Exams and Anxiety – A Way Through

As you know, exams are around the corner. Some of us look forward to these. Some of us dread them. And the rest of us sit somewhere along the spectrum. The truth is - we all suffer from Exam Anxiety. So our question is:

What is exam anxiety?

Most people naturally feel some anxiety before an exam. Some anxiety before and during an exam actually helps to enhance your performance. The extra adrenalin that stress releases can assist you in responding to demanding situations. Sometimes, however, too much adrenalin is released and you may begin to feel distress. Then anxiety can get in the way of performing well.

It is most useful to keep your anxiety about exams at a level that allows your best performance - not so low that you lack motivation to study and not so high that it gets in the way of you performing well. The goal is to find ways of managing your anxiety so it promotes alertness and performance.

So let’s unpack this further. Here is a checklist to deal with the question: “Do you have exam anxiety?”

When you have an exam, do you:

- feel like you “go blank”
- find yourself thinking “I can’t do this” or “I’m stupid”
- feel like the room is closing in on you
- feel your heart racing or find it difficult to breathe
- suddenly “know” the answers after turning in the exam
- score much lower than on homework or assessment tasks
- feel overwhelmed or become distracted
- miss important cues from your surroundings

If you have any of these then here are 4 easy tips to help alleviate Exam Anxiety.

1. Be healthy: If you are physically and emotionally exhausted, your body and mind are less able to tolerate stress and anxiety. Aim to:

   - get adequate rest
   - eat well and drink sufficient water
   - exercise
   - give yourself ‘guilt-free’ time for social, enjoyable and relaxing activities.

2. Be prepared: Over-prepare by studying earlier and more than is absolutely essential.

If you over-prepare, your responses become more automatic, and performance is less affected by anxiety. Prepare by:
• completing all practice and review tasks
• speaking to your teachers
• confirming the location of the exam and leaving sufficient travel time

3. **Regulate your stress level:** Aim to lower your level of stress. Effective ways involve altering your physical responses like breathing and muscle tension:

• practice mindfulness. Be aware of your immediate surroundings to help regulate your breathing, your heartbeat and your racing mind. Don’t buy into negative energies around you. Move away and note your immediate surroundings out loud in your mind.

• Breathe! In for the count of three, out for the count of three. Do this three times. This will lower your stress level quickly.

• Progressive muscle relaxation:Consciously relaxing your muscles will help your body and mind relax. Practice muscle relaxation during deep breathing. Focus on a particular muscle group (e.g., shoulders) and alternatively tensing and relaxing the muscle. Then, focus on releasing all of the tension in the muscle, repeating ‘relax’ in your mind.

4. **Stand Up To Catastrophic Thinking:** Thoughts have a direct link to anxiety levels. Negative or catastrophic thinking regarding exams will increase anxiety. Practice positive self talk. Try some of the following:

• Become aware of your negative or catastrophic thinking
• Look for the evidence for the negative thought. Challenge it.
• Try turning the volume down on the negative thought.
• Visualise the negative thought leaving your mind.
• Imagine a trap-door at the top of your head with all negativity floating out….

Exam Anxiety is real and it can be either the push you need or the mountain too hard to climb. Try these suggestions. Ask teachers for help. Visit the Wellbeing Team. And always remember - you are not alone. Together we can get through the exams successfully.

From:  *Overcoming Exam Anxiety*