

## Chapter 9



## Dealing with EXAMS

### Stress

The weeks leading up to an exam can be an extremely stressful and difficult period. Even the most confident student can be affected by exam stress. A certain amount of stress can be effective in motivating us to study. When our levels of stress cross that line to the point when it begins to prevent our ability to study and learn, this is when it becomes a major problem.

Examinations are the most common method of assessment and thus usually a vital component of all courses. Knowing how to deal with them and the stress that surrounds them is an essential skill that every student needs to learn.

### Signs of stress

- ◆ Difficulty in concentrating or an inability to make minor decisions
- ◆ Headaches, abdominal pain, unusually cold hands and feet, tightness in chest, pounding heart, breathing difficulties.
- ◆ A loss of efficiency in school
- ◆ A lack of joy, spontaneity, happiness, or enthusiasm
- ◆ Preoccupations with certain thoughts, especially negative ones
- ◆ Being unable to sleep, persistent nightmares or the recurrence of a disturbing dream
- ◆ Abnormal eating habits
- ◆ An intolerance of people and irritability or outbursts of anger, especially during discussions or disagreements
- ◆ Loss of sense of humour
- ◆ Increased use of stimulants, especially alcohol and tobacco
- ◆ Withdrawal from friends and social situations

(VHI, May 2002)

**If you can deal with the stress surrounding exams, they can become a great opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge on the subject to your lecturer.**

Tips to reduce your stress levels

1. **Be organised!** Keeping your lecture and study notes organised is a great way of reducing stress around exam time. It will also save you time by not having to rummage around for lost notes.
2. **Do not try and cram for exams the night before.** Making a simple revision timetable and spreading your revision over a long period can help reduce stress. Cramming can cause immense stress and anxiety, which can leave the **student drawing a 'blank' when they go into the exam. It is easier to recall information that is learned over a long period and constantly revised than information learned over a very short period of time.**
3. **Eat well.** A well balanced diet is crucial around exam time. Skipping meals can leave you feeling tired which will affect your concentration and attention levels. A well **balanced diet is a great step towards that 'healthy body, healthy mind' balance. Eating a diet that is full of fibre can help keep your digestive system flowing which will prevent you from feeling tired and sluggish.**
4. **Get plenty of sleep.** Recent research into REM sleep (Rapid eye movement) has found that this specific type of sleep may play a role in memory storage (Maquet, 2001). **This would mean that a good night's sleep is essential when you are studying.**
5. **Take time to Relax.** Taking time to relax away from your revision is a great way to reduce stress. Allow blocks of time in your revision timetable for relaxing. It is so important to keep that Study/Personal time balance when you are coming up to exams.
6. **Recognise your stress.** When you feel like you are getting stressed, take a step back from your revision. Stress is a signal from your body and mind that you are doing too much.

Try avoiding excess caffeine, alcohol, smoking and sugar. While they might have initial soothing effects, they have bad long-term effects



### Relaxation Techniques

**Take Deep breaths.** Stopping and taking a few deep breaths during moments of intense stress can help relax you. This is often a very useful technique when you are in an exam hall waiting to take an exam. Right before an exam stress and anxiety levels often peak. Taking a few deep breaths before turning over your exam paper to look at the questions can help relax and focus your mind.

When taking the deep breath try to visualise the air flowing in through your feet the whole way up through your body and then out your head. Repeat this exercise about 10 times and you should begin to feel relaxed. Make sure you are breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth.

**Simple Meditation.** Try meditating before and after you study. This is a great technique to help relax you before beginning your study and after you finish your study.

When beginning your meditation find a place where you feel comfortable. Have your body in a comfortable position and close your eyes. Try visualizing something that relaxes you, like sunbathing on a beach or taking a long walk. Take slow deep breaths, breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. Playing relaxing music can also help you focus on your thoughts when relaxing. Use this meditation time to relax and zone out from the stress of exams.

