

Exam Stress

This guide aims to help you understand and recognise exam stress and offers strategies to help you minimise any harmful effects. The leaflet also provides contact details for a number of further sources of help and advice.

Related guides: ['Revision and Exam Skills'](#) and ['Common Exam Errors'](#).

What is stress?

Stress is one of the body's natural responses to something that is threatening or frightening. It is something that we all experience at times. Many aspects of university life have the potential to cause stress, including adjusting to a new environment, fulfilling academic requirements, financial pressures, developing friendships and preparing for and sitting exams.

Stress is not necessarily harmful: mild forms of stress can motivate and energise you. Slightly increased stress levels may make you more alert and motivated to do your work. However, if your stress level is too high then it can cause difficulties, including impairing your ability to prepare for and perform during exams.

The Stress Reaction

To understand what produces the responses associated with anxiety and stress, think about how your body responded at times when you felt threatened or frightened. It is likely that you will have experienced the following physical responses:

- Increased muscle tension to prepare your muscles for use;
- Increased heart rate to boost blood flow and energy levels;
- Increased breathing rate to supply oxygen required for energy;
- Extra alert senses to produce a reaction from the slightest touch or sound.

All these reactions happen automatically when we are under stress; they are driven by the production of hormones, including adrenaline. This is called the flight or fight response because it equips you to fight or escape from situations which are dangerous or threatening; your body is alert and ready for action. Once the danger has gone, your body will gradually return to normal.

People also respond similarly to situations that feel threatening but which cannot be resolved by fighting or running away. Imagine that it is a few weeks until the start of your

exams, your revision is not going well and you are starting to feel “stressed out”. In this instance there may be some time between when you start to feel stressed and the end of the “danger” (which may be the completion of the exams). During this time your body may remain mentally overactive and physically tense. It is when you are in this uncomfortable state that you are stressed or in a state of anxiety; the flight or fight response is switched on and remains on, causing additional difficulties for some individuals. It is only when you perceive that the danger has passed that your body returns to normal. This may be as soon as you have sat the exam, but it could be when the results come out, or even later.

What are the signs that I am stressed?

There are a whole range of different signs which may indicate that someone is feeling stressed. The signs could include strong feelings such as guilt, shame, feeling scared or irritable; having self critical thoughts & sensitivity to criticism of others; being unable to concentrate and remember things; behavioural changes such as changes in your appetite, avoidance of particular situations, increased use of drugs or alcohol and sleeping difficulties; physical changes such as headaches or other pains from muscles that have become tense, or feeling sick. People vary greatly in the way that they react to stress, and you should therefore try to become aware of how your body and behaviour change and take action to minimise any negative effects.

Panic can produce physical sensations such as muscle cramps, pins and needles, dizziness and chest pains which can be very frightening especially if it is the first time you have experienced panic.

What can I do to help a friend who is feeling stressed?

Friends can often take on an important supportive role during the exam periods and at other times of stress; often very simple things can help.

- Accept that your friend is anxious, whatever the cause of the anxiety and whether or not you feel they have a good reason to be anxious.
- Encourage them to talk about their concerns and listen carefully.
- Help them to build up a group of people, including friends and family who can support them.
- Encourage them to relax and to try and follow the strategies outlined below.
- Encourage them to seek further guidance and help from the resources detailed at the end of this guide if the strategies outlined do not help.

Ten strategies for dealing with stress

Unfortunately there is no magic wand that will remove the impact of stress on your life. Controlling stress is an active process which means that you will have to take steps to limit its impact. However, there are some very simple steps that you can take to do this which may help your stress levels work for you instead of against you.

Step One: Be careful about what you eat and drink

Try to eat a well balanced diet, eating at least three regular meals a day. Eat foods which will release energy slowly and are likely to have a calming effect. Food or drink high in sugar may give you instant energy, but in the long term may wind you up leaving you feeling more nervy and edgy than you did before.

Limit your consumption of caffeine particularly found in tea, coffee, fizzy soft drinks and “Proplus” tablets. Excess caffeine tends to heighten arousal and increases “jittery” feelings; it can also impair your concentration and may keep you awake at night.

Try to also limit your use of alcohol and to avoid all use of non-prescribed drugs. These may make you feel better in the short term, but can prevent you from sleeping properly; they can also impair your ability to remember the work that you are trying to revise. Some people drink alcohol and/or smoke more to control their stress levels, but it would be a good decision to try to develop more healthy ways of controlling your stress.

Food & drink which are beneficial	Food & drink which you should try to limit
Fresh fruit Fresh vegetables Pasta Potatoes Milk Herbal Tea	Biscuits Cakes Sweets Fizzy drinks Tea, coffee Alcohol

Step Two: Get enough sleep

Make sure that you get plenty of rest; six to eight hours a night are recommended. If getting to sleep is a problem, ensure that you have at least a half an hour break from your revision before going to bed. Use this break to do anything relaxing which will take your mind off your work such as:

- Having a soak in the bath;
- Chatting to your friends;
- Writing a letter;
- Listening to some music.

Step Three: Take regular exercise

Exercising regularly will not only help to keep you physically healthy, but also uses up the hormones and nervous energy produced when you are stressed. Exercise will also help to relax the muscles which become tense when you are stressed, and as exercise increases the blood flow around the body, it can help you to think more clearly.

You do not have to take up a strenuous sport; try swimming, walking, cycling or dancing. Anything that gets you moving around and is enjoyable is beneficial, especially if it involves spending at least half an hour in the fresh air every day.

