

# Exam Stress

## Anne the Anxiety Buster

**Liz:** You know, exam anxiety is such a common problem for students but it isn't often acknowledged or understood. People say things like "but everyone gets stressed about exams" and while that is certainly true, if you've ever experienced the debilitating effects of anxiety, you'll know that exam anxiety is more than just your garden variety stress. Actually, maybe the most helpful way for us to talk about this is for me to introduce you to one of my clients, Anne, who had great difficulties with exam anxiety that she was able to make great strides in dealing with.

Anne was a student in a program that was loaded with exams – every semester, there were usually as many as 10-12 exams that she had to cope with. Now, Anne told me that she had always struggled with exams because she would get extraordinarily nervous, but had managed to get by. However, once she got to uni, the problem started getting worse and worse. Anne struggled with both in the preparation for and the doing of exams. Anne came to see me after a particularly upsetting exam that she had been unable to finish because she became overwhelmed by panic. So, to get a clearer picture, I asked Anne "What happened to you in the exam Anne?" And here is what she said:

**Anne:** Well, I became overwhelmed by panic and couldn't finish it.

**Liz: Okay – well that about sums it up! Tell me about the sorts of things that generally happen for you when you are trying to study for your exams?**

**Anne:** Well, I worry the whole time about failing, I worry about not remembering what I am studying, I worry that I am going to have to quit my course because I just can't handle it. So sometimes I'll be reading things and find that I have read a whole page and not remembered a single word, which only makes me more anxious.

**Liz:** So it sounds like you are so caught up in your worrying thoughts that there is just no room to concentrate and retain the things you're trying to learn.

**Anne:** Yes – that's exactly it!

**Liz: And what generally happens for you during an exam?**

**Anne:** By the time I get to the exam, I am usually so nervous that I can hardly stand it. I get heart palpitations, sweaty palms, I feel like I can't breathe and I've even thrown up a couple of times beforehand. And then when I get in the room, sometimes my mind goes completely blank and I forget things that I know I have revised.

**Liz:** That sounds awful – it must be exhausting to cope with exams.

**Anne:** It just makes me feel like such a loser and so hopeless, like I'm never going to get over this. I just don't know that I have what it takes to be a student.

So, once we had worked out what went wrong for Anne, what her symptoms were and how she felt about it, over the next few sessions we turned our attention to what triggered her exam anxiety...

So I asked Anne:

**Liz: "Can you tell me about the thoughts that you experience when you are trying to study? What are you saying to yourself?"**

**Anne:** They go something like this: "What if I can't get through the exam? What if I fail? What if I make a fool of myself?" Also, throw in a healthy serving of "I'm such a loser", "I should be able to handle this by now"; "I've just got to get it right this time or I'll never succeed" and "I just don't want to do this anymore, I wonder if I can find someone and pay them to sit my exam for me?"

Contd. on next page

# Maximising Academic & Personal Potential (MAPP)

# Exam Stress

## Anne the Anxiety Buster

**Liz:** (chuckles) Well – that would be one way of dealing with it I suppose. But I wonder about the effect that these thoughts are having on you – the “what if” thoughts that raise your anxiety, the critical thoughts, the “I should” perfectionistic thoughts, the hopeless “what’s the point” thoughts. Because I imagine that these sorts of thoughts would elevate your anxiety and make you too anxious to be able to study effectively. A little bit of stress and anxiety can help you to have the energy to study, but too much starts to have the opposite affect and makes concentrating impossible. Why don’t we start tackling some of those thoughts and see if we can help you challenge them when they come up for you and reduce their impact on you.

....

So, then we worked on helping Anne to deal with these anxiety making thoughts when they arose, first on challenging them by asking herself “what is the evidence that this is true?” or “is it really helping me to think this way?” and then secondly by starting to use self-talk that was encouraging. So, instead of saying, “I’m going to fail” or “I couldn’t cope if I failed”, she would try to say “I will do my best” or “I would survive even if I failed”. Anne also worked on learning how to use relaxation effectively as a means of reducing her anxiety. She cut down on her caffeine, salt and sugar intake in the lead up to exams and made sure that she got plenty of sleep, which are all things that can help to address the physiological aspects of anxiety that can be so debilitating.

