

Examinations

- Control your fear of examinations and learn how to cope with exams and the expectations

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Preface

Fear of examinations can manifest itself in various ways both mentally and physically and may be triggered off for various reasons. It either appears in certain situations, or arises suddenly, when you least expect it, without really following a regular pattern. But once the anxiety has a firm grip on you, it may very well be that it intensifies along the way.

No two students experience exam nerves the same way, just as the anxiety - depending on the student - may influence the actual exam performance differently. But no matter how hard it hits, most students experience exam nerves as a wearing and time-consuming condition with a perceptibly exhausting impact.

Unfortunately, there is no miracle cure, no magic spell to fight the anxiety. But there are methods, however, that can help you to control it. In most cases, it is a matter of learning new ways to handle the examination situation as well as your own expectations. This is often a process of hard work, but ultimately most students regain their confidence and realize that it has been worth the effort.

At the Student Counselling Service we have many years of experience helping students with tools and methods of how to control their anxiety; to have a life in which *you* are in control of your exam nerves, and not the other way around.

This pamphlet provides you with pieces of good advice and a number of exercises to help you ease the nervousness. Visit our website at www.srg.dk where you will find further information on our counselling programmes.

You are always more than welcome to get in touch, to have a talk about your situation and how we may be of assistance. You will find the contact information on the various counselling offices at the back of this pamphlet.

Director of the Student Counselling Service

Else-Marie Stilling

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Fear of Examinations – When and How?

At some point during their university years most students experience pre-exam nerves. But having the jitters may in fact work for and not against you, because the emotional intensity of the experience sharpens your attention and compels you to make an extra effort and perform your best.

Some students, however, suffer from far more severe anxiety problems related to exam performances, and often to such an extent that it develops into a condition of stress followed by low self-confidence and self-esteem. It is important to remember that quite often the anxiety is a sign that it is the way you handle a situation or a personal relation that needs to be changed. The anxiety communicates a message to you; it is not merely a psychological condition.

Be open minded and break the pattern

The challenge is to understand what the anxiety is all about the moment it shows. It is perfectly natural to feel anxious, but it is absolutely crucial that you are open-minded and embrace the signals which the anxiety communicates. Here is your chance to change.

If you are willing to rethink the way you handle exam situations and your personal relations, you automatically let yourself take an active part in the situation and influence it in a positive way.

Perhaps you are stuck to the belief that ‘something is the matter with *you*’, but if so, you are most likely to never be rid of the anxiety, because you keep yourself in a deadlock. If, on the other hand, you are willing to rethink the way you generally handle exam situations and personal relations, you automatically let yourself take an active part in the situation and influence it in a positive way. Therefore, when you feel the exam nerves crop up, the challenge is to change your attitude and ask yourself how the anxiety can be of use in a constructive way.

The road to change

At the Student Counselling Service we meet a great many students who ask for advice or certain techniques to fight their exam anxiety. Sometimes little tricks may work wonders, whereas in other cases it takes a little more than just that. Many students hope for a miracle cure, but sadly there is no such magic spell. There are, however, a number of methods that in the short or long term help most students to fight the anxiety.



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Usually, the students who come at the Student Counselling Service have spent a long time searching for the cause of their problems, and quite often they have already tried to solve them on their own. But sometimes you need someone else to help you to clarify and define the cause and the remedy for the problem. It can also be that you need help to realize how your thoughts and manner of behaviour can influence the degree of your anxiety.

Many students hope for a miracle cure, but sadly there is no such magic spell. There are, however, a number of methods which in most cases help the students to fight the anxiety.

Working with your exam nerves is a process of looking upon yourself anew in a more nuanced way; to change your attitude towards yourself and your problem. This may very well be a demanding and tiring, yet quite rewarding process. Perhaps you are not even aware of which aspects of your behaviour you need to change, and you feel that no matter how hard you try you cannot solve the problem, or that your efforts come at too great a cost.

Anxiety – Some Definitions

Anxiety is a general term for conditions of nervousness, tension, and worry. It may be related to something concrete or indefinable, and it is often

accompanied by rather unrealistic conceptions that catastrophe is lurking around the corner. The anxiety affects how we feel and behave, and sometimes to such an extent that it manifests itself socially, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Most people who have felt anxious will recognize the uneasy feelings of discomfort.

