



Exam stress

Conquering exams with less stress

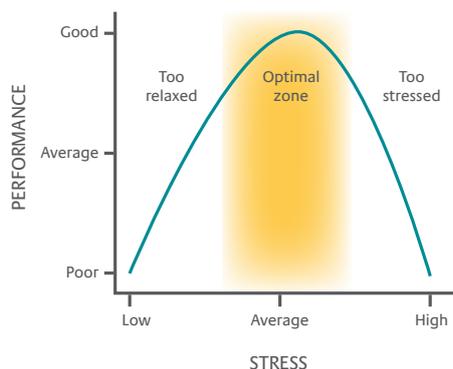
Exams are a part of getting through university. Unfortunately exams can trigger stress and a lot of anxiety for many students. However, there are ways of harnessing your nervous energy to help you get through your exams with success, instead of freezing in fear.



About exam anxiety

We all know how it feels... your stomach churns, you question yourself, and you want to run screaming in the other direction! During the exam, you may feel sick, shaky, sweaty or your mind might go completely blank. Exams can trigger a lot of stress.

Believe it or not, some stress can actually enhance performance. For example, athletes often say they perform better during a race than when they are training. Stress can help you to focus and get through a high level of work in a short amount of time. Take a look at the figure below as a demonstration of the relationship between stress and performance.



Stress can become a problem at high levels, which is when people find their anxiety causes their mind to go blank, or perhaps they have strong physical symptoms of anxiety such as difficulty breathing or feeling panicked.

There are three ways to reduce exam anxiety:

1. Work on general relaxation and stress management
2. Learn strategies to deal with worry and anxiety-provoking thoughts
3. Develop practical skills for studying and sitting exams

Exam stress

Exam anxiety and general stress management

It may sound simple, but keeping a balanced lifestyle is an important part of managing stress around exam time. If your general stress levels are low, you will be far more able to cope with the additional stressors of the exam. Consider the following:

- Live a healthy life style with a balanced diet. Avoid too much alcohol and caffeine. Make sure you prioritise getting enough sleep.
- Prioritise exercise – it is a very effective stress-buster.
- Make time for friends and leisure activities. You will be able to focus better if you also allow yourself to have a decent break!
- Learn strategies to reduce anxiety such as breathing exercises, calming techniques and progressive muscle relaxation (see the Centre for Clinical Interventions for more information www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/minipax.cfm?mini_ID=21)

Exam anxiety and the way we think

The way we think can have a big impact on the way we feel. Two people may have done the same amount of exam preparation, but one may be calm while the other is a nervous wreck. Consider these examples:

- **Jessie:** “I have a bad feeling about this exam. If I fail that’ll be it- I will fail the unit and probably end up as a drop-out. I’m really not cut out for university”
- **Morgan:** “I feel nervous about this exam, but I know I have done enough study to get me through. I have reviewed the practice examples and I’m pretty certain that I will be able to answer the majority of the questions”.

It is no surprise that Jessie will be the one who freezes up during the exam, while Morgan manages to focus despite a few butterflies in his stomach.

For more information on how to challenge negative thinking and change your negative self-talk, see the **Centre for Clinical Interventions** website: www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/minipax.cfm?mini_ID=8 or **ReachOut:** <http://au.reachout.com/what-is-self-talk>

Where are we?

The main Counselling centre is at the South Street Campus on Bush Court. We also have some counselling available at Peel.

Email for all campuses:
counsellingservice@murdoch.edu.au

Exam anxiety and practical tips for preparation

Preparation before the exam can also effect exam anxiety. If you don’t know the subject well, it’s natural that you will feel more nervous. Consider the tips below:

- Start studying well in advance.
- Find out what sort of exam it is (e.g. multiple choice, essay format) and study accordingly.
- Study past exam papers, if available. Study under exam conditions (e.g. give a time limit to essay writing, and don’t check your text books)
- Set a study schedule. Often it helps to study in 45 minute blocks with 10-15 minute breaks.
- Work out how your brain best retains information. Do you need to write notes? Do you need to listen to lectures? Do you need to draw mind maps or use acronyms?
- Look up the exam venue before the day and check it out to make sure you know where to go.
- Plan your time during the exam. Make sure you allocate more time to the questions worth more points.
- Begin by answering the questions you know- this will build your confidence.

Wanting to work on this further?

There are other strategies to manage exam anxiety that are not covered in this handout. The counselling service runs workshops on exam anxiety each semester. Individual appointments are also available for students. Or view other material on our website for further information.

South Street Campus

Social Sciences Building 440 (Bush Court)
Phone: (08) 9360 1227
Hours: 8.30am – 4.30pm

Peel Campus Student Centre

Phone: (08) 9582 5501
Hours: 8.30am – 4.30pm