Exam Anxiety & Relaxation

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is our natural response to threat or sense of an emergency. When we feel under threat, our bodies go into a ‘fight or flight’ response. We become prepared to fight or to run away. The main bodily change is the release of adrenaline and cortisol which gives us the surge of energy to act. The hormone cortisol helps to slow down other processes in the body not involved in dealing with the perceived threat.

Other changes you might notice:

◊ Increased muscle tension
◊ Increased heart rate
◊ Increased breathing rate
◊ Increase in alertness to the slightest touch or sound

Anxiety & Assessments

Feeling anxious about assessments is normal and to be expected.

➔ A moderate amount of anxiety may not be a bad thing. It can sharpen concentration and performance and help to create the extra energy and momentum needed to keep studying, when you might prefer to be doing something else.

➔ Symptoms can be sweaty palms, dry mouth, feeling sick, feeling shaky in the legs and abdomen, feeling tearful, becoming fearful, panicky, wanting to escape, lack of appetite, mind wandering and more.

➔ Popular coping strategies can include drinking alcohol, smoking, eating sweets, sleep too much or too little and avoiding the issues altogether. While some of these may have a short-term calming effect, they are not ideal solutions and their after effects could lead to you feeling less able to focus or concentrate.

University of Southampton Enabling Services
Front Desk: Building 37, 8am – 6pm | Tel: 023 8059 7726 | Email: enable@soton.ac.uk
Drop-in 1-3pm Mon – Fri during term time (Building 37 waiting area)
www.southampton.ac.uk/edusupport
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How you can help yourself

- Remind yourself of past successes, especially in previous examinations.
- Step-by-step: tackle one piece of work at a time.
- Build up a mental toolkit of helpful coping strategies that work for you.
- Have a plan.
- Positive visualisation – see yourself being successful.
- Study with friends.
- Remember – look after your physical as well as your mental wellbeing.

Techniques to try

Thought-stopping technique
When we become anxious we begin to have negative thoughts (“I can’t answer anything”, “I’m going to panic”). If this is happening, halt the spiralling thoughts by mentally shouting ‘STOP’, or picture a road STOP sign or traffic lights on red. Once you have literally stopped the thoughts, you can continue planning.

Use a Mantra
Derived from meditation, a mantra is a word or phrase which you repeat to yourself. Saying something like ‘calm’ or ‘relax’ under your breath or in your head, over and over again, can help defuse anxiety.

Focusing
Looking out of the window, noticing the number of people with red hair, counting the number of desks in each row...all help to distract your attention from anxious thoughts and keep your mind busy. Mental games such as making words out of other words or titles, using alphabetical lists, etc. are all good forms of distractions.

Bridging objects
It can help to carry or wear something with positive associations with another person or place. Touching this bridging object can be comforting in its own right, then allow yourself a few minutes to think about the person or situation which makes you feel good. This can have a really calming effect.

Self-talk
In exam anxiety or panic, we often give ourselves negative messages, “I can’t do this”, “I’m going to fail”, “I’m useless”. Try to consciously replace these with positive, encouraging thoughts: “This is just anxiety, it can’t harm me”, “Relax, concentrate, it’s going to be OK”, “I’m getting there, nearly over”
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## Student Toolkit

### Sleep
Get lots! If you are finding it difficult to sleep, take time to rest. Sleep can help build long-term memory.

### Study Patterns
Take regular breaks. If your mind is wandering try studying in short bursts. Find out about the Pomodoro technique.

### Study Skills
Good strategies and planning can help reduce anxiety and stress. Visit the Southampton Academic Skills Hub (SASH) in the Hartley Library or use the Study Skills Toolkit on Blackboard.

### Food
Food affects mood. Try to eat at least one healthy meal a day, which includes protein and vegetables.

### Drink
Your brain needs water! Stay hydrated - research has found that when we're dehydrated, we have more difficulty keeping our attention focused. Dehydration can impair short-term memory function and the recall of long-term memory.

