

EXAM SURVIVAL GUIDE

Staying In Control

Increased levels of stress and anxiety can be about fear of the unknown, we can create fantasies in our head about how a situation might develop and reach all sorts of irrational conclusions. In all cases emotions heighten and overwhelm rational thinking, when feeling anxious and panicked individuals 'forget' what they know to be true about themselves – that they are competent, effective individuals who have the capacity to manage stressful situations. With that in mind one tactic you might employ to reduce high levels of stress and anxiety is to write yourself a list of factual evidence that confirms your ability to cope.

Pick a time when you are feeling calm and in control and create your list, this will be completely individual but below are a few ideas on the sort of things which might appear on it:

- I have taken exams before and achieved good results
- I attend a Grammar School so therefore am above average intelligence and more than capable of achieving good results.
- An exam is a test of knowledge, I can retain and interpret information and am therefore full of knowledge.
- I have revised (well/adequately/thoroughly) for this subject.
- I made the decision not to revise for this subject as thoroughly as others as I am not so concerned about the result.
- Others will have expectations of me but in the future I want to look back and feel that my own expectations were realistic.
- I cannot be good at everything – no-one is.
- My parents/extended family/friends/teachers have confidence in me.
- Some anxiety is a positive thing, it will help me perform.
- Feeling anxious prior to taking an exam is **completely normal**.
- These feelings will pass, I will not feel as bad as this for long.
- I have felt like this in the past, got through it and completely recovered.

Revision

You have probably made yourself a really effective revision timetable and as you are the expert on yourself you will hopefully have tailored it to your own needs, However a few hints and tips are offered here which you can choose to ignore if you wish. Please excuse me if I am telling you things that you already know.

- Be honest with yourself about your revision, don't pretend to yourself that you have done more or less than you actually have.
- There is only one person in control of how much and how you revise and that is you.
- When do you feel at your best? Is it possible to revise at that time of day, if not how can you look after yourself so you feel in a calm state ready to work?
- Revise in blocks of time then reward yourself in some way, whatever works for you, maybe using a 15 minute break to exercise, have something to eat, listen to some music, **15 minutes** gaming – whatever will relax you, reward you and enable you to go back to revising feeling refreshed.
- For some being organised causes a problem, one method to address this could be that you decide how many subjects you would like to revise at one sitting, organise text books etc in subject piles, let's imagine there are four piles and arrange them around a table, each pile in front of a separate chair. Sit down on one chair in front of a subject pile and revise for 45 mins – 1 hour, then have a 15 minute break, move to the next subject pile, revise for 45mins – 1 hour, then have a 15 minute break and so on until you have covered all your subjects.
- When revising by whatever method start with your weakest subject first, it is always tempting to do more revision on a subject you like and are better at, Don't do it!!
- Never believe how much or how little revision your peers have said they have done, it's probably not entirely accurate and you'll end up feeling worse if you believe them.
- Put away your phone, ipad or any other electronic devices whilst you're revising, they will distract you and limit your concentration. Don't listen to music with lyrics again it will distract you.
- **Concentrate on you!!!!**

For Parents

No doubt your parents or carers in most cases will be very keen to monitor and 'police' your revision, whilst recognising that it is good to have their support you need to know that you are in control of it and not them. If your parents are anxious about your revision and the exams themselves they could project that anxiety on to you and this will not be helpful. With this in mind here are a few ideas that can be passed on to parents and carers around them managing exam stress:

- Try not to impose your own ideas, hopes and fears on the young person.
- To support is great, to interfere can be counter productive.
- Ask the young person if they would like some help/support, if they say yes ask how they would like you to do that, if they say no, respect that but do keep checking.
- Recognise that the young person will be feeling anxious and stressed in varying degrees even though they may not admit it.
- Be aware that the whole system is under pressure – things have changed a lot since you were at school. It's all about results and teachers are under extreme pressure too which will undoubtedly influence the amount of pressure they put students under.
- When a young person is overwhelmed with anxiety it's very easy for them to lose perspective, try to help them keep it in proportion.
- Identify and concentrate on positives.
- Encourage and support.
- Communicate and connect.
- Stay calm at all costs
- Keep an eye open for disrupted sleep patterns, change in eating habits, low mood in the young person. These *can* be warning signs that they are becoming overwhelmed by emotions.
- Make sure that they are taking breaks from revision and rewarding themselves in some way.

Run Up To The Exam

This is the point when panic can really set in, the exam is only hours away and suddenly you feel as though you know nothing! This is when your emotional response impacts on your cognitions and you're prone to irrational thinking, at this point get out the list of evidence you have created of things that you know to be factual, hopefully it will ground you a bit and reduce any sense of panic and lower anxiety.

Tempting though it is to stay up all night before an exam(s) and revise, be sensible, a reasonable night's sleep will serve you well and help you feel more able to cope with stress tomorrow.

Let's say you have revised for most of the day/evening prior to the exam, make sure you stop at a reasonable time and give yourself a reward before you go to bed. If that reward happens to be an hour on the Xbox try and schedule in some down time before you go to bed so you can relax. Maybe it might be a good time to try one of the relaxation exercises you are now aware of.

Tempting though it is, it probably isn't a good idea to be talking to all your friends on social media at this point. Panic, stress and anxiety can be infectious and if one person is feeling this way it's all too easy to get swept away by those feelings yourself.

If you can't sleep or wake up in the middle of the night paralysed by fear, don't lie there ruminating on negative thoughts, get up make a drink, read a magazine for 10 minutes, listen to some music for a short while, anything to distract you, then go back to bed and try again to sleep. Again it might be a good time to use a relaxation technique.

