



Managing exam stress

Exam times are usually very stressful for students. The right amount of stress can help drive and motivate a student to achieve exam and study related goals but too much stress can be counterproductive to exam success. Sometimes it may feel like you have many assignments and exams all at once, this may be stressful but don't worry – you are not alone. In preparing for and working through exam time it is important to develop a plan and to look at ways to manage stress. Below are some tips to deal with exam stress.

Preparing for exams

- Set goals; write down your study goals, break large goals down into small steps, ensure goals are specific, achievable and realistic.
- Develop a study plan; on a timetable, allocate time to studying for exams, make sure you add time for other activities that you will need to complete also like exercise, sleep, family, work, etc. Balancing study for exams with other interests and commitments will help to reduce stress.
- Prime time; identify when your personal prime time to study is, this is a time when you are most focused and can get the majority of study done (e.g. early in the morning, when kids are at school, late at night).
- Prime location; in what environment do you study best – at uni, at home, in the bedroom?
- Take regular breaks from study; it's not a waste of time – it is important to relax and exercise. Go for a swim, a walk, run, go to the gym. Watch a movie or meditate.
- Get a good night's sleep and eat a healthy diet including foods rich in vitamins such as B and C and iron.
- Avoid drugs; caffeine and other drugs may perk you up in the short term but they can also cause sickness, sleeplessness, difficulties in concentration and retention of information. Most often the crash and burn has a negative effect.

- Use active learning strategies; take notes while reading, talk out loud, talk to other students/family/friends about study material.
- Challenge worry; keep unhelpful thoughts in check, engage in helpful and positive thinking. Some people find saying something to themselves that helps to put the exam in perspective and soothe their nervous system can be helpful, i.e. I can just do my best, I am doing my best, I can deal with this, I have done this before or something else that fits for them.
- It can help to look at and practice on old exam papers. It can be even better to practice under exam type conditions.
- Remind yourself that you are more than this exam.

Things that may enhance concentration

- Interest in the activity
- Motivation to finish task/pass exam
- Feeling relaxed and enjoying task
- Goals or direction
- Comfortable place to study
- Environment with little distractions
- Positive thoughts
- Personal rewards for completing small goals



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Just before exams

- Try to get a good night's sleep the night before.
- Eat something light even if you do not feel hungry.
- Keep worry at bay by using positive self talk (e.g. 'I can do this').
- Find out where to go and be on time, make sure you have everything you need for the exam (pen, student ID, calculator, etc).
- Relax and take deep breaths.
- If you know that standing around before the exam talking to others who may be nervous will add to your stress, avoid hanging around with these people before you go into the exam. Some people find arriving just on time helps them avoid this situation.

During exams

- Read through questions carefully.
- Don't rush, just take your time and work through the exam step by step.
- Try not to get distracted by others who may be finished or leaving the room.
- Sometimes our mind will go blank under pressure and stress; take some deep breaths, try to relax and look at the question again. You could breathe in, grip the chair you are sitting on with your hands, pull up and hold for a moment and then as you breathe out, let go of the breath and release muscle tension.
- Remain focused on the task at hand; if you are getting distracted by thoughts, gently remind yourself to come back to the exam.

After the exam

- Don't spend time worrying about what you may have done wrong.
- Congratulate yourself for getting through and giving it your best.
- Have a break before studying for the next exam.
- Reward yourself and celebrate

IMPORTANT

If you do badly it won't be the end of the world.

Exam success is not a validation of you as a whole person.

If you have experienced life circumstances outside your control (e.g. family problems, death of a loved one, homelessness, etc.) and these circumstances have increased your stress significantly, please seek support.

A SCU counsellor is a qualified professional who provides free confidential counselling to students who are facing difficulties managing study and life stress.

Recommended Reading: Orr, F. (2005). How to pass exams. Allen & Unwin

The information in this handout is sourced from: Reachout.com.au Exam Time Fact Sheet

Southern Cross University Student Health Service, Counselling

Lismore: 02 6626 9131

Coffs Harbour: 02 6659 3263

Gold Coast: 07 5589 3252

The Hotel School Sydney: 02 8249 3200

**Southern Cross University Out of Hours
Crisis Line: 1300 782 676**

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