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Guidance

# Coping with exam pressure - a guide for students

Updated 24 October 2023

**Applies to England**

## Coping with exam pressure – a guide for students



## How to feel more confident about exams and assessments

### What are negative beliefs?

Many people with high exam anxiety can't stop worrying about failing or the consequences of failing. For instance, 'If I fail my GCSEs my whole life will be a failure'. These types of beliefs focus on what you can't do rather than what you can.



### **Replacing negative beliefs with positive beliefs**

Find a positive, realistic belief that can replace the negative belief. For instance, if your negative belief is 'I am rubbish at maths' a positive, realistic alternative could be: 'Even if I will never be the best at maths, I will do better if I have a revision plan and stick to it'.

#### **The key things to remember are that:**

- if you suffer from anxiety, replacing negative beliefs can help
- some people find it helpful to keep a record of their beliefs
- you can become a more confident person with a 'can do' attitude

### **How to best plan your revision**



For many students, starting revision is the biggest hurdle to overcome.

One of the most effective ways to build confidence about taking exams, overcome any nervousness about starting revision, and manage any worry about taking exams, is to structure revision.

A good way to manage this is to:

**Create a plan:** break down everything you need to revise into small topics and just revise one topic at a time. By creating a plan you are taking control

**Set targets:** identify when you are going to revise each topic. Give yourself a time limit for when to complete each topic

**Check progress:** check your progress and set yourself a new time limit if necessary. Once you've met a target, set yourself a new one

A way you can approach revision of a specific topic is to structure it in 4 stages. Stage 1 is to set a specific target for what you want to revise and when. Make it manageable and don't try to do too much. Stage 2 is to revise the topic you specified at the time you planned to revise it. Stage 3 is then to test your revision. This could be immediately after your revision, later in the day, or the next day. You could test yourself by simply practising an exam question. Stage 4 is to review your target. If you met it, then set

yourself a new target (Stage 1) and start the cycle of revision again.

It will be important to look at the same topic more than once to make sure your comprehension is good. If you struggle with the topic a second time, try to work out why that is. Were you distracted and finding it difficult to concentrate or have you identified part of a topic you don't quite understand as well?

Of course these are suggestions for ways to practise revision and there are certainly other ways, so if you have found a good way that works for you, stick with it. The thing to take from this is that planning ahead can help to manage any concerns you might have about revising.

**The key things to remember are that:**

- targets should be achievable and manageable
- targets must be short-term and include a time-limit
- review your targets, and when complete, set new ones
- it is important to test yourself to see if your revision is effective

**Stress is not necessarily a bad thing**

People react to stress in different ways. Stress can be a great motivator for some students, giving them the 'get up and go' that they need to succeed. Other students are indifferent to stress; they can float along without getting affected by stress in a good or bad way. Stress can be a bad thing for some students, when exam pressures become overwhelming.

**The key things to remember are that:**

- stress is nothing to be scared of
- anxiety is not inevitable
- you can learn how to cope more effectively

## The signs of high exam anxiety



### Cognitive signs (thoughts)

- going blank in an exam
- difficulty concentrating
- negative thoughts about past performance or consequences of failure

### Affective signs (emotions)

- feeling excessive tension
- feeling panic
- feeling overwhelmed
- feeling not in control

### Physical signs

- dizzy or faint
- sweating
- fast heartbeat
- tight churning stomach

- jelly or wobbly legs

### **The key things to remember are that:**

- most people experience some of these signs during an exam
- high exam anxiety is when you experience them most of the time
- you can learn to control your physical reactions to anxiety

### **How to control physical reactions to anxiety**



#### **Deep breathing**

When you become anxious your breathing becomes shallow and fast. Breathing slowly and deeply will help you calm down and feel in control.

#### **How do I do it?**

- 1 Sit comfortably with a straight back.
- 2 Place your left hand on your chest, and right hand below it, on your diaphragm.

- 3 Inhale deeply through your nose for 5 seconds.
- 4 Hold your breath for 2 seconds.
- 5 Exhale slowly through your mouth.
- 6 Feel the expansion in your diaphragm.
- 7 Repeat for 1 or 2 minutes until you feel calm.

**The key things to remember are that:**

- you can learn to control anxiety with deep breathing
- many people find it easier to learn with an instructor
- yoga or mindfulness classes can also be helpful

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