

Preparing for and writing exams are among the most important and stressful aspects of University life.

Research has demonstrated that highly anxious students tend to receive lower grades than do less anxious students, even when ability and preparation are the same.

At Student Counselling Services, we thought it important to offer information to students that could assist them in identifying and dealing with anxiety about exam writing.

Mastering exam anxiety

It is normal to experience anxiety about exams. Virtually everyone feels some degree of nervousness. Remembering this can assist in lowering anxiety.

A second and equally important point is that exam anxiety is not the enemy. A certain degree of tension is necessary to fuel motivation and enhance performance. Try to face and accept anxiety as a legitimate part of your student experience.

When people try to resist or reject anxiety they feel about exams (e.g., pretend they don't have it) or focus exclusively on it or worry about it, they use up valuable time and energy and end up increasing their anxiety. Accept where you are at and go with it.

And finally, no one is a perfect university student. Some exams are going to go well and others not as well as you hoped. Striving for perfection will work against you, as will a lack of interest and poor study habits.

Get to know yourself and what helps you to feel more relaxed and better able to perform to your potential.

When to seek help

Seek help sooner rather than later!

What is exam anxiety?

Most simply put, exam anxiety is a common and normal stress reaction experienced before, during and sometimes following exams. Exam anxiety becomes problematic when it is intense, persists over time and interferes with academic performance.

What are the symptoms of exam anxiety?

Exam anxiety is typically experienced as an array of uncomfortable symptoms that may include:

Emotional symptoms

- feeling fearful of exams
- feeling nervous, worried, panicky, overwhelmed

Physical symptoms

- headaches
- racing heart
- shortness of breath
- sweating
- tense muscles
- stomach upset
- feeling tired

Cognitive symptoms

- difficulty concentrating/organizing thoughts
- racing thoughts
- poor memory/difficulty recalling key words and concepts
- "blinking"
- thoughts of failing or of being criticized

- thoughts of being embarrassed or viewed as stupid
- focusing on how friends or others are doing
- remembering exam answers after the exam is over

Behavioural symptoms

- restlessness
- "cramming"
- making errors when material is well-known
- procrastinating
- missing exams
- performing below potential

What causes exam anxiety?

A significant proportion of exam anxiety is the direct result of lack of preparation.

Exam anxiety may also be related to:

- poor self-confidence, low self-esteem
- family expectations
- self-imposed pressure to achieve
- poor study skills
- strong fear of failure
- another anxiety problem
- mental health difficulties

What can I do to master exam anxiety?

There are MANY specific strategies (a total of 55 listed here!) that students can use to reduce anxiety and improve their ability to write exams. For best results, use anxiety-management strategies before, during and after exam writing.

What should I do BEFORE the exam?

1. Expect that you will experience some anxiety – remember that it’s normal to feel nervous.
2. Learn to recognize your anxiety symptoms and acknowledge that you are feeling anxious (e.g., “I’m feeling kind of shaky inside. I must be nervous about this exam.”)
3. Accept any anxiety you may be experiencing as a normal part of your student experience.
4. Let a partner, friend or family member know that you are anxious. Talking and feeling supported can help.
5. Make time to enjoy your life. Having fun and feeling happy will help reduce anxiety.
6. Engage in regular exercise.
7. Eat well. Resist the temptation to skip meals and live on coffee and snacks.
8. Avoid too much caffeine. While coffee is a stimulant and can help keep you awake/alert, too much tends to make you feel anxious.
9. Get enough rest (i.e., avoid staying up all night to study).
10. “Thought stop” your anxiety-provoking self-statements. Literally tell yourself, “STOP” when you notice negative thinking (e.g., about failing, about being unable to calm down, etc.). Divert your attention to more positive self-statements (e.g., “I can do this.”).
11. Avoid thinking about poor performance on past exams. Let the past be the past.
12. Generate BELIEVABLE confidence-building thoughts (e.g., “I will try my best.” “I know the material pretty well.”).
13. Remind yourself that this is only one of many exams you will write over the course of your career here.
14. Set realistic goals. If you were a below-average student throughout high school, expecting all mid-80s in your first term at University might be unrealistic.
15. Decide to work at reducing your anxiety (and improving your grades). Work one step at a time.
16. Practice a relaxation technique (e.g., abdominal breathing, meditation, guided imagery).
17. Learn your course material thoroughly. Studying everyday (i.e. “a little and often”) is an effective way to enhance learning. Also, learn the material well enough to perform under stress.
18. Develop good overall study skills (e.g., time management, note-taking).
19. Arrange a study group or find a tutor.
20. Ask the professor what type of questions will be on the exam and what topics will be emphasized.
21. Review old exams.
22. Double-check the time and location of the exam.
23. Avoid rushing to the exam. Be on time.
24. Don’t study on the way to the exam. Instead, focus on calming down.
25. Immediately before the exam, avoid talking with classmates if it confuses what you’ve studied or results in increased anxiety.
26. Bring what you need to the exam (e.g., several pencils and pens, calculator, ruler, etc.).
27. Choose where to sit in the exam room so you feel comfortable and won’t be distracted.

What should I do DURING the exam?

