# ANXIETY, EXAM Stress and how to cope

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Fear is our untaught instinctive reaction to a known threat

**Anxiety** is an emotion. It is a normal emotion which is designed to keep us on the lookout for danger. It is characterised by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes such as increased heart rate, feeling hot, breathless, nauseous. So it is both in the mind and in the body. And by the way, our minds and bodies are inextricably connected, but here in the Western world we often think of our minds as being at the top of our bodies, literally in our heads, and this can mean we can almost forget about our bodies, often only becoming aware of them when something changes or goes wrong.

Anxiety itself is normal, we all have anxiety, we all need anxiety, it helps us get things done.

I can guarantee there's a lot of anxiety in this room right now. Mr Armstrong may be anxious because he doesn't know exactly what will happen in this session; I am anxious coming here today, because I haven't done this before. Many of you may be anxious now, what's this going to be like, there are a lot of us (hard for those of us with social anxiety), will it end on time, what am I missing to be here etc.

So anxiety is normal, and can be helpful; for me today it has made me prepare thoroughly. But when it becomes severe or carries on at a high level for a long time it can start impacting on everyday life. When we feel anxious, it is because our body is releasing stress hormones, adrenalin, noradrenaline and cortisol, because we perceive a threat, the Fight or Flight response (we'll come back to this a bit later). This biological reaction works well in the face of short-term stress but not good if we face an overwhelming situation which we feel we cannot cope with. (for example, a bucket-load of school-work, impending exams, pressure to do well, expectant parents and teachers, and high expectations we put on ourselves.)

**Worries** are thoughts about actual or potential problems. It is normal to have worries, but when they become intrusive and repetitive they become a problem. Typical worries may start with words like "I should", "I ought", "I must", "If only", "I wish"

**Stress** is the feeling of being overwhelmed or unable to cope with a situation, in other words, when the worries and anxiety become too much.

Stress is completely in our own minds, it does not exist in the world. It is a result of how we think and feel about our experiences and challenges.



Mental health: On a continuum, we all have it Our 'tricky' brains – evolutionary psychology Hand model of the brain The amygdala – our over sensitive smoke alarm! Modern life is hard, in so many ways Social mentality theory In terms of evolution, our brains haven't a chance to keep up with the modern world. You could say our thinking brain is spiralling out of control. But if our pre-frontal cortex can cause us all these problems, surely it can think its way to solutions. 'The best way out of a problem is through it", i.e. face it





# **EXAM ANXIETY – THREE BIG FEARS**

### • Fear of Repeating Past Failures

Our brans have a tendency to be negative

### Fear of the Unknown

Gain as much experience of the upcoming exam as possible. Use Practise Papers and Study Guides, create quizzes out of your notes to fill in the gaps, create exam conditions and practise. Make the experience feel like an old friend

### • Fear of the Stakes

We are not defined by our exam successes or failures. To do badly in an exam is not the end of the world. We are still the same person whatever we score

### Fear 1: Repeating past failures

We humans have a tendency to a negative bias. This is a useful evolutionary survival skill, since it helps us to remember when we were in danger so we can avoid it next time. But it's clearly not helpful in a test situation.

If we have had a past failure, we need to analyse the mistakes we made.

Chess players, elite performers do this in order to learn from their mistakes. Review past papers

Ask teachers for feedback on mistakes, and make sure you understand where you went wrong

Highlight that section, and ask yourself: Was I unprepared? If so, why? Was it that I didn't spend enough time preparing, use an ineffective study method, did I rush it in the exam, did I run out of time?

Remember, failure is a great teacher, and a better one than success. Since we remember failures so well, every one of them has the potential to be a lesson and an opportunity. But, you need to use that opportunity by making a plan to avoid the same mistake/s in future.

### Fear 2: Fear of the unknown

We humans naturally fear what we don't know or understand. It's a no brainer, if we

don't know about something then we don't know for sure that it is safe, it might hurt or harm us.

Familiarity is the antidote to the unknown. Squirrels are wild animals and naturally fear humans. However, when they are exposed to lots of harmless humans say, in a London park, they lose their fear and don't run away, in fact they realise that humans can bring rewards in the form of tasty food.

So, we need to gain as much experience of the upcoming exam as possible.

Use Practise Papers and Study Guides

Create quizzes out of your notes to fill in the gaps

Create exam conditions, by timing yourself when doing pieces of work, sitting at a desk with a clear workspace.

Basically, you are familiarising yourself with the experience, making it feel like an old friend!

### Fear 3: Fear of the Stakes

One of the biggest sources of exam anxiety is the feeling that it means everything, to fail it will be the end of the world, the worst thing possible, you'll never get a good job, your whole life will be a failure.