Then we turned our attention to some strategies Anne could use in the exam room when anxiety struck – in other words, developing a personalised “contingency plan”. I asked Anne:

**Liz: “What do you think might help you best if you do happen to experience anxiety in the exam room that gets in the way of you being able to successfully complete the exam?”**

**Anne:** Okay, I think what might work for me is that if I go blank or start to panic in my next exam, I’m going to put my pen down and close my eyes and breathe slowly for a couple of minutes until I can feel my anxiety lessening. I also like the idea of bringing in a ‘lucky charm’ into the exam room with me – I can bring the pen I got for winning a spelling bee in primary school because it helps to remind me of success, of things I’m good at and it’s also comforting. That way, if I start to feel too anxious, I can pick up the pen and visualise how excited and proud I was to win it and it might distract me from my panicky thoughts.

...

Anne found that she was far more relaxed in the lead up to exams than she had been previously. This meant that her revision was far more effective because she was able to concentrate. Anne also worked on being patient with herself and not setting expectations that were unreasonable. Anne knew that she might experience anxiety in the exam, but because she had already decided how she would deal with it if it came up, it seemed less scary. When Anne sat her exams, she did experience some anxiety, but she used her pre-planned strategies and found that her feelings of panic subsided and she was able to go on and answer questions. As a result, Anne was able to successfully pass her exams and in so doing, she started to feel more confident about her ability to cope with her anxiety, to be able to complete her exams even though she felt anxious – feel the fear and do it anyway! Although Anne still did not like exams, she was no longer afraid of them and knew that she could cope.

Well done Anne!

Now – working on an issue like exam anxiety can take time and what worked for Anne might not be what works best for you. Remember that coping with anxiety is a personalised experience, just as the experience of anxiety itself is a personal experience. But you are not alone and you can learn to work better with your anxiety. The main thing is not to put pressure on yourself to get rid of anxiety – as I said before, a little bit is actually a good thing, instead just learn to work with it rather than suppress it or try to avoid it, because it is those things that make anxiety stronger.

Thanks for your time in listening to this podcast, I hope you have found it helpful. And remember that there are more resources on the MAPP website, on the counselling service website and the study and learning centre website. And of course, you are always welcome to attend a workshop or come and speak to a counsellor or a learning advisor in person.

# Maximising Academic & Personal Potential (MAPP)

**Contd. on next page**

# Exam Stress

## Anne the Anxiety Buster

### Script 2 for pod cast – Dealing with Pre-exam anxiety

Feeling a bit nervous in the lead up to exams is natural and believe it or not, actually quite helpful because it can energise you and help to sharpen your focus while you get on with the job at hand. But there can definitely be too much of a good thing and too much stress or anxiety can get in the way. You might find that you are spending more time worrying about the exam than being able to study and that even when you do try to study, you can't concentrate or retain information – which probably only makes you worry more, right?

Well – don't feel too disheartened. There are definitely things that you can do to help you cope with the anxiety that you experience before exams and still allow you to revise effectively. In this pod cast, we are going to talk about a variety of strategies that might be helpful for you. Listen to all the suggestions but then my advice to you is to choose the strategies that resonate for you – that fit with who you are, that sound possible, "do-able" or that sound interesting and that you might have some energy to try. Everyone is different and what works for one might not work for another, so the goal is to come up with a personalised strategy that fits for you.

#### Strategy One: Relaxation

If you find that you are in a constant state of high tension, regularly have muscular pain in your neck and shoulders, or grind your teeth, or feel agitated, or nauseous, or have heart palpitations or find that you take short shallow breaths rather than deep and full breaths, then developing a regular routine of deep relaxation might be very useful for you. Now deep relaxation doesn't mean sitting in front of the telly taking deep sips of your favourite bevvy (although a little bit of that sort of time out can be a good thing too!). Deep relaxation refers to a process to help slow the body down and give it recovery time. The aim is to feel as relaxed as possible without actually being asleep!

Examples of deep relaxation include meditation, deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, visualisation or all of the above. You can find more information on relaxation exercises and examples of relaxation exercises on the counselling service website under "online resources". The most simple breathing exercise that can be quite effective if you keep it up for five minutes or more is to take slow, long, full and deep breaths (count in to 3 or 4 and out to 3 or 4 so you don't end up taking huge gulps of air and let your breath in and out gradually). It is important to practice deep relaxation regularly in the lead up to your exams to help manage your stress levels and become comfortable with the technique as a way of helping you to feel calmer.

#### Strategy 2 - Healthy lifestyle

Now, we've all been guilty of thinking that the five food groups during exams include chips, chocolate, lollies, coffee or tea, and fast food that should be eaten on the run and when you've got time. And I'm not saying that you shouldn't have some treats, but eating a balanced diet that includes fresh foods (especially fruits and vegetables) and regularly eating at meal times (especially breakfast) can help you to manage your stress levels more effectively. Just in case you're not sure, the five food groups are actually Grains (which include bread, cereal and pasta), Fruits; Vegetable; Meats and other protein source and finally, Dairy.