Everyone has at some point in their life experienced anxiety. Often, the anxiety actually helps us to handle critical or dangerous situations, because it sharpens our senses and makes us act constructively in critical situations.

For example, it is the anxiety that makes you step back if you come too close to the edge of a cliff, or when you instinctively try to cushion a fall. It is the anxiety which makes you act promptly: if you had to stop and think about it, it would surely end in disaster. So when we find ourselves in frightening and unpleasant situations, the anxiety may in fact work *for* and not against us.

What scares you is quite often not the exam situation itself, but the importance attached to it.

The anxiety often appears most inconveniently in situations where there is no real life-threatening danger, as in for instance exam performances. In

fact, the anxiety may be felt so powerfully that it actually prevents you from thinking clearly. Perhaps it hinders your studying, hampers your concentration, or causes a mental block. What scares you is quite often not the exam situation itself, but the importance you ascribe to it: that it is a matter of life or death, all or nothing.

The Cause of Exam Nerves

There is no clear-cut explanation why some people find it tremendously difficult taking an examination, while others succeed with effortless ease. It is strictly an individual matter, just as the degree of how anxious you are varies from each person. Some students develop exam nerves because of one or several uncomfortable encounters, whereas others find it sneaking up on them without reference to previous experiences. Some students have always been accompanied by exam nerves as far back as they can remember, while others do not have the unpleasant encounter until late in their course of education. What is more, some students also deal with anxiety problems in other aspects of life, and some are only acquainted with it in relation to exam performances.

Fear of examinations is not a feature of a certain type of personality, but there are general characteristics which may provoke and even strengthen the anxiety. Be aware, for instance, if you have (too) high expectations, if you feel uncomfortable with being in the centre of things, if you worry too much about an exam, or if you are determined that you *must* perform one hundred per cent every time.

Too ambitious?

At the Student Counselling Service we meet a lot of very ambitious students. There is nothing wrong with being ambitious, because it keeps you going and propels you to take active participation in the things you engage in.

The problem is when your ambitions take control and leave little space for shortcomings and mistakes. If you have difficulty dealing with the inevitable ups and downs of studying, you tend to give yourself a hard time, allow yourself to panic and misinterpret your shortcomings and mistakes as a proof of your own insufficiency and to give in for the pressure. Ultimately, you end up looking upon yourself with low self-esteem, believing that your shortcomings are a sign that you are not well prepared, that you are not



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good enough. If you recognise these thoughts, it might be a good idea to change your attitude and accept that 'to err is human'.

Do not worry about your difficulties in mathematics; I can assure you that mine are still greater (Albert Einstein)

Adjustment required

When your ambitions exceed your abilities, it may very well strengthen your fear of examinations. And you should consider lowering your expectations to a more realistic level, so that they correspond to the demands required.

If you expect more of yourself than you can actually deliver, the feeling of never being able to perform adequately may be strengthened. Some students struggle with meeting their own expectations, where others on the contrary keep adding new ambitions to their list, as soon as they have accomplished the first. In this way, the satisfaction of what you actually accomplish never gets to settle. And it may very well influence your self-confidence if you keep tighten the noose on yourself.

There is no such thing as 'stupid questions'

Difficulty with raising a subject, coming forward, to speak up in a crowd or at lectures may also be sources of anxiety. A lot of people know too well the experience of being at a lecture and wanting to pose a question, but they hesitate out of fear of sounding ridiculous. In this example the anxiety works as a curb and the result is that the matters you need resolved or elaborated on are never clarified.

If you can recognize this pattern, you must remember that it may in fact worsen as time passes. In some cases, it may lead to insecurity, doubt and low self-esteem.

Change your focus

Several people who suffer from fear of examinations are often in a chronic condition of tension, in which everything related to an exam – before, during and after – is connected with anxiety. It is as if they have to sit an exam every day;

They test /testing themselves in everything they read, write, think and say. It is often experienced as a long and wearisome fight, where you keep flunking at your own inner and imaginary examinations.