But, in reality, you're rarely going to come across an exam or a situation which you can't recover from, there will almost always be another way.

Reframe the exam in your mind. Think of it as another learning opportunity rather than as a judgement.

Remind yourself that you are not defined by your exam result. You are still the same person if you score a 9 or a 6 or a 3 in an exam.



# Two main types of attention

• Top-down (voluntary attention)

When we have to do a task like reading a page in a textbook or solving a maths problem

• Bottom-up (stimulus-driven attention)

When we notice something due to a stimulus in our environment, like a phone notification (instant gratification)

What is learning? It is the encoding of new information into solid memories, and it is a physical process that takes time.

But our brains aren't built to make long term focused decisions. Evolutionary psychology tells us that our brains are hardwired to care a lot more about now than later, because the primitive parts of our brain are really interested in survival, so it says let's catch that food now while it's here, better eat this meal now because who knows when the next meal will be available. This is why we humans put off doing stuff, or in other words, procrastinate! All the task-driven work like schoolwork doesn't come naturally to our tricky brain, so we have to build external structures to help it out.

Two main types of attention

1. Top-down, called voluntary attention. This is when we have to do a task like reading a page in a textbook or solving a Maths problem.

2. Bottom-up, called stimulus-driven attention. This is when we notice something due to a stimulus in our environment.

You probably realise that it's the top-down type which we need to strengthen when we have to complete a task. We don't even need to try to strengthen the bottom-up type, because it happens all the time, easily, because basically our human brains love novelty and distraction. We are always looking to satisfy short-term cravings due to our cave-person brains.

When we develop our top-down attention our brain actually gets better at inhibiting mechanisms to block out competing stimuli. So this is great news, we can actually get better at concentrating with some simple practice techniques.

The strength of our inhibitory mechanisms i.e. our ability to stay focused, depends on a number of things including our environment, our own personal tendency to seek novelty when bored, our interest level in the task itself, how long we've already been doing the task, and our brain's current state which is linked to how we are looking after our physical needs such as food, exercise, sleep, anxiety levels.

# HOW TO STRENGTHEN OUR TOP DOWN ATTENTION

- Stop multi-tasking
- Create a good work environment
- Put away anything non-essential
- · Break down your current task into smaller sub-tasks
- Anticipate potential distractions
- Give yourself mini rewards



- Develop your actual ability to focus. Resist cravings! Attention is like a muscle. It's something you can train over time to get stronger
- Apps to help you include Cold Turkey and StayFocused, which block distracting websites entirely, and Forest which encourages you to ignore your phone by letting you grow virtual trees
- Establish a cycle of work and rest. We need breaks, both short and long. These breaks must be planned in advance and timed. As time goes by, you can go longer and longer without a break

#### How to Strengthen our Top-down Attention

Stop multi-tasking! Many people believe we can do two things at once, but this is not true! When we switch from one task to another, we lose 2 things, the actual raw amount of time taking making the switch, but more importantly, we also lose the amount of time it takes for our brain to properly refocus its attention and get back in the flow. Also, a residue of your attention is stuck in the other activity.

The answer: Choose 1 task and make it your sole focus. Spend 20 – 30 minutes on it. Create a good work environment. Make a space just for studying. This establishes in your brain a place with just one context, and context is powerful. A scientific study involved scuba divers who were given a series of facts to memorise whilst underwater in their scuba-diving gear. When asked to recall the information, they performed better when they were underwater than in a new and unfamiliar environment. When your location, the people you are with, and all the other pieces of your environment point to a single activity, you'll be much more likely to do it.

Think of a gym – your brain knows you are there to work out.

Many people know this, for example, JK Rowling wrote most of her first book at Nicholson's, a café in Edinburgh.

Note: there is no perfect study space, but in general, the fewer things that are competing for your attention, the better.

Put away anything non-essential, such as phone, close tabs on computer, other subject material.

Break down your current task into smaller sub-tasks, in order to be able to decide what is essential to have out and available. For example, if you are writing a piece of research, the sub-tasks could be Brainstorming, Researching, Drafting, Editing. The Internet is only needed for Researching, so close it down for the other three things. Anticipate potential distractions. Ideally put your phone outside the room, or at the very least turn off notifications, put it on 'do not disturb' (flight mode?), tell friends not to contact you. Quote scientific study.

Develop your actual ability to focus. Attention is like a muscle. It's something you can train over time to get stronger. One of the best ways to learn is to resist cravings for novelty, you know the feeling, the sudden urge to check Snapchat, watch a video of a corgi jumping into a lake while you're working on your English homework! We get these cravings because by default our brains don't like hard work or boredom, but guess what, the strength of these cravings is set by how often you give into them. Our actions create habits and expectations in our brains, and these become hardwired patterns of behaviour. i.e. every time you give in to a distraction, you're ingraining that decision into a habit. The good news is, we can also train the opposite behaviour. By acknowledging a craving, and deliberately ignoring it and getting back to work, we start to build a tolerance for boredom and wean yourself off that need for constant stimulation. Thus, your ability to focus improves.

