

EXAM STRESS

Higher Health: 0800 36 36 36



A moderate amount of stress can be a good thing. It can sharpen concentration and performance and help to create the energy and motivation we need to keep studying. Too much stress, however, can be overwhelming and stop us from being able to study and function healthily in life. Undoubtedly, it would be disappointing if you do not do as well as you hoped. Thus, instead of thinking negative thoughts it is helpful to challenge the thoughts (*I won't get a good job, people will think I am stupid, my future is over*) with a more realistic assessment of the situation. Enlist the help of a friend, counsellor or tutor to help you to do this. It is very common to think that we will be judged solely on our academic achievements rather than as individuals with contributions to make in all sorts of ways. If someone believes that his/her self-worth depends on academic achievement, there will be considerable anxiety surrounding any academic assessment. Too much anxiety can be paralysing. If the pressures to succeed from family or others is extremely high it may help to contact your local counselling service in order to talk about this.

WHAT IS STRESS?

- Stress is part of the body's natural response to a perceived threat. It causes our bodies to go into a fight or flight response.
- The main physiological reaction is the release of a rush of adrenaline which gives us the energy to act.
- If the perceived difficulty is not physical but psychological, the adrenalin is not used up and this can cause increased muscle tension, heart rate and breathing rate.
- This then leads to physical changes (headaches, neck aches, stomach problems), mood changes (irritability, tearfulness, feeling low or anxious) or behaviour changes (sleeping problems, increase or decrease in appetite, difficulty in concentration).
- Exams lead to stress because the marks will influence final degree results. Thus, the stress is derived mainly from the additional meanings which get attributed to exam results.

ORGANISING YOUR TIME

- Draw up a weekly timetable including everything you need to do such as revision, eating, sleeping, lectures and relaxation.
- Allow for sufficient flexibility due to the unexpected.
- Be realistic about how much time you can spend revising – if you divide the week into 21 units (3 a day), you should work for a maximum of 15 units per week. You should have 6 units to do other things.
- Allow yourself time for relaxation as it will decrease your stress levels. This is *not* wasting time as it will help you work more effectively.
- Plan how you will use your time during your revision periods. Decide on the order of topics and how much time you will spend on each.
- Stick to your deadlines.
- Prioritise – do the most important topics first and allow more time for subjects you find difficult.
- Set specific goals for each revision period.

WHAT FRIENDS AND FAMILY CAN DO TO HELP?

- Listen to the individual's concerns, be sensitive and give him/her support.
- Encourage him/her to take breaks and go out from time to time.
- Inform them about various strategies.
- Help them to seek additional help if the stress is getting too much for the person. Reassure them that this is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- Ensure that they are having regular meals, times of relaxation and emotional support.
- Give positive feedback.
- Keep distractions to a minimum.

SLEEPING BETTER

- Do not work in or on your bed.
- Stop working at least an hour before you intend to sleep.
- Stick to a regular bed time and getting up time.
- Maintain good sleeping patterns – 6 to 8 hours a night is recommended.
- Do not drink too much alcohol – it will prevent you from sleeping properly.

STUDY PATTERNS

- Take regular breaks from studying.
- When you notice that you are distracted, get up and take a break.
- Fifteen minutes when you can concentrate is better than three hours of staring into space and feeling guilty or anxious.

TECHNIQUES TO COPE WITH STRESS

- Some individuals may use alcohol, smoking and drugs as a means to manage stress. These may have a calming effect in the short term, however, they are not ideal solutions since it may cause one to feel worse afterward and thus impair the ability to think clearly.
- Eat at least one proper meal a day and keep the body hydrated.
- Exercise. This increases the blood flow around the body which increases clearer thought. Just a 10 minute walk a day can be helpful, especially in using up some of the extra adrenaline created by the stress.

BASIC REVISION METHODS

- **Step One:** Read your notes and seek answers to questions. Be as active in your reading as possible – talk to yourself, walk around the room, speak into a tape recorder.
- **Step Two:** Close up your notes.
- **Step Three:** Actively recall what you have just been reading, asking again the same questions without looking at your notes. Write down what you have recalled in brief notes.
- **Step Four:** Check the original notes with the new ones. If you recalled all the answers to the questions, then you have created a master card which you can use to re-revise without having to consult lengthier notes.
- **Step Five:** If not all the questions have been answered, re-read your original notes, looking particularly to those you missed. Repeat steps two to four.

ON THE DAY OF THE EXAM

- Do not try to learn any new topics since this may impair your ability to recall those you have learnt previously.
- Look at some brief notes or revision cards.
- Do not study for the last hour before the exam.
- Time your arrival at the exam room so you do not need to wait about outside with others who may increase your anxiety level.
- Give yourself time to settle before reading the questions and starting to write.
- Use a breathing exercise to regulate your breathing and calm yourself down.
- Have a plan for how you will use your time in the exam room.

RELAXATION ROUTINES

- Focus your attention on counting breaths.
- Close your eyes and breathe slowly and deeply.
- Locate any areas of tension and try to relax those muscles.
- Stretch.
- Give yourself a little treat each day.
- There are various herbal preparations and homeopathic remedies available but you should consult a qualified practitioner about this.
- Yoga, meditation and massage all contribute to reducing stress and promoting relaxation.