Other nutritional tips include:

- Reduce caffeine intake (as caffeine intensifies the physical symptoms of stress)
- Reduce nicotine intake (which has a similar affect to caffeine)
- Reduce processed sugar intake (as excessive refined sugar intake can cause sudden drops in blood pressure – hypoglycemia)
- Reduce sodium intake (as excessive sodium intake can cause increases in blood pressure)
  
- Include a protein source in your diet (protein is necessary for energy and maintenance of cellular immunity and hormone production)
- Include Vitamin C and B-complex Vitamin sources in your diet (eg. broccoli, tomatoes, citrus fruits, potatoes)
- Include a calcium source in your diet (milk products, tofu)
- Include a zinc source in your diet
- Include a potassium source in your diet (tomatoes, bananas, dark green leafy vegetables)

It is also important to try to go to bed and get up at regular times and get at least 8 hours sleep per night. Keeping up a routine that includes exercise will help you to discharge stresses that may be building up.

Contd. on next page

# Maximising Academic & Personal Potential (MAPP)

# Exam Stress

## Anne the Anxiety Buster

### Strategy 3 - Time Management

One of the ways to reduce stress very effectively is to be more prepared, have more time to study and have an idea of what you need to do and when. So, planning out how you will spend your study time and being realistic about what you can achieve within the time you allocate could really help. Allow for regular breaks and time out or down time. Use a study time table in which you mark out study periods and create a prioritised task list to follow within these study periods. You can find more information on time management on the Study and Learning Centre website and on other components of the MAPP program.

### Strategy 4 - Down time

Make sure that you make some time for yourself when preparing for exams, either to do something fun and relaxing, or something social with friends or family. Having some down time can give you more energy for your studies and ultimately help you to concentrate better. You might also find other activities relaxing to do during down time like taking a long bath, going for a walk, listening to music or a relaxation tape.

### Strategy 5 - Practical preparation

Taking care of all the small details before the day of the exam can give you more mental space and avoid last minute panics. So:

1. Develop an active revision strategy that will work for you and allow you to use resources such as lecture notes, readings and practice questions/ practice exams. Start as early as you can and avoid cramming. Check out the podcast on active revision strategies.
2. Find out all the information you can about the exam before the day. This reduces the number of things you will have to worry about on the day.

For example:

- Where is the exam scheduled?
- How long will it take you to get there? Do a trial run.
- How will you get there (drive, walk, public transport)?
- If driving, where will you park and is parking available at the time of the exam?
- If using public transport, get a timetable and choose a time that will allow you to catch the next tram/train/bus and still be on time if you miss it.
- What does the room look like?
- What do you need to do when you get there? Will you need your student card? Pens, pencils, eraser, sharpener, watch, calculator etc.
- What are the exam rules and regulations?

The night before the exam, gather together all the things that you will need so that you don't have to search for them in the morning.

### Strategy 6 - Get a good night's sleep

This one's pretty simple and is just as it sounds - on the night before the exam, it is important that you get a good night's sleep to be sure that you are able to concentrate at your optimum level.

### Strategy 7 - Get there in good time

Give yourself some time to spare to avoid rushing and increasing your stress levels, but try not to get there too early to avoid getting caught up in conversations with others about what they have revised and what they expect to be on the exam. This will only stress you further. Sit quietly by yourself taking deep, relaxing breaths and repeating positive statements to yourself.

### Strategy 8 - Visualise success

Spend some time visualising how you would like things to go.

- Picture yourself turning up to the exam feeling calm and confident.
- Picture yourself sitting at a desk in the exam room and feeling comfortable and relaxed.
- Picture yourself reading the questions and smiling because you know what you will write about.
- Picture yourself concentrating well.
- Picture yourself finishing the exam within the allotted time and feeling happy with your performance.