Apps to help you focus include Cold Turkey and StayFocused, which block distracting websites entirely, and Forest which encourages you to ignore your phone by letting you grow virtual trees.

Establish a cycle of work and rest. We need breaks, both short and long. Short breaks – up to five minutes. **Don't** switch to another task or get involved in something distracting – remember we can't multi-task, so this will create that attention residue. **Do** stretch, have a short walk, some fresh air, get a snack, breathe slowly and rhythmically.

Long breaks – do something fun and distracting.

These breaks must be planned in advance and time. That way, you are not letting your mind rule you, letting it follow its cravings for novelty. Rather, you are taking control of your mind, and training your top-down attention, rather than succumbing to your bottom-up stimulus driven attention.

As time goes by, you can go longer and longer without a break.

### How to work efficiently

Make a study schedule. Enter the exact dates and times of forthcoming exams, and work backwards 3 or 4 weeks for big exams, less for smaller ones, and plan in periods of time for revision. Remember to allow time for ongoing work such as homework and other commitments.

Get as much information about the upcoming exam as possible. What type of questions, what materials are allowed in the exam, any practice tests available, what teacher-help, online help etc.

Establish your study space.

Set a timer and work for that specific time.

Make your own quizzes.

Flashcards are great for facts and vocabulary. They can be double-sided, you can study them from either side.

For subjects like Maths and Physics, although it is necessary to spend time studying formulae and concepts, the majority of the time should be spent actually working through problems. As you spend time actively working through these problems, you'll inevitably run into things you don't know how to solve. When this happens, ask your teacher for help

BUT, consider the following first. Ask yourself: What is it, exactly that I don't understand? Spend 15 more minutes trying to solve the problem on your own, line by line through the problem until you know precisely where the confusion begins. Also, try to write down the solutions you've tried so far. Doing this documents the problem, and creates a context for the person who will eventually try to help you. It might actually help you to solve it yourself, and if not, it will earn you respect from your teacher!

Crib Sheet exercise. To make this, you have to be very choosy because the card can't be too big, so you end up with a small card containing the most important information on it, which can be very useful for cramming just before the exam. And, since you've spent time looking all that stuff up and writing it down in teeny tiny letter, you were interacting with it, actively, the whole time. Developing your ability to focus, using your top-down attention. A win-win.



Why do we humans procrastinate?

Lots of study on this, and an expert called Dr Piers Steele has come up with "The Procrastination Equation" to explain it.

CRASH COURSE STUDY SKILLS on YouTube Thomas Frank uses this equation and helps to explain how different qualities in the way we think affects our motivation.

Motivation = expectancy x value divided by impulsiveness x delay

Expectancy is how strongly you believe that you are able to complete a task. Value is the rewards you get for completing the task, as well as how pleasant or unpleasant the experience of doing it is. A reward can be a small short-term thing such as a sweet to a large long-term gain such as getting a good grade which gets you into the University of your choice

Impulsiveness is how susceptible you are to distractions to do other things Delay is the amount of time between now and when you'll get the reward for completing the task. The longer the delay, the more you'll procrastinate. This is because humans place far more value on short-term rather than long-term rewards.

How to overcome Procrastination

Raise Expectancy. Break the task down into smaller sub-tasks. This narrows your focus. Ask for help if you can't do it.

Improve Value. Improve the actual reward (difficult if you are studying a subject you really don't enjoy, which applies to a lot of school-work)

Improve the experience of doing the work itself i.e. make sure you are comfortable, in a good environment, have the right study aids, study with a friend, go to a favourite cafe or library, listen to music (without lyrics is best)

Add mini rewards for completing subtasks. This could be a sweet or special drink or snack, a reward system which as it accumulates you can swap for a big reward. Eg for every 20 minutes you spend on a task, give yourself a star, when you have ten stars choose a treat for yourself such as the cinema, a takeaway with a friend, a new video game.

Improve Impulsivity. The environment really matters. Cut out distractions, lock it down a bit. Turn off notifications etc.

Delay – build in mini rewards so you don't have to wait too long, and build in bigger rewards too.

# **THE POMODORO TECHNIQUE**



All you need is a timer and a little piece of paper.

- I. Decide on one single task to work on
- Set your timer for 25 minutes to work as hard as you can on that task. If a distraction comes up, or you get the impulse to do something else, write it down on the piece of paper, and get on with your work
- 3. Finally, when the timer goes off, take a 5 minute break, stretch, a short walk, some rhythmic breathing, get a snack, then repeat this process until you are ready for a longer break

A simple but very effective little hack to Stop Procrastinating. All you need is a timer and a little piece of paper.

