

# Exam Stress

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## Introduction to exam stress

Some people seem to work well with exam stress and find that it gives them the extra buzz to focus their energy on revision and course work. Others find it a tough task but manageable. Some find that their levels of stress rise too far and that the effect is that they cannot function so well. They may find it hard to concentrate, to think clearly, to sleep and to eat. There may be a variety of causes for this and so it may be helpful to explore a variety of possible solutions.

## Physical effects of stress

When we are anxious, we tend to breathe in slightly more than we breathe out. This leads to slightly more oxygen being carried in our blood and to an increase in adrenalin and cortisol. These are useful if we are in physical danger as they can help us to fight or run for our lives. They are unhelpful in exam situations because they make it harder to think clearly, to relax or to sleep. We feel tense, irritable and panic. However, we can learn to change this.

Learning some breathing exercises can make a dramatic difference because they change the levels of adrenalin and cortisol in our system.

- E.g. breathe in for the count of 4, hold for 7 and out for the count of 8.

Other things that help are meditation and yoga and activities like Tai Chi. Physical exercise like running, walking and dancing can also help.

What you eat and drink can help or hinder too. Avoid caffeine (coffee, tea, cola drinks, chocolate) and sugary foods. Drink water, fruit juice, decaf drinks and herbal teas such as chamomile. (Caffeine and sugar both increase anxiety levels). Eat a balanced diet with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. Eat something for breakfast before an exam e.g. a banana.

- See the [PDF on Anxiety](#).
- See the [PDF on Insomnia](#) - sleep problems.

In severe cases of stress, your GP may prescribe medication.

## Personal aspects of stress

Sometimes exam anxieties are part of a general way of being anxious most of the time. Some may suggest that this could be our personality type, but others would suggest that it is learned behaviour. Talking things through with a friend or counsellor may be very helpful.

Many students get stuck in a pattern of negative thinking. This could be sensitivity to imagined criticism. Many students (especially females) imagine that they got to university by luck or mistake. They find it hard to imagine succeeding. Some students get into the habit of comparing themselves with others in an unfavourable way - forgetting that everyone who gets into university is bright.

Notice if you have negative patterns of thought and discuss them.

- Try to beat any avoidance: start with small targets to give yourself confidence.
- Look at old papers, design your own questions, and make yourself rehearse with other people and your tutors.
- Do not use alcohol - it only acts as a depressant and makes it harder to concentrate.
- Give yourself rewards when you have done some work.
- Don't dismiss or discount what you have achieved.
- Learn to be kind to yourself whilst also accepting that there is no way around the hard work!

Make sure you also plan in some time for social events, even if it is just to sit and have a coffee with a friend. Write these on your plan if you have a chart on your wall. Try out something [creative](#) or [energetic](#) to refresh you. Your brain will thank you for it

## Issues to do with revision or study skills

Although you may have done well at A-level or the equivalent, you will find that university work may need different skills. Skills can always benefit from being refreshed and strengthened. There are lots of places to go for help on this.

Talk with your personal tutor or course director about specific feedback to do with your course.

The [Student Learning Support Centre](#) at the Pilkington Library has leaflets and runs workshops on stress reduction and relaxation as well as many workshops on study skills including exam preparation.

[The Maths Learning Support Centre](#) can give individual help to students from any department who have problems with Maths. You can contact them on:

[mlsc@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:mlsc@lboro.ac.uk)

01509 227460 (West Park)

01509 228250 (Central Park)

If your exam anxiety is made worse by dyslexia or any other disability, contact the [Disability Office](#) so that exam arrangements can be considered:

01509 222770

[disability@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:disability@lboro.ac.uk)

.....  
[www.lboro.ac.uk/cds](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/cds)

## Helpful hints for optimising performance

These are suggestions that have worked for fellow students over many years. Pick ones that you'd like to try. Don't try to do them all! We are all different and some approaches work better for some than others.

- Get friends/family to recognise specific 'sacred study times' when you are not to be interrupted or lured away to the kitchen/pub etc. and when your phone will be off.
- Work in your favourite place/clothes/atmosphere/comfort blanket etc!
- Work together with a friend if this encourages you to keep at it.
- Explore music: There is some evidence that quiet classical music significantly helps memory and recall. Mozart is especially recommended. However, this may not work if you hate it! Use headphones to avoid disturbing other people.
- Explore aromatherapy: There is some evidence that the use of essential oils can help. Lavender is relaxing and helps reduce tension and aids sleep. Rosemary is said to help memory. Citrus such as lemon and cedar are said to help alertness. If you use an oil burner, make sure you note fire safety regulations for candles. Do not put essential oils on the skin without diluting in a carrier oil.
- The best way of learning is to teach. Use friends (especially those not doing your subject) to practise talking through a dissertation or revision topic. Teaching others is ever so helpful in clarifying your knowledge. You will find you know more than you thought once you start. This can be done on a mutual exchange, e.g. fifteen minutes each, then do something else.
- [Keep breathing!](#) In for the count of 4, hold for 7 then out for the count of 8 to help keep your body calm and your brain alert. Go for a walk, run, dance, stretch regularly. Look at the horizon every half hour or so to rest your eyes.
- Imagine a favourite place in the country where it is peaceful and imagine you are there now and again. It helps unwind.
- Sip plenty of water throughout the day. It is said that a 2% level of dehydration can lead to a 30% drop in concentration. (Fizzy drinks and coffee can dehydrate you). Some writers recommend 1.5 litres of water a day.
- If you think you need help, don't be afraid to ask. All the staff in the university wants you to do well so talk to a tutor, your GP, a counsellor, one of the study skills resources. Lots of students do need some help and that's what we're here to offer.

## Useful links

**Student Minds** – [exam stress](#)

**NHS** – [stress busters](#)

**Mental Health Foundation:**

- [Mindfulness: 10 minute practice exercise.](#)
- [Three-minute mindfulness breathing space.](#)
- [Stress and the mind: quick-fix relaxation exercise.](#)
- [Stress and the mind: full works.](#)
- [Stress and relaxation: full works.](#)

**Mind** – [14 ways to beat exam stress](#)

**CALM** - [Stressed? Dr Rangan prescribes passion and friendship](#)

**[Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity team](#)**: 01509 228338

[studentwellbeing@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:studentwellbeing@lboro.ac.uk)

To book an appointment with any of our services within Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity (including the Counselling Team, Mental Health Support Team and the Wellbeing Advisers), please complete [the referral form](#).