Step Four: Control your breathing

If you notice that you are starting to feel very stressed, for example, as you wait for the examination to start, try to regulate your breathing by concentrating on breathing out to a slow count of four; the breathing in will take care of itself. It will be helpful if you practise this exercise when you are not stressed so that you are very familiar with the technique when you need it.

Step Five: Make time for fun

You may feel that you don't have the time, but it's important to build leisure time into your revision days and the days that you sit your exams. Get involved in a non-academic activity, such as sports, crafts, hobbies or music. Anything that you find relaxing or enjoyable which will give you a break from thinking or worrying about your exams will be beneficial.

Step Six: Improve your study skills

Effective study skills can reduce stress by making you feel more in control of your work and more confident that you will succeed. It may also be useful to talk to your course tutor to get subject specific advice to help make your revision more focused.

- Identify the best time of the day to study.
- Plan a timetable
- Start revision in plenty of time.
- Prioritise

Remember that most of your fellow students will be feeling the same way as you do. Tell your friends and family how you feel and find ways of relaxing with them which will help to support you.

Step Seven: Relaxation

There are a plethora of relaxation and meditation techniques available, and exploring these to find one that you find helpful is time well spent. Relaxing takes practice, so if you find a method which attracts you, practice it until you have learnt it properly. If you want to try out other methods do so later.

Step Eight: Realistic expectations

Remind yourself that you can only do your best and accept that sometimes your best is not always going to be the same. Depending on your mood/feelings/health for example, your best may be better on one day than another ...

Step Nine: Look out for negative thoughts

Just prior to an exam, and in other stressful situations, it is common to have unrealistic thoughts or predictions: for example “if I don’t do well in this exam, then I will fail my degree and I’ll never get a job”; “I am completely useless and can’t cope”, etc.

Try to identify the thoughts you have when you are feeling stressed.

Then question your thoughts: are they distorted? i.e. are you expecting the worse outcome? Is your thinking all or nothing? Are you exaggerating? Are you discounting the positives?

Is there another way of seeing things? How would someone else think about this? How would you think about this if you were feeling better?

What is the worst that could happen? What can you do if that were to happen, and how can you get help? Is it helpful for me to think the way that I do?

What are you aiming for is to challenge your negative thoughts and come up with more realistic alternatives.

E.g.: Negative thought: “I should not ask for help”

Realistic alternative: “Everybody needs to ask for help at times, I would happily help someone else and not judge them because they have asked”

Step Ten: Talk to somebody

Try to establish a good social support network and ask for help and accept it if it’s offered! Coping with high levels of stress (whether the cause is academic or non academic) can require additional practical help, support and advice. If you feel you may need further support, there are a variety of people/agencies to help:

On Campus:

- **Student Support Service Reception**
studentsupport@uea.ac.uk, 01603 592761 or ext. 2761

- **The Wellbeing Service** (Student Support Centre)
studentsupport@uea.ac.uk, 01603 592761, self-help books in UEA Library
- **Learning Enhancement Team** (Student Support Centre)
ask.let@uea.ac.uk, 01603 592761
- **UEA Medical Services**
01603 251600
- **Student Union Advice Centre**
advicecentre@uea.ac.uk, 01603 593463
- **Your Adviser**
- **Nightline**
listening@norwichnightline.org.uk, 01603 503504

Off Campus:

- **The Samaritans**
jo@samaritans.org, 08457 909090

On the day of the exams and during the exam:

- Have a good but moderate breakfast and lunch, remembering not to drink too much caffeine.
- Try to do something relaxing for the last hour before the exam. Last minute cramming could cloud your ability to remember the overall concepts.
- Try to avoid fellow students who may increase your anxiety levels by asking what you have or have not revised, etc.
- Use the breathing exercise that you have practised to regulate your breathing; exhale slowly.
- If you find even getting into the examinations hall a problem, talk to a trusted friend and ask them to walk to the exam hall with you.
- Take time to read each question carefully.
- Plan your timing and write it down.

After the Exam:

- Try to arrange something relaxing/enjoyable.
- Try not to focus on what you did or did not do in the exam.
- Concentrate on preparing for the next exam in good time.
- Some people feel relief the moment an exam or exams are over but others can feel purposeless and lost or in a state of uncertainty until the results are known. One solution is to ensure you keep time for the pleasures you enjoy before the exam.

Positive Self Statements for Coping with Anxiety

Preparation

- Anxiety is a natural response to a stressful situation. Remember to use my breathing/relaxation techniques.
- It won't last long and I can cope with it.

Coping

- I can tolerate anxiety - I have managed to lots of times before.
- Remember to breathe and relax.
- One step at a time.
- The feelings are not pleasant but they are not harmful or dangerous.

Afterwards

- I handled it; it will be easier next time.
- It was not pleasant but I coped.
- I deserve to do something more enjoyable now.

Other Resources

- www.mind.org.uk (How to cope with exam stress and other useful related booklets)
- International Stress Management Association, www.isma.org.uk
- Butler, G. and Hope, T. 1995, 2007: *Manage Your Mind. The Mental Fitness Guide*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Want to know more?

If you have any further questions about this topic you can make an appointment to see a **Learning Enhancement Tutor** in the **Student Support Service**, as well as speaking to your lecturer or adviser.

- 📞 Call: 01603 592761
- 💻 Ask: ask.let@uea.ac.uk
- 🖱️ Click: <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement>

There are many other resources to help you with your studies on our [website](#).

Your comments or suggestions about our resources are very welcome.



Scan the QR-code with a smartphone app for more resources.

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