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Set your timer for 25 minutes to work as hard as you can on that task. If a distraction comes up, or you get the impulse to do something else, write it down on the piece of paper, get on with your work.

Finally, when the timer goes off, take a 5 minute break, stretch, a short walk, some rhythmic breathing, then repeat this process until you are ready for a longer break. This works as the timer creates a time boundary which your brain likes. You know, with certainty, that you only have to work for 25 minutes. It cuts down on the initial resistance you feel since 25 minutes doesn't feel like a huge investment of your time and effort. The timer also creates an external motivator. Instead of relying on your brain to keep track, you let the timer do it for you.

This technique really works.

### How to increase our skills of focus and concentration

Firstly, we need to have a balance of work and play. We need time off! We are tuned into circadian rhythms, i.e. we are designed to be awake during the day, and asleep at night. We also need micro-rhythms in our lives, those of work and rest. We are now all living in the most challenging age so far for concentration and focus. When did you last apply yourself to thinking about something without distraction? Our brains behave like puppies, so if you think about it, being human is like having a puppy inside your head! Picture a puppy: fun-loving, pleasure-seeking, untrained, unruly. We have to train our puppy or else it can become a bit of a problem! Just as we have to train our brain!

Recall the last time you did a piece of homework at home. Did you do it without any distractions, or did you check your Snapchat, watch a quick video on YouTube, catch a funny TikTok, listen to some music and find yourself singing along to the lyrics, message a friend? The distractions are endless!

But, contrary to popular belief, we humans cannot multitask. It's scientifically proven that we can only do one thing at a time.

So, we need to cultivate our ability to pay attention, we literally need to train our brains to be able to do it, and it isn't as hard as it might seem!



Doing this sort of activity can help to create a bit of distance between you and your anxious feelings and thoughts, making it easier to observe them with acceptance and compassion and kindness.

Sitting on a chair, or lying down, start by getting into a comfortable position and allowing your eyes close if that feels right, otherwise lower your eyes. Take a few moments to come into the present moment by connecting with your breathing, noticing each full in-breath and each full out-breath.

Now, bring to mind the image of a mountain, perhaps a mountain you have visited or seen in photographs, or one of your own imagination. Bring into focus as many details of this mountain as possible. Imagine its size and shape. Perhaps it's a snow-covered peak with trees and meadows on its lower slopes. Notice that your mountain, like all mountains, has a solid, unmoving base.

However the mountain appears, just sitting and breathing with the image of this mountain, observing it and noting its qualities. And when you feel ready, see if you can bring the mountain into your own body, so that your body and the mountain become one. Perhaps your head is your mountain's peak, your shoulders and arms are the sides of the mountain, and your bottom and legs are its solid base. With each breath you become a little more the mountain – solid, still and centred.

And, as you connect with the solid core of the mountain, can you also observe its

surface, noticing the multitude of changes that take place on it, from day to day, and season to season? As day turns to night, perhaps noticing how the temperature drops, and the light gradually fades. In spring, perhaps you can feel a gentle rain, or see dense fog obscuring the view. In summer, meadows may be filled with wildflowers, mountain goats graze in the warmth of the sun, or forest fires may ravage the surface. In winter, you may watch as snow falls softly on the stately evergreens, or avalanches destroy everything in their paths. You may also notice people on your mountain, voicing their differing opinions of it – it is the best or worst mountain they have ever seen, or it is too easy or too difficult to climb. And, as you observe all of these changes on the surface of your mountain, can you also realise that its solid base remains unchanged?

Perhaps at times, when you feel your anxiety in your mind and body, you can connect with your inner mountain, embodying its strength and stability, observing your inner experiences as you would the ever-changing surface of a mountain. And realise, as you notice your thoughts and feelings come and go, that your essential self, your core, remains unchanged.

# **TOP TIPS TO MANAGE ANXIETY**

- Worry is a rocking chair you keep doing the same thing but never get anywhere
- Worry jar
- Worry time
- Tell yourself to 'stop' when you find yourself repeating negative thoughts
- Try to look after your body healthy eating, enough sleep, exercise, relaxation
- Laugh and smile more
- High Density Fun (as opposed to Low Density Fun)
- Mindfulness breathing, visualisation
- The smaller you break down the anxiety, the more manageable it feels
- Practise self-compassion, become your own comforter

# ...CONTINUED

Draw 2 circles.

Put all the things you have no control over in one circle, and all the things you can control in the other.

Let go of the thoughts you have no control over, then change your focus of attention.

For the other circle, consider each one, and think of one or more things you can do to start the process of positive change.