In fact, the anxiety is related to the actual examination you have to take, but practically it is as if you are to sit at green table every day. And when you keep supervising and evaluating your efforts and performances, reading and writing may become extremely difficult, hampered by your own constant testing: Do I read a sufficient amount of texts? Am I doing it fast enough? Can I remember what I just read? Have I understood the text? Is what I wrote acceptable? etc. In this constant state of assessment and control, you actually increase your focus on the risk of failure, which ultimately intensifies your fear of examinations.

It may be a good idea to test your knowledge and to practice your presentations. But try to separate exercises from the actual reading and studying process. For example, you could test yourself whenever you have read a couple of chapters or have answered question 1 to 5. In this way you keep yourself from distracting yourself while reading.

It is as if they have to sit an exam every day, testing themselves in everything they read, write, think and say. It is often an experience of a long and wearisome fight, where you keep flunking at your own inner examinations.

When the fear of failure has taken its firm grip on you, it becomes almost impossible to imagine that you will succeed and that you will pass the exam.

Instead, all your energy is focused on how it will feel when you flunk. For this reason, it is important to sometimes visualize that you *will* succeed.

A Piece of Advice – Before, During and After an Examination

For both oral and written exams it is important to arrive in good time. If you are late, you might have a stressed start or be late for the exam. If on the other hand you arrive early, the atmosphere around the examination hall may give you the jitters. Therefore, you should figure out what works best for you: if you feel comfortable with talking with someone before the exam, or if it enhances your nervousness. It is perfectly alright to keep your distance, and you could for example bring along your MP3 player, if music helps you relax and loosen up, or bring a friend if this makes you calm and comfortable.

It is a good idea to familiarize you with the conditions concerning the examination: Where is the exam held? Do you have time for preparation? What sort of aid is allowed to bring along? How long does it take? Do you need something to eat or drink?

It is crucial that you find out which conditions that suit you best and make you feel comfortable in the situation. It may vary from each person, and so you should use your own experiences to identify the things that work and those that do not.

Below you will find a couple of questions and some ideas as to how you can help yourself to control your fear of examinations and ease your situation, both before, during, and after the exam.

Before an Exam

Where do you study most effectively? Is it at home, at the library, at a café or somewhere else? Do you need quiet or is it okay with other people around you?

If you have someone to study with, a study group for instance, you will have someone to double check you and test your knowledge, that you know your readings. If you do not have a study group, you might want to consider, if this could help you. Perhaps you feel uncomfortable in a study group, and so it might be better for you to study on your own.

At what time of the day do you study most effectively? Is it early in the morning or late in the evening? As a student you can more flexibly schedule your day to study at the time that suits you the best.

Consider how detailed your schedule should be? Try to be precise in relation to days and hours. For some students it works better to study according to time in stead of a certain number of pages or chapters. Some texts are more difficult to work with and therefore take longer time to read. If you for instance study according to a certain number of pages, you might not get through the readings which you had originally planned, and so you push yourself to study longer than first expected. You might even skip your

breaks?! If, on the other hand, you study according to time, you make certain that you do not overdo it. You may not have read all the texts you had scheduled, but you will, however, have renewed energy for the next day's reading.

How do you ensure that your schedule allows both time for studying and spare time? Some students need a very tight schedule in order to have spare time, whereas others are more flexible. You must make out what suits your temper, but remember to take a break once in a while.

How do you spend your leisure time best? Some relax with music, some need physical activity, and others make do with social gatherings. Most people, however, need a change from the reading. You must find out how to balance reading time and spare time during the period of exam preparation. And remember that you are not truanting “what is important” when you take a break; you are recuperating. The more weight you put on your shoulders, the lower the energy; and the harder it gets for you to study efficiently. The trick is to make room to ‘breathe freely’, to recharge your batteries so you are able to focus on the things you want to accomplish. There is no law against doing other things than studying; it may in fact be a great relief and a huge advantage for you – even during preparation time.

If you use the last ten to fifteen minutes everyday to evaluate your readings and decide what to do next, it is time well spent.

You should also consider what you need in relation to your family, friends and boy- or girlfriend. Would you like to talk about the exam with them? Can they ask you about your readings or does it stress you out? If you are aware of what you want, need or expect of your closest relatives, remember to tell them.

Written Exams

If it is optional, you should choose the seat that suits you best and makes you feel comfortable. Perhaps you like best to sit up front where the other students are out of sight? Or in the back, where others cannot see you?

