

Exam and Assessment Anxiety

It may be that you know from past experience that exams and assessments are something you have always dreaded, and felt anxious about. Or perhaps you are feeling anxious about them for the first time, or more worried than you can remember being about them before. You may begin to worry about them at the very start of the semester, or a month, week or days before they are due.

Not many people can face exams and assessments without feeling some stress and, to a certain extent, stress can help you to get things done. But when it reaches a certain level, which varies from one person to another, stress becomes unhelpful.

Typical reactions to stress

There are various signs of stress which people experience when their level of anxiety becomes too high.

Physical symptoms and feelings:

- Sleep may be disturbed, short and interrupted, or you may find you want more sleep.
- Appetites may change, so you may find you want more or less food than usual, or start consuming more alcohol, caffeine or sugary food.
- Panicky feelings or breathlessness are possible; you may feel nauseous and notice general muscular tension, perhaps focusing in neck-ache, headache or tightness in the jaw.
- You may become slightly down or very anxious – sometimes swinging between the two. You may have feelings of terror or despair.

Thoughts and imagery:

- Preoccupation with thoughts about exams and assessments even though they are ages away.
- Self-critical thoughts, such as running yourself down and comparing yourself unfavourably with other students.
- The future may seem bleak with you not getting your degree or being inferior to others.
- 'Blanking out' or noticing yourself becoming vacant for periods of time may be a way of avoiding anxiety. Some people worry about this happening during their exams.
- Flashbacks are startling and vivid memories of unpleasant scenes, perhaps from previous exams or receiving assessment feedback. You may have intrusive dreams or nightmares.

Actions:

- You may start trying to block out the subject of exams and assessments – avoiding going near exam halls, missing lectures or switching-off when assessments are mentioned.
- You may be too easily distracted with very short spans of concentration and your normal functioning at study tasks may be badly affected.

- You may withdraw from other people, unable to talk to friends as much as usual. You might feel frightened of what people say about assessments. People may seem less reassuring than usual.

How to deal with exam and assessment anxiety

1 Stop avoiding the issue.

- Try to face up to what lies ahead and plan for the event.
- Review your assignment, revision and exam skills, and plan to deal with any deficiencies.
- Set up a timetable to manage assignments and revision more effectively. Be realistic when planning your time: don't be too ambitious about what you can cover in an hour or two.
- Schedule relaxation time in-between study sessions (but avoid over-partying!)
- Create an area where you can study effectively; i.e.: good lighting, comfortable chair, etc. The area should be free from clutter that might cause a distraction

2 Learn to handle anxiety more effectively.

- You will keep your stress at a lower level if you have a routine that allows for regular meals and a regular sleeping pattern.
- Develop a successful 'winding down' routine before going to bed. Put your books and laptop away, make a list of anything you want to remember for tomorrow, and relax quietly. (For more on sleep problems, see the relevant information leaflet on the website.)
- If you begin to feel panicky, concentrate on breathing slowly and deeply; put your hand on your diaphragm and breathe so that you feel it expanding and contracting slowly.
- Picture yourself positively; maybe struggling with aspects of an exam or assessment – but doing so competently and successfully.
- Imagine how good it will be when the exams or assessments are over, and what a sense of achievement you will have when you've done them.

3 Strengthen exam and assessment skills.

- To help reduce anxiety, practice answering questions under timed exam conditions on your own. Find out early on what assignments you need to work towards.
- Don't be frightened to ask for support from your department, perhaps with examples of the sort of questions or assignments you could expect.
- Sometimes we need someone else's help to get us to face up to a problem, and new skills develop more easily when you have a chance to talk it out with friends or family. Many people find having an exam/assignment 'buddy' helps with self-discipline and calming anxieties.
- Student Services run course and workshops on a range of study skills, which includes coping with exams. More information is available through Firstpoint.

If you think that you would like to talk to someone then please contact the Student Counselling and Mental Health Service via email cmh@worc.ac.uk or phone 01905 54 2832. The Services' web page (www.worc.ac.uk/counselling) gives more information and tells you how to make an appointment.

The Services are located in Woodbury Building on the St John's Campus.