- **Regulate your breathing:** Deep diaphragmatic breathing is a powerful anxiety-reducing technique because it activates the body's relaxation response. Breathing from the diaphragm, in a slow measured way, filling the stomach then the chest, stimulates the vagus nerve, which controls the parasympathetic (calming) nervous system. Stimulating the vagus nerve leads to a decrease in heart rate, blood pressure and other sympathetic responses. Practice breathing deeply and consciously, multiple times per day, and this technique will be available to you on test day.



- **Imagine you are breathing into your heart center:** There's a simple technique I use when I'm nervous, where I place my hand over my heart, and take deep breaths, focusing my energy on my heart. This is a technique I learned from an organization called [Heartmath](#). The act of combining slow breathing, a nurturing gesture, and redirecting my consciousness to my heart, helps restore a sense of calm. This is a simple technique to employ for a few breaths during a test.



6. Seek Support

- **Talk to Someone:** Share your feelings with friends, family, form tutor or subject teacher or a member of the Sixth Form Team who can provide support and guidance.
- **Join a Study Group:** Studying with others can provide motivation and reduce feelings of isolation.



Now What?

There are so many applications here, which apply to numerous areas of education and life. Self-regulation is essential. We will all face stressful situations in a great many contexts. The ability to self-regulate one's emotional state is a gift that keeps on giving. Students can learn to take self-regulation strategies from one area of life and see if they can apply them to other areas. Get creative. Find out what works. Practice and get better and better at bringing yourself back to calm, to optimise performance and happiness.



Tips for Exam Day

- **Arrive Early:** Give yourself plenty of time to settle in and relax before the exam starts.
- **Read Instructions Carefully:** Make sure you understand what is required before diving into the questions.
- **Manage Your Time:** Allocate time for each section and stick to it as closely as possible.
- **Stay Calm:** If you start to feel anxious during the exam, plant your feet firmly on the floor and take a few deep breaths to refocus and practice one of the tips above.

By implementing these strategies and practicing them, you can reduce exam anxiety and perform at your best. Remember, it's normal to feel some level of stress about exams, but with the right approach, you can manage these feelings effectively. Good luck!



Please note that all information in this guide is gathered from across the WWW and various organisations and is by no means the only information out there but you will find more information on Google. Please do your own research and use this document as a platform to get you started.