You should always read through the entire assignment so that you are able to form a general view of the questions posed and know what to answer.

Many students begin with the easiest questions, those which are most accessible to get the paper started. Consider if this could work for you.

If you get stuck, then continue with the next question – you can always return to the troublesome part of the assignment later.

A change of air or stretching your legs may work wonders, so go to the lavatory or take a short walk down the hall.



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Oral Exams

Bear in mind that it is natural during ordinary conversations to take a break to think. This also applies for examinations.

Some students tell their examiner that they are feeling nervous, because it helps to actually say it out loud. Consider if it could work for you.

It may have a good effect to say “I do not remember right now” in stead of just “I do not know”.

It is perfectly alright to have a question repeated to you – and if you are still in doubt, you can always ask to have the question rephrased.

If you are uncertain that the answer you think about is right, say out loud anyway, even if you have hunch that it is an incorrect answer. It is better than saying nothing at all.

If your mind goes blank, it may be a good idea to explain what is going on – you cannot expect others to interpret your reaction correctly. What seems as nervousness to you may come across as indifference to others.

After an Exam

Many students experience a feeling of emptiness after the exam has finished. They feel listless and tired after a long period of hard work, concentration and tension. For some the nightmare continues until the result is available. Perhaps you have a lot of ideas and worries about what went wrong, that you will fail the exam etc. Try to put a curb on the negative vibes and thoughts. Whatever the result, you cannot change the situation after the paper is handed in and the examination is over.

Students often gather around after an exam to discuss grades, results and the possible answers to the questions. If you are uncertain of your answers, it might be a good idea to keep out of the discussion, because it may provoke further uncertainty as to your own answer. You will focus more on what they wrote, that your answer is not the same as theirs, and in the mind wandering you forget what you actually wrote in your paper.

Perhaps you have a lot of ideas and worries about what went wrong and that you will fail the exam etc. Try to put a curb on the negative vibes and thoughts, whatever the result, you cannot change the situation after the paper is handed in and the examination is over.

Remember to allow yourself to enjoy the fact that the exam is over and to give yourself some credit for your accomplishment. Take the day off, even if the next exam is lurking around the corner, waiting for you.

If you fail an exam, you should bear in mind that it is not the end of the world! Many students have failed one or more exams during their course of study. Of course, failing an exam may mean that you need to extend your period of study a bit, but most students complete their studies quite well, after all.

Exercises

The examination period can be a long and quite intense period of time. And so it may be a good idea to do some exercises between whiles.

Dissociate yourself from the chronic exam-related “condition of tension”

Practise noticing the point where you begin to feel the chronic exam-related “condition of tension” in you. That is to say, the time you begin to evaluate yourself constantly, while you are reading or writing. Typically, you keep asking yourself ‘how do I read?’ ‘Do I understand the text?’ ‘How is my

writing?’ etc. The exercise is firstly about recognising and noticing *when* you begin to assess yourself critically and thereby push yourself over the edge. Secondly, it is about being aware of not blaming yourself. Make up a sentence, a phrase or a motto you can repeat to yourself whenever you are in this situation, or make up another rule that suits your temper. The most important thing is that you take active participation in keeping the exam anxiety at a distance and maintains your focus on your preparation and readings.

“Take Five” – a good exercise

Take a five-minute-break every day and visualize that you can handle the specific situation which you are afraid of. What do you do if your mind goes blank? Can you see yourself saying “I am stuck, a moment please”? Saying things out loud often eases the anxiety and it can help you to get back on track.

Breathing Exercise

When we are feeling anxious, we tend to hyperventilate, which means that you breathe fast and jerkily. It may be a sign that the supply of carbon dioxide to the brain is insufficient which makes it difficult to think clearly.

You may also feel dizzy, or have a prickly sensation in your fingers and toes. It can be an uncomfortable feeling, and a message of panic is sent to the brain, propelling you to hyperventilate even more. It is important to breathe accurately:

- 1) Take a deep breath and hold it while counting to ten.
- 2) At “ten”, breathe out slowly, while repeating the phrase “stay calm”.
- 3) Repeat several rounds of inhalations and exhalations in which you breathe in for 3 or 4 seconds and breathe out for 3 or 4 seconds. Each time you expires, repeat the phrase “be calm”.
- 4) Make sure your breath is situated in your midriff and is supported from the abdomen. If necessary, put one hand on your stomach and breathe in so deep that the hand moves accordingly with your inhalation.

