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## Tips for combating Exam Stress/Anxiety

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The time running up to examinations is a very stressful period for many students. It is a time when we perceive that we are judged by ourselves, our peers, our teachers and most importantly, our parents or people of similar significance. It can also be a time when self delusion ends and a big chunk of reality kicks in. We can become concerned that in the past we did not do enough and now we have to do so much more to catch up and make amends. So we create huge levels of stress, perhaps more than we have ever felt before.

This stress gives rise to many difficulties e.g. irritability, difficulty in concentrating, headaches, moments of panic etc.

Stress usually has very negative connotations but it is an important part of life and can be very positive. A situation such as a first date is a good example. Standing on the start line of an athletic event would be another. Everybody is subjected to stress and, let's face it, life would be very dull without many of the challenges associated with stress. However, if the stress or anxiety is acute and has been present for some time, then it is advisable to seek professional help from a doctor or therapist specialising in anxiety.

So how can we deal with the anxiety generated by the upcoming exam(s)? There are in fact several areas that we can consider:

External pressure.

If you are a parent and reading this because you are concerned for your child at this time, then please ensure that you have not, either directly or indirectly, put huge pressure on him or her. If you have, then you will be a major part of their problem. Unfair criticism, implied (or overt) expectations of high achievement, comparisons with siblings, 'awfulising' about the terrible consequences if they fail etc is guaranteed to cause negative emotional turmoil in your child and increase levels of stress and anxiety. Sit down with your child and have an adult conversation about how he or she feels at this time. What are their concerns.

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Being able to discuss this with you and with you listening and being supportive will be a great help.

Before we look at the ways in which you can reduce your levels of stress and anxiety over the upcoming events, I would like to say a word of warning. Sometimes when things seem to be too much and appear to overwhelm us, there can be the temptation to try to 'hide' from this by taking 'recreational' drugs or alcohol. Please don't. Apart from these probably being illegal, substances can adversely affect areas of the brain such as memory and concentration. This can cause a long term as well as a short term problem. Ok that's the nagging bit out of the way so let's move on.

### Areas of help

Worry over an upcoming event is called anticipatory anxiety. So let's have a look at how the anticipation can be less daunting.

### Work environment

This is related to where you do your studying for exams and is likely to be a bedroom or study in your home.

1. Is your desk or study area tidy? If you are studying several subjects and the desk is littered with books and papers from all subjects then this will help to clutter your mind and prevent concentration and clear thinking. For example, if you are studying English and there are maths and physics books open on your table then there is a constant reminder of things you have to study for these, perhaps more difficult subjects.

So decide on the total time that you need to spend on study during this period and divide by the number of subjects. So, if you have allowed yourself 3 hours of revision for 3 subjects for example, then allocate 1 hour to each. Then ensure that only information relevant to the subject that you are now to study is on your desk/table i.e. clear the area of all subject material that you are not about to study.

You can now

- i) Focus on this and not be distracted.

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- ii) Accept that this time is only for this subject allowing you to 'knuckle down' and concentrate.
2. Do you have loud popular music playing or the TV switched on while you study? If so, turn it off (not down). I do recommend that you play some relaxing music and the old fashioned baroque music is ideal. You don't have to like it (although you might well end up liking it). Have it playing quietly in the background. Composers like Bach, Corelli, Albinoni, Handel are good choices and most music stores sell compilation CD's. Check with your parents. It is possible that they be as un-cool as me and have some of this music in their CD collection. This may sound very 'un cool' but there is good reason for using this type of music and that is it operates at a similar frequency generated by our brains when we are relaxed.

With the brain in this calmed state, you are much better able to concentrate and more easily able to absorb information. With loud rock type music you may find yourself having to try and 'force' yourself to learn. How many times do you read and re-read a page or do an exercise again and again because you realise that you have not understood or remembered any of it?

3. Learn to relax. This can be difficult in our workaday world. One method is to use hypnosis.

You can download a free audio file from my website:  
[www.wessexwellbeing.com](http://www.wessexwellbeing.com) which gives about 30 minutes of total relaxation.

Alternatively, set some quiet time aside and just sit and try the following:

You might like to record these instructions instead of trying to remember them. Play the recording back and rehearse until you can do the exercise without worrying how you sound or having to remember the details.

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Make sure that you are somewhere quiet, on your own and not likely to be interrupted.

Close your eyes and start to breathe in and out deeply, slowly and gently and just focus on the air moving in and out of your nose. Keep breathing at a regular, comfortable rate. After a few breaths, start to become aware of any tension in your body. On each out breath, start to relax any part of your body that has tension. The shoulders and the neck are good places to start. Thoughts will creep in but don't hang on to them, just let them float off into the distance.

After a few minutes when you are feeling relaxed, think of a time when you felt proud of a particular achievement. Take time to find and vividly remember it, there is no rush. See yourself clearly in this memory. Focus on the wonderful feelings of being calm and in control and totally confident. Focus on the details: Is it in colour or black and white? Make the picture brighter and brighter, larger and larger, the sounds louder and the feelings stronger and stronger and then say SUCCESS and tap the back of your left hand with your index finger.

Think of a chocolate teapot.

Now repeat the scene of your being proud, confident and in control and saying SUCCESS at and tapping the back of your left hand twice more.

Now just continue to sit there, relaxed and feeling confident and just imagine that you are in a huge library. So many shelves all neatly stacked with interesting books. All neatly catalogued so finding information in this library is so easy.....This is true because this library represents all the knowledge and all the experiences you have had in your life. All the information is stored here in these books and you can get to whatever information you want simply by believing this.

So before you start an exam or any endeavour that needs you to recall things you have done or seen or experienced, then you can now have a 'magic ritual' that makes it all so easy.

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All you have to do is to say to yourself **SUCCESS** as you tap the back of your left hand and just visualise this magnificent library of yours. It's that simple.

So now you can start to open your eyes and wake up feeling refreshed and so confident that you are now so in control. No further need for worry or anxiety.

4. Remember that we are all responsible for **choosing** our own emotions. Why choose stress and anxiety when these negative emotions work against you? You can only be examined on things that you have been taught. All that you have been taught is in your mental library and you now know that you can easily access all this information whenever you want to.

So perhaps you can now choose to see the exam as an interesting challenge that you are more than ready and able for.

I wish you well.