1. Acknowledge and accept your anxiety (e.g., “My heart is racing and I’m feeling nervous about this exam. That’s ok. I’m going to do my best anyway.”).
2. Use encouraging self-statements (e.g., “I can do this even though I’m anxious.”). Consider writing one or more of those statements on your exam booklet so that you can easily refer to as you write.
3. Take a few minutes to help calm yourself. Use abdominal breathing and supportive self-statements.
4. Try to find a comfortable position in your chair and remain still (i.e. avoid finger tapping, leg bouncing, etc).
5. Use abdominal breathing whenever you notice tension building.
6. Remember that most people (professors included!) know that exams are anxiety-provoking. Think of the people in your life who are cheering you on.
7. Imagine yourself doing well.
8. Before you begin reading the exam, write down formulas or important points to remember on the first page of the exam.
9. Read the exam directions carefully.
10. Budget your time so you don’t have to rush. Allow enough time to try each question.
11. Take the time to make an outline and organize your thoughts if you are writing an essay question.
12. Focus on what you do know.
13. If you go “blank” skip to another question or simply start writing something. In reality, you have not forgotten what you have studied. Acknowledge your anxiety and keep writing. Feeling “blank” will pass.
14. If the exam is more difficult than you thought it would be, stay focused and record what you do know.
15. Try every question. Always show what you know even if you don’t have a complete answer.
16. If you don’t know an answer, guess (but only if you won’t be penalized for incorrect answers).
17. Always ask for clarification if you don’t understand a question.
18. Don’t focus on how quickly others are handing in their exams. Speed and knowledge don’t always go together.

What should I do AFTER the exam?

1. Acknowledge and accept any anxiety you felt or are still feeling.
2. Engage in relaxing activity.
3. Treat yourself.
4. Remind yourself of your effort.
5. Dwell on the successful parts.
6. Remember that your anxiety level and grades are not reflections of your self-worth. Failing an exam does not make you a failure as a person.
7. Take an honest look at your exam performance. Analyze how you are doing and plan a new strategy if you need to.
8. Find and read a book about study skills and exam anxiety.
9. If you need to, seek the assistance of a tutor before you write your next exam.
10. Seek professional assistance with anxiety management (e.g., Student Counselling Services).

How do I know when to seek help with anxiety?

Once addressed, exam anxiety generally decreases in a gradual way. Over time, grades generally improve.

If you find yourself experiencing anxiety that is interfering with your ability to prepare for or write exams, or if anxiety is interfering with any aspect of your life, you may benefit from professional assistance. At Student Counselling Services, we see many students who report anxiety difficulties.

If you are experiencing any of the following, it may be indication that anxiety has become problematic:

- Frequent procrastination
- Doing poorly on an exam after you studied and were sure you knew the material
- Frequently remembering many exam answers after the exam is over
- Persistent fears of failure
- Insisting on perfection
- Excessive worrying
- Overwhelming episodes of panic
- Fearing something catastrophic will happen to you
- Avoiding certain social situations
- Intrusive thoughts and/or repetitive behaviours

- Substance use to manage anxiety
- Missed classes and/or unmet deadlines
- Poor or declining grades
- Performing below your potential

Anxiety is generally recognized as a readily treatable problem. People can learn and practice specific skills to help themselves feel better!

If you think you may benefit from assistance with anxiety management, call (966-4920) or stop by Student Counselling Services (Apotex Center, 3rd floor Place Riel) to arrange for an appointment to speak with one of our staff members. Our services are available to registered students.

How do I do the abdominal breathing?

When you become anxious you automatically breathe in a more rapid and shallow way.

“Overbreathing” results in a decreased proportion of carbon dioxide to oxygen in the blood. The heart pumps faster, muscles feel weak and shaky, you start to feel dizzy, hands become clammy and tingling sensations occur in the hands and feet.

Many of the physical symptoms of anxiety can be a direct result of rapid and shallow breathing.

Anxiety symptoms can be reversed or prevented by altering your breathing.

How to practice abdominal breathing:

- In a sitting position, lean back.
- Place one hand on your upper chest and the other on your abdomen.
- Imagine that your stomach is a balloon that you want to fill with air.
- Take a long, slow breath through your nose as if to fully inflate the balloon (the hand on your abdomen, not your chest, should rise). Take four full seconds to inhale.
- Hold for one or two seconds.
- Exhale slowly and gently through your mouth (the hand on your abdomen, not your chest, should fall). Take four full seconds to exhale.
- Continue this process for at least four minutes.
- Practice abdominal breathing at least twice/day.

Beckfield (1994)

Bourne (2000)

Wilson (1996)

How do I manage my thinking?

When feeling anxious and worried, it can be helpful to talk to yourself in a soothing way. Here are some examples of self-statements that discourage anxious thinking and promote a sense of calm. To assist you in managing your thinking, generate some self-statements that are tailored to you and your anxiety about exams. Remember that these are meant not only to calm, but also to distract. They are most helpful when they are brief "I" statements that are written in the present tense.

- I am learning to let this go.
- These are just thoughts and I can let them fade away.
- I can feel anxious and still cope.
- I can ride this out.
- I've done this before.
- As I wait, I will feel better.
- Breathe.
- This is difficult and I can deal with it.
- I can feel anxious and still manage.
- It's ok if I feel anxious.
- It's enough to do what I can.
- I can do this.
- I can slow myself down and manage.
- It's scary, but I know what to do.
- I'm really scared, but I can focus on what I need to do anyway.
- I'm good at helping myself.
- I do cope, despite feeling anxious.
- I can slow down and be still.
- I can make a few mistakes and still move forward.
- I can give myself what I need.
- It's ok to feel my feelings.
- I'll cheer myself on.
- This is difficult and I can deal with it.
- I can believe in myself.
- It's normal to make mistakes.
- Stay focused.
- I can let this worry go.
- I can keep going.
- I can cope when things don't go as I'd hoped.
- I can show up for myself.
- I'm really scared, and that's ok.
- I can step back and think.
- I can breathe and help myself through this.
- I can support myself and do alright. I have skills to manage.
- I don't have to be perfect.
- I feel better when I focus on what I can do.
- Letting go of worry frees me up.
- My anxiety lessens when I'm kind to myself.
- I'm capable.
- I feel better when I remind myself that I do cope.