**Exercise.** Taking regular breaks to exercise can help you relax. Even a simple walk can help get the blood moving around your body; it is also a great outlet to release frustration.



### Revising for your exams

Exams are a crucial aspect of education and, as previously mentioned, the most common form of testing. Adapting easy revision strategies can help you be well prepared for an exam. There is no reason that with proper revision and a calm cool attitude on the day of the exam why you can't excel in the exam situation.

There are 2 central elements for exam preparation.

1.



2.



If you concentrate on these 2 elements of exam preparation you should find that the exam situation will be a lot easier for you. Like with other aspects of your study you also need to organise your time and plan your study. Cramming the night before an exam is not a good revision technique. Instead you should space your revision time over a few months.

There are several methods of revision that work depending on your learning style. Tailor your revision techniques to correspond with your specific learning style.

Visual learners



**Use visual maps, highlighters, visual charts, diagrams and images to represent essays and key information**

Auditory



**Rehearse your notes by talking out loud to yourself or someone else. Study groups are good for auditory learners. Try recording your essays onto audio-tapes and listening to them over and over again.**

Kinaesthetic



**Rewriting your notes repeatedly can help you learn them. If you find this tiring try typing them out on a computer. Turning your revision notes into a chart or diagram can be beneficial for kinaesthetic learners.**

## How to avoid a crisis during revision

- Have all your lecture notes clear and organised. Spend the week before you begin your revision making sure that you are clearly organised.
- Have a clear plan made out for what you need to cover and what you have already covered. Make sure you give extra time to areas of your course that were emphasised by your lecturer
- If you are confused with an aspect of your course try not leaving it until the last minute to ask for help.
- Keep a list of references for any secondary sources you intend to use in the exam.

Setting out a revision timetable before you begin your revision is a great idea for keeping you on target. Use a Visual Map to brainstorm on each individual subject. This will help you outline what areas need to be covered. Being pro-active about your revision allows you a sense of control over the situation. It also helps you to be organised.

### When making a revision plan consider the following:

1. Where are you going to revise?
2. Will you work alone or form a study group?
3. Always cover enough topics i.e. at least cover twice as many topics and the number of questions you need to answer in the exam
4. Devise a revision timetable which should begin at least 5-6 weeks before the exams – make sure you schedule enough time to revise each topic.
5. Gather together lecture notes, handouts, journal articles, assignments, essays and key text books.
6. Revising past exam papers is important when studying for exams as it helps you focus on the most important areas of the course. Also go through the final lectures in courses carefully as these may give useful summaries and tips to likely exam questions.

### Exam Practice

Everything we do in life takes a little practice to get used to; exams are the exact same. Doing some exam practice will help you when it comes to the time constraints in an exam situation. It will also help you practice thinking and forming an answer under pressure. If you go into an exam without any practice the experience may overwhelm you and you may fail to get down on paper all your knowledge.

When preparing your revision essays from past exam papers, it is often helpful to practise writing your sample answer out in the time constraint given for the actual exam. When you are in a 3 hour exam and you have to answer 4 questions sticking to your time limit of 40 minutes per question with 20 minutes for your essay plan will mean that each question will get the same amount of time and effort. If each question is weighted evenly then it is vital that you give each question the same amount of time and effort.



At the beginning of the exam, after you have decided which questions you are going to answer, it is very helpful to take a few minutes to write down an essay plan for your answer. Taking those few minutes to make an essay plan will help you lay out a well structured answer. It will also help you keep to the point and will be a reminder of information you need to put into the essay as you go along. Try to practise making essay plans for questions you have not seen before to prepare for the exam.

