

Tackling Exams Effectively

How To Deal With Going Blank or Questions You Don't Know the Answers To

Memory blocks

Write down any words or ideas that may be associated with the question, visualise diagrams or other related materials to establish cues and connections. 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.

Worrying about questions you don't know the answers to

It is best not to focus 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 and increase your anxiety symptoms, which will affect your ability to successfully complete the rest of the exam. If you get stuck, move on to other parts of the exam and come back to these questions later. 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.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO REDUCE WITHIN-EXAM ANXIETY:

Relaxation

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 thighs, buttocks and back can also help.

Use 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.

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.

Focusing

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 focusing 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

If negative thoughts and catastrophic worries start spiralling in your mind during the exam (like "I'm going to fail", "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 take a deep breath in and breathe slowly out, relaxing your shoulders, hands, forehead and jaw. Keep breathing deeply until you feel calmer and then slowly go on with what you were doing.

Creating mild pain

You could also try something physical like flicking a rubber band against your wrist, or pressing your finger nails into your palm to distract yourself from the thoughts. The mild pain can help to put a stop to the spiralling thoughts.

Bridging objects

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 those 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.