Repeat the exercise until you have gained full control of your respiration.

The “Stop Thinking-Exercise”

The following exercise of diversion is useful whenever you are feeling nervous and thoughts of negativity interfere with your ability to perform;

when your mind plays the “hammer trick” on you through subversive thoughts like “I am stupid!” and “I will certainly fail!”

Repeat the following steps when these thoughts keep you from thinking clearly:

- 1) Think “STOP” – or say it out loud! You must stop this line of thought. Picture a huge red traffic light.
- 2) Try then one of the following approaches
 - Scan your surroundings and look for at certain colour
 - Stop at for instance everything red in the room and state to yourself what you see – for example a red flower, a red shirt, a red stroke of a pencil in a picture, a red lamp, etc.
 - Concentrate on all the sounds around you – both inside and outside the room
- 3) Count down from 10,000, perhaps with an interval of 5 as in for example 10,000 – 9,995 etc.
- 4) Sing to yourself your favourite song

Relaxation

Whenever we are feeling anxious or stressed out, our body suffers extreme tension. The tension is to tell us that danger is lurking around the corner and that there is a reason to worry. Because a long period of physical tension drains the energy out of our body, it is reasonable to practise relaxation. This is done most easily by exertion first, then relaxation:

- 1) Cross your arms and hold them above your breast, with the elbows pointing downward and your closed fists upward. Tighten your breast, arms and hands all you can and hold this position for about 18 seconds. Relax then for another 18 seconds, and repeat the exercise
- 2) Tighten your abdomen really hard and keep it for eighteen seconds and relax for eighteen seconds.
- 3) Tighten your legs and feet, keep it, and relax
- 4) Tighten your neck, throat and face, keep it, and relax

Repeat the exercise for all four muscular areas 2 or 3 times.

Change Your Patterns of Thought and Conduct

Fear of examinations is often related to the way we perceive and understand certain situations and relations. It calls for a change, if we want to get rid of the anxiety, and you must realise that changing your usual pattern of thought and conduct is a process of very hard work. It takes a lot of courage, and it takes time! If you take the plunge, you will, every now and then, most likely relapse into your old, familiar and well-known, often very wearing routines.

Most students experience that the slow and uphill struggle contrasts with the wish to change things immediately. Your patience is put to the test, and it is not unusual if your courage and your belief in success will fail you at times. This is perfectly normal, but remember that you are on the right track, if you are aware of the point where you fall back on your old routines.

Below you will find four ways in which you can change your patterns of thought and conduct.

- 1) Consider one or more of the following sentences: Is what you demand of yourself reasonable? Would you demand the same of



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others in the same situation? If you were to give another student in your shoes a good piece of advice, what would it be?

- 2) Train yourself to focus on the things you succeed in, not what you miss or what you fail to do, and remember to give yourself credit for it. You can use this in the exam situation. Do not tell yourself that you will fail if you think you said something stupid or incorrect. Focus on the things you do say, what you are satisfied with, and do not let the negative thoughts put a curb on you.
- 3) Write down the reasons why you will do *well* at the exam, for instance: “I have read the syllabus”, “I have answered all the preparatory assignments” etc. Whenever the anxiety pays a visit, read your statements, or recite them out loud. In this way you keep yourself to the many reasons why you will pass the exam.
- 4) Consider your closets friends and relatives, who can give you the support you need. And remember that it is alright to take some time out of your reading schedule to be with other people; it gives you renewed energy, whenever you are feeling down and crestfallen. Remember that most people are happy to be of benefit to others.

Contact the Student Counselling Service

Phone: 70267500

The line is open Monday through Thursday between 9 am and 12 p.m. and again from 12.30-15 p.m. Friday between 9 a.m. and 13 p.m. If you call us between 9 a.m. and 12 p.m. you will as soon as possible be contacted by one of our counsellors the same day at least the following day except for weekends. The counselling on the phone lasts approximately 15-20 minutes.

Read more about us and what kind of help we offer at our **website** www.srg.dk