Try to put as much detail into this visualisation as possible as it will make it seem more realistic

Contd. on next page

# Maximising Academic & Personal Potential (MAPP)

# Exam Stress

## Anne the Anxiety Buster

### Strategy 9 - Positive self-statements

In the lead up to your exam, repeat positive and affirming statements to yourself like "I can do this", "I have studied and I know the material" and so on. Try not to put pressure on yourself by comparing yourself to others or worrying about what your friends and family will think if you don't do well. When developing your own positive self-statements, there are some basic rules, which can give you some guidance:

- Avoid negatives (don't say "I'm not going to panic", say "I am confident and calm about my exams" instead.)
- Keep it in the present tense (don't say "I will feel better about exams" as this will keep the good feelings in the future and not the present, say "I am feeling better about exams")
- Keep it in the first person (saying "I feel confident about my exams" is better than "it is possible to feel more confident about exams")
- Have some belief in what you say (don't tell yourself something you really don't believe. Try to think about the reasons why something positive is true and challenge your negative beliefs if you have trouble believing a positive self-statement)

Here are some examples of positive self-statements:

- "I can find out what I have to do to help me get as prepared as I can"
- "Although my time is limited, I can use the time I have more effectively"
- "If I can't study all of the material, I can prioritise the more important parts"
- "I don't need to compete with others. I'm doing my best. I am showing signs of improvement"
- "Others are uptight too. I can control it and make it work for me"
- "My feelings are in my control"
- "If I get anxious, I can use a relaxation technique and calm myself down"

### COUNTERSTATEMENTS

If you find that you are experiencing negative, unhelpful and self-defeating thoughts, then developing some counter statements might be helpful for you. For example, if you find yourself saying "I'm getting really tense, I'm going to stuff up this exam" Or "My life will be over if I don't pass this exam" Try creating a counter statement that is accepting of your anxiety, challenges the negative thought and is constructive:

For example: "I'm getting uptight, so all I can do is relax. I'll take a few moments to calm down and give myself a chance to think more clearly" Or "Will my life really be ruined if I fail this exam? No it won't! I'll be disappointed if I fail, but I can attempt it again next year or choose another subject"

### Conclusion

I know that coping with anxiety is really tough, but if anxiety is a prominent part of your life as it is for one in five of us and it impacts on your exam preparation, then finding some techniques that help you to get on with the business of studying might help you to reach your full potential. But try to be patient, try to be positive and try to be your own best friend. Think about what you would say to that best friend you care so much about if they were freaking out about their exams to encourage them and try telling yourself the same things and you'll be on your way.

Thanks for your time in listening to this podcast, I hope you have found it helpful. And remember that there are more resources on the MAPP website, on the counselling service website and the study and learning centre website. And of course, you are always welcome to attend a workshop or come and speak to a counsellor or a learning advisor in person.

### Script 3 for pod cast – Dealing with Within-exam anxiety

Feeling nervous before an exam is one thing, but feeling so anxious during an exam that you go blank, find the words swimming on the page before your eyes, or start feeling so sick that you just can't concentrate is another – the double whammy! It can make the whole process of exams feel like the worst torture from hell and stop you from being able to show your lecturers that you do know your stuff.

But don't lose heart – just as there are a variety of strategies to help you cope with pre-exam anxiety, there are also a variety of strategies that can help you with your anxiety if it happens in the exam room itself. Now, the important thing to remember is that these strategies are just suggestions and the goal is to choose the ones that you think might work for you. It might involve a bit of trial and error, but my hope is that these ideas will plant the seeds to help you create your own personalised strategy for coping with anxiety in the exam room.

Contd. on next page

**Maximising  
Academic &  
Personal  
Potential (MAPP)**

# Exam Stress

## Anne the Anxiety Buster

### **Strategy 1: HOW TO DEAL WITH GOING BLANK OR QUESTIONS YOU DON'T KNOW THE ANSWERS TO:**

Okay – this is the big one, the most dreaded scenario. There you are, in the exam room, you've done the prep, you understand the material, you've worked hard. You turn the paper over and look at the questions. Horror. What are these odd assortment of words on the page? They certainly don't make any sense. And although there is a vague sense that somewhere at some time you read about that stuff, it certainly isn't in your head right now. Elvis has left the building. What do you do? First of all, remember that if you work on relaxing, speaking to yourself in a positive way, then you can coax Elvis back into the building – after all – you did your revision and remembered the stuff last time you went over it. It is there in your memory somewhere, you just need to find the right path to get to it. Try some of these ideas:

#### **If you experience memory blocks**

Try writing down any words or ideas that may be associated with the question, visualise diagrams or other related materials to establish cues and connections. Think about where you were when you last revised the stuff, think about the lecture theatre and where you sat when you heard the material for the first time. If you still can't remember, leave the question and come back to it later as the information may resurface once you begin concentrating on another topic.