In the morning give yourself enough time to get yourself organised without having to rush too much, try and eat some breakfast if you can. If you can't take a breakfast bar or some fruit to school with you so if you do get peckish before the exam you have something. Try and drink plenty of water and take some into school with you so you have water to drink in the exam.

When you're in the exam you may feel panicked when you turn the exam paper over having persuaded yourself that you won't be able to answer anything, take a moment and do some deep breathing to calm yourself – no-one will notice they will be too busy feeling panicky themselves!

This exam will occupy you for a couple of hours of your life, but at the moment it feels all encompassing. It is important, there's no doubt about that, but just remember that in all likelihood you will look back and think, 'I don't know why I got myself in such a state about it'. It is what happens in life, we stress, we feel anxious, we perform, we get through it and mostly we get the results we deserve. To a large degree you can control your own destiny!

Stay Calm...

Here are some relaxation exercises, some more complicated than others - in moments of increased stress and anxiety just practice the deep breathing; it's very effective and when you're either standing or seated no-one will notice what you are doing, particularly if they are all feeling anxious too. You may initially feel a little resistant about trying these out, but maybe give them a go in the privacy of your own room and consider how helpful they are to you.

Relaxation Exercise 1

With its focus on full, cleansing breaths, deep breathing is a simple, yet powerful, relaxation technique. It's easy to learn, can be practiced almost anywhere, and provides a quick way to get your stress levels in check.

Practicing deep breathing meditation

The key to deep breathing is to breathe deeply from the abdomen, getting as much fresh air as possible in your lungs. When you take deep breaths from the abdomen, rather than shallow breaths from your upper chest, you inhale more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and anxious you feel.

- Sit comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- Breathe in through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should move very little.
- Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should move very little.
- Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls. Count slowly as you exhale.

If you find it difficult breathing from your abdomen while sitting up, try lying on the floor. Put a small book on your stomach, and try to breathe so that the book rises as you inhale and falls as you exhale.

Relaxation Exercise 2

Progressive muscle relaxation involves a two-step process in which you systematically tense and relax different muscle groups in the body.

With regular practice, progressive muscle relaxation gives you an intimate familiarity with what tension—as well as complete relaxation—feels like in different parts of the body. This awareness helps you spot and counteract the first signs of the muscular tension that accompanies stress. And as your body relaxes, so will your mind. You can combine deep breathing with progressive muscle relaxation for an additional level of stress relief.

Practicing progressive muscle relaxation

Most progressive muscle relaxation practitioners start at the feet and work their way up to the face. For a sequence of muscle groups to follow, see the box below.

- Loosen your clothing, take off your shoes, and get comfortable.
- Take a few minutes to relax, breathing in and out in slow, deep breaths.
- When you're relaxed and ready to start, shift your attention to your right foot. Take a moment to focus on the way it feels.
- Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of 10.
- Relax your right foot. Focus on the tension flowing away and the way your foot feels as it becomes limp and loose.
- Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
- When you're ready, shift your attention to your left foot. Follow the same sequence of muscle tension and release.
- Move slowly up through your body in sequence; right calf, left calf, right thigh, left thigh, hips and buttocks, stomach, chest, back, right arm, right hand and fingers, left arm, left hand and fingers, shoulders and neck, face, contracting and relaxing the muscle groups as you go.
- It may take some practice at first, but try not to tense muscles other than those intended.

Relaxation Exercise 3

A body scan is similar to progressive muscle relaxation except, instead of tensing and relaxing muscles, you simply focus on the sensations in each part of your body.

Practicing body scan meditation

- Lie on your back, legs uncrossed, arms relaxed at your sides, eyes open or closed. Focus on your breathing, allowing your stomach to rise as you inhale and fall as you exhale. Breathe deeply for about two minutes, until you start to feel comfortable and relaxed.
- Turn your focus to the toes of your right foot. Notice any sensations you feel while continuing to also focus on your breathing. Imagine each deep breath flowing to your toes. Remain focused on this area for one to two minutes.
- Move your focus to the sole of your right foot. Tune in to any sensations you feel in that part of your body and imagine each breath flowing from the sole of your foot. After one or two minutes, move your focus to your right ankle and repeat. Move to your calf, knee, thigh, hip, and then repeat the sequence for your left leg. From there, move up the torso, through the lower back and abdomen, the upper back and chest, and the shoulders. Pay close attention to any area of the body that causes you pain or discomfort.
- Move your focus to the fingers on your right hand and then move up to the wrist, forearm, elbow, upper arm, and shoulder. Repeat for your left arm. Then move through the neck and throat, and finally all the regions of your face, the back of the head, and the top of the head. Pay close attention to your jaw, chin, lips, tongue, nose, cheeks, eyes, forehead, temples and scalp. When you reach the very top of

your head, let your breath reach out beyond your body and imagine yourself hovering above yourself.

- After completing the body scan, relax for a while in silence and stillness, noting how your body feels. Then open your eyes slowly. Take a moment to stretch, if necessary.

Relaxation Exercise 4

- **Mindfulness** is the ability to remain aware of how you're feeling right now, your "moment-to-moment" experience—both internal and external. Thinking about the past—blaming and judging yourself—or worrying about the future can often lead to a degree of stress that is overwhelming. But by staying calm and focused in the present moment, you can bring your nervous system back into balance. Mindfulness can be applied to activities such as walking, exercising, eating, or meditation.
- This may sound simple but it's an incredibly difficult technique to master, your mind will automatically wander and it takes great effort and self discipline to remain in the moment. Give it a try and keep practising!

Liz Headley

School Counsellor

Remember – a bit of stress is completely normal and to be expected. If this gets out of hand, or if you just need someone to talk to about the pressure of exams, come and have a chat with the pastoral team at any time.