### Exam Essay Plan

**Introduction → Your introduction should set the tone for the entire essay. It should be short and to the point. If a statement is given, make sure you begin by saying whether you agree or disagree with the statement.**

**Point 1 → Your first and last points should be your strongest.**

**Point 2**

**Point 3**

**Point 4**

**Point 5 → Your last point should tie up your whole argument /essay.**

**Conclusion → Use your conclusion to quickly review your whole argument. State why you took the approach you took. This section should be a paragraph long, definitely no more than 2.**

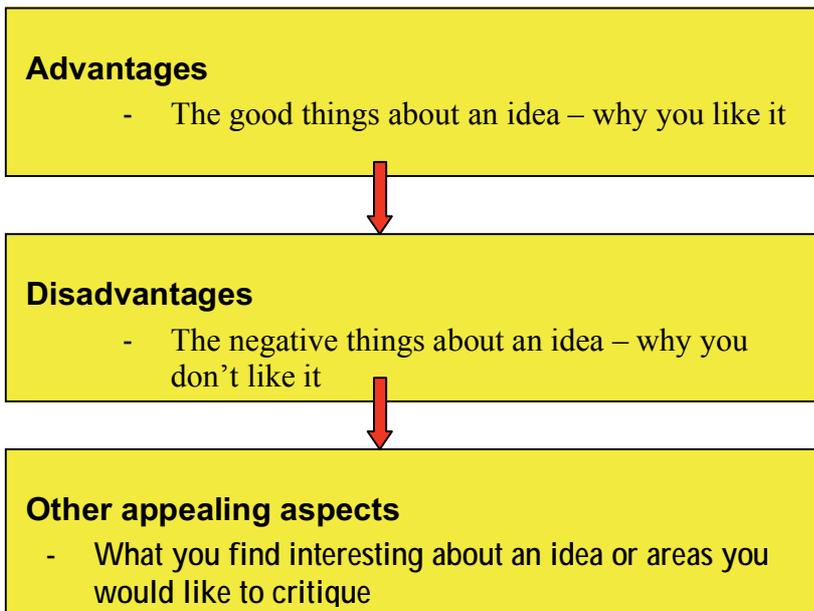
When you are writing your answer try to keep in mind the following rule.

- **Make a Point**
- **Reference the Point**
- **Prove the Point**

**The Plus, Minus, Other  
Appealing Aspects Technique**

If you find that you can't answer a question in the exam, do not panic! Try the following technique to help trigger your memory. This technique works by taking a few minutes to find as many Positive, Negative and Other Appealing Aspects about a certain subject.

**Advantages, Disadvantages, Other appealing aspects**



By giving a few minutes to find reasons for each aspect of the answer – this will help you to form a comprehensive and structured approach to the essay.

## Example

**The legal age for drinking in *Ireland should be raised to 21 years of age?***

### Advantages

- People would be more mature before they start drinking
- It would help clamp down on under age drinking
- It puts less social pressure on people to start drinking in their teens
- Because you would be more mature you would be more likely to drink sensibly

### Disadvantages

- People would find a way to get drink despite their age

### Other appealing aspects

- Whether the ban would make a difference to under age drinking
- The level of support that young people would give to the ban



### ***In The Exam***

#### **Firstly, check that you are sitting the correct exam!**

- Read the instructions carefully. If you don't understand something ask the examiner for help.
- Read through the whole paper before you begin and mark any questions you could answer.
- Don't panic. Exam papers always look dreadful to start with.
- Put down an answer for everything--in some cases you will receive marks for being on the right track.
- Write helpful notes in the margins, like equations, rules, diagrams, etc, particularly if you've worked hard to memorize them--it reduces the load on your memory.
- Always show your work where it's appropriate--sometimes the steps leading to an answer are just as important as the final result
- With multiple-choice questions, eliminate obviously wrong options straightaway and choose among the remaining ones--your odds are better!

- Check each section of the exam after you've completely finished - often you'll catch simple mistakes or better answers will occur to you after you've seen the whole exam.

### **Quick Summary**

- ◆ Take a few deep breaths before turning over your exam paper
- ◆ Don't panic if you do not immediately see a question that you can answer. Make an essay plan out and use the above technique or Visual Mapping to help trigger brainstorming
- ◆ Use your time wisely. Try to keep within the time block that you have set for each question
- ◆ Leave yourself a few minutes at the end to look back over your answer for mistakes

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