



# Exam Anxiety

## WHAT IS EXAM ANXIETY?

Highly anxious students can receive lower scores on exams than do less anxious students, even when ability and preparation are the same. These students sometimes report becoming overwhelmed by their feelings of tension and worry, and “freezing” or “going blank” when preparing for or writing an exam. They become less able to concentrate and are easily distracted from the exam process. If the anxiety you experience interferes with your academic performance it is a problem that should and can be addressed.

## HOW CAN I BETTER MANAGE EXAM ANXIETY?

- Develop strong study skills. Learn to organize your time, take effective notes, identify critical material from lectures and texts, and use strategies to improve your memory.
- Plan Accordingly. Determine due dates and the exam schedule for each course early in the term so that you can plan accordingly. For example, arrange to complete your term paper such that you have adequate time to study for the midterm.
- Form a study group. Plan study sessions with classmates to review class notes and to help one another generate potential exam questions and formulate answers.
- Over-prepare for your exams. Knowing the material very well will increase your confidence and help reduce anxiety. For this technique to be successful you need to organize your schedule so you have ample time to prepare for exams.
- Gather the supplies you will need for your exam. Don't wait until the last minute to look for your calculator or ruler. The less you have to worry about prior to the exam, the better.
- Practice visualizing yourself writing the exam, staying calm and doing well.
- Get a good night's rest before the exam. For most students, this is essential to good exam performance.
- Be on time. Rushing to an exam or arriving late will increase your anxiety. You may want to double-check the exam time and location in advance.
- Focus on the present. Try to avoid thinking about past or future exams.
- Be aware of your thinking. Are you telling yourself, “I'm going to fail” or “I always blank on exams” or do you say, “I can write this exam” and “I am going to stay calm”? Positive thinking can help you.
- Choose a seat in the exam room where you will be comfortable. For example, avoid sitting by the door if there will be noise in the hallway.
- Take the time to read exam questions carefully.

**P**reparing for and writing exams are among the most important and stressful aspects of University life.

A certain amount of test anxiety is normal. It can actually improve your academic performance by helping you to concentrate on the task at hand and to stay motivated and alert. However, some students experience severe anxiety that can be counterproductive.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF EXAM ANXIETY?

Many students describe experiencing some of the following symptoms of anxiety before and/or during an exam:

### Physical

- fatigue
- chest pain
- headaches
- upset stomach
- muscle tension
- rapid heart rate
- dizziness

### Behavioural

- disturbed sleep
- not attending class
- procrastination
- increased alcohol use
- increased caffeine use
- distractibility
- restlessness

### Emotional

- stressed
- worried
- irritable
- frustrated
- confused
- overwhelmed

Some students confuse the symptoms and consequences of exam anxiety with other learning and attention problems. If you do have difficulties with learning and/or attention, you may be more likely to experience anxiety during exam preparation and the writing of exams.

- Answer exam items you are sure of before responding to more difficult items. This builds confidence and gives you a sense of accomplishment.
- After finishing an exam double-check your answers.
- Try not to pay attention to what other students are doing. Once you have worked out time estimates for different sections of an exam, stick to your plan. Don't worry if other students finish before you.
- After writing an exam, evaluate your effort. Notice any areas of difficulty (e.g., responding to essay questions) and seek assistance (e.g., speak to your professor, check out the programs at the University Learning Centre).
- Give yourself credit. Acknowledge your successes and willingness to improve your skills.

## OTHER STRATEGIES TO MANAGE ANXIETY

- Take care of your physical health. Try to eat nutritious meals, reduce your caffeine intake, exercise moderately, get enough rest and stop smoking.
- Make pleasant activities an important part of your schedule. When you are busy and most anxious it is especially important to take time out.
- Maintain relationships with people who support your efforts at University.
- Learn proper breathing techniques. Slow, abdominal breathing promotes relaxation and helps reduce feelings of anxiety. This strategy is particularly helpful as you arrive for the exam and wait for it to begin.
- Seek assistance with drug and alcohol problems. These substances cannot cure the underlying cause of your anxiety and can seriously undermine your success at University.
- Remember that a certain amount of anxiety is normal. Focus on using the anxiety management strategies that work best for you.

## WHERE CAN I GET HELP?

Student Counselling Services	(966-4920)
Student Health Services	(966-5768)