#### **If you find yourself worrying about questions you don't know the answers to:**

As hard as it will be, it is best not to spend all your time in the exam focussing on those questions you feel less confident of as this will take up time that you could utilise answering questions that you are confident in answering. You will also become more anxious, which will affect your ability to successfully complete the rest of the exam. It is usually better to start with the questions that you feel most confident about as this will help to create a momentum and build up confidence for tackling the rest of the exam.

### **Strategy 2: What you can do if your anxiety gets too intense during the exam:**

First of all, take the time to use some simple and portable relaxation strategies

Use deep breathing techniques to help calm the physical symptoms. Four or five deep breaths, counting slowly as you breathe in and then breathe out can make a huge difference. Practice deep breathing before the exam so that it becomes a comfortable and familiar technique that you can use to help relax you. You can also try stretching, or flexing and then relaxing your finger, shoulder and neck muscles to promote blood flow. Shifting position slightly to allow more blood flow to your back and the lower half of your body can also help.

#### **Other ideas – try using a mantra**

Repeat a word or phrase in your head that has a positive and relaxing meaning such as "calm", "let go", "relax" while you breathe in and out slowly and deeply. Use visualisation Think of a peaceful scene in your imagination. It can be of a real time and place that you've experienced where you felt positive feelings, or an imaginary place where you would like to be. Make it as vivid as possible by imagining what each of your 5 senses would experience while being there. While visualising, breathe deeply, slowly and evenly until you feel calmer.

#### **Focussing**

Pick a focal point in the room (eg. the wall, a picture, a clock) and focus your mind on this point. Breathe in slowly, tune into the positive thought "I CAN do this exam" and exhale slowly. Repeat this until you feel calmer and more positive. If you continue to feel anxious, use focussing to distract your mind. Look out of the window and count the number of trees, cars, people etc. that you can see, or count the number of desks in the exam room. Try breaking your pencil lead and focus on sharpening it. You could also try "mental games" such as making words out of another word or alphabetising a list of words as a form of distraction.

#### **Thought stopping**

Now, this doesn't work for everybody but it is worth a try as it might work for you. If negative thoughts and catastrophic worries start spiralling in your mind during the exam (like "I'm going to fail" or "I'm going to panic", "I don't know the answers to any of these questions"), try a thought stopping technique. Mentally shout "STOP", or picture a road stop sign, or red traffic lights. Then follow this with some deep breathing until you feel calmer and then slowly go back to the exam questions.

#### **Using a physical distraction**

Although this might sound a bit dramatic, some people have found that doing something physical like flicking a rubber band against your wrist, or pressing your finger nails into your palm to distract yourself from the thoughts can help with anxiety. The theory is that the mild pain can help to put a stop to the spiralling negative or panicky thoughts.

Contd. on next page

# Exam Stress

## Anne the Anxiety Buster

### **Bridging objects**

This is one of my favourites. The idea of this strategy is to bring something with you to the exam that reminds you of a positive person or a time in your life that was positive. Touching or looking at this object when you are feeling anxious can have a calming effect because it helps to connect you to the positive feelings.

### **Positive self-statements**

If you are giving yourself negative messages like "I can't do this", "I'm pathetic", "what's the point?", it is important to try to replace these statements with more positive and constructive self-talk. Try to encourage yourself instead by reminding yourself "this is just anxiety, it can't harm me", or "it's going to be okay if I relax and concentrate", "I'm getting there" and so on. Come up with a list of encouraging statements before the exam that you can get yourself familiar with (even try the old trick of writing them on post it notes and sticking them up around the house where you can see them every day to remind yourself of them).

### **Conclusion**

Most people hate exams or have had some negative experience in exams, another large group of us really struggle with being able to perform effectively in exams, so you're not alone. Unfortunately, sometimes exams are a necessary evil – something that you just have to do to be able to achieve your goals of getting your degree and getting out into the world. Over time, you can build up a repertoire of strategies that are helpful to you in being able to get through exams. You'll probably never enjoy exams, they may never be your preferred method of assessment, you may even continue to find them excruciating – but the goal is not to get to enjoy them or to get rid of all anxiety – the goal is to be able to demonstrate what you know in spite of that pesky anxiety. Anxiety doesn't have to stop you functioning or getting to your goals – you can get there, I know because I've seen others do it too.

Thanks for your time in listening to this podcast, I hope you have found it helpful. And remember that there are more resources on the MAPP website, on the counselling service website and the study and learning centre website. And of course, you are always welcome to attend a workshop or come and speak to a counsellor or a learning advisor in person.