### Caffeine
In the short-term it can be an effective stimulant. However, it can be unhelpful for people who experience anxiety or stress.

### Exercise
Helps relax tense muscles, increases circulation and creates a positive feeling of wellbeing - all good for combating stress. Even a small walk outside can be helpful.

### Breathing Practice
Helps to calm feelings of stress, which helps regain focus and energy. Deep breathing is way of accessing the parasympathetic nervous system, which controls your rest, digest and relax response.
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5 Senses Drill

1. Pause what you are doing for a moment and take one or two deep breaths to help bring you into the present moment.

2. Look around you, and silently name three things that you see in your immediate vicinity.

3. Now opening to the sounds around you, silently note and name three things that you can hear right now.

4. Bringing your attention to your body, silently name three sensations that you can feel in this moment (maybe warmth, tingling, contraction, coolness...)

5. Bringing your attention to smell and taste, what do you notice in your immediate awareness when you bring you attention to these senses – lightly name what you experience.

6. Take one or two breaths to finish this mindfulness exercise.

Think Basics

I will keep a regular sleep routine
I will see friends
I will avoid eating rubbish
I will exercise/walk
What else can you do? Make a list of ideas
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On the Day

- Don’t try to learn new topics as this may affect your ability to remember those you have learnt previously
- Some people find it helpful to review brief notes or prompt cards
- Try not to study at least an hour before the exam. Do something simple and slow down, bringing your attention to whatever it is you chose to do.

Breathe…

Give yourself time to settle. Take a few deep breaths before reading the exam questions, and again before starting to write.

You are not your results

Whilst it would be disappointing if you do not do as well as you hoped, the chances are that it will not be as catastrophic as you envision. Try to challenge your negative thoughts with a more realistic assessment of the situation (“I am about to write an exam. I am as prepared as I can be. I will try my best”).

Help Available

Further Online Resources: www.southampton.ac.uk/edusupport

Enabling Services Drop-in

An opportunity to meet with an Enabling Services advisor to find out more about the support available. Come along to the Student Services Centre between 1pm and 3pm Monday to Friday.

Mindfulness

Enabling Services Mindful Fridays: Mindfulness can help us to develop new strategies in dealing with difficult or stressful situations. No need to book just come along and join us. House 28 University Road, 13:30 – 14:15.

Workshops

Wednesday Workshops: Wellbeing workshops offered throughout the academic year from 1:30pm to 2:15pm. The workshops cover topics including relaxation techniques, coping with stress, anxiety or low mood and they can also be a good place to meet and talk to other students who are experiencing similar difficulties.
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Exercise

Sport and Wellbeing at the University of Southampton: “...a programme of activities, along with outstanding facilities, enabling you to make lifestyle choices to enhance your wellbeing. A comprehensive range of courses and classes to suit your specific needs, including watersports, swimming and fitness”.

www.southampton.ac.uk/sportandwellbeing/
sportandwellbeing@soton.ac.uk
023 8059 2119

Free relaxation podcasts

Mental Health Foundation: “Designed to fit around your lifestyle and provide an introduction to the skills and techniques that can help you live a mentally healthier life”. Including relaxation techniques, mindfulness, and help with sleep – 17 free podcasts on a variety of wellbeing issues.

www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/podcasts

Useful Apps

Headspace: “Headspace is meditation made simple. Learn online, when you want, wherever you are, in just 10 minutes a day”. (10 days free and paid subscription thereafter). Android and iOS

www.headspace.com

Calm: “Calm can help you meditate, sleep, relax and much more. Guided meditations, immersive nature scenes and blissful music soundscapes”. (In app purchases). Android and iOS.

www.calm.com

Nature

The Valley Gardens: located on the Highfield Campus, behind the Jubilee Sports Hall and Students' Union building and is home to many rare plant and animal species.

Southampton Common: the largest open space in the City boundaries (326 acre site). It is a haven for flora and fauna and has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), with the inclusion of the Hawthorns Urban Wildlife Centre which gives visitors the opportunity to learn about the local ecology and wildlife.