

Performing under Pressure

How to Succeed and Manage Exam Stress

York College Counselling Service
A Free Confidential Service

Some feeling of pressure is natural at exam time;

it helps to motivate us to try to do our best.

But this pressure can turn into unhelpful stress when it gets out of control. We may feel we can no longer 'switch off' when we are not studying or 'freeze' when we need to perform well.

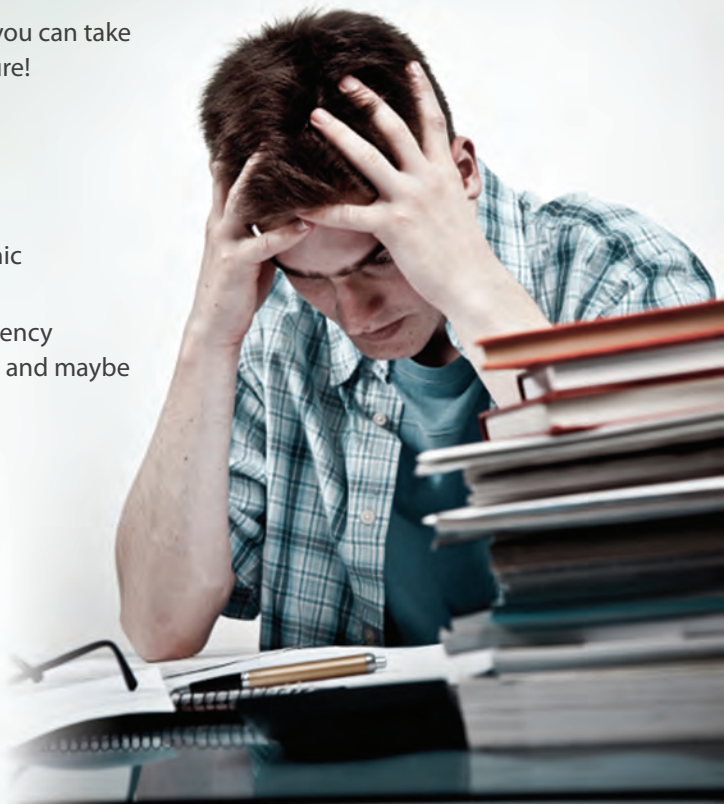
Here are some tips on steps you can take to perform well under pressure!

Plan and prepare!

- This puts you in control
- Builds confidence
- Reduces last-minute panic and anxiety
- Defeats the 'ostrich' tendency (I'll pretend it's not there and maybe it'll go away)

Plan a revision timetable well in advance

- Fill in other important commitments, for example, a part-time job
- Where there are realistic slots available for revision, put them in as fixtures
- Include planned rest and recreation sessions and don't allow them to get eaten into. If you work all/most of the time, you become less efficient and you are wasting effort!
- Include some 'unscheduled time'. This gives you some flexibility for the unexpected and you can adapt.



If something out of your control throws your planned timetable out

for example, illness – Don't panic! (It won't help)

Regroup and re-plan – you can only be realistic about what is necessary and what can be achieved under difficult circumstances.

Set goals and targets for what you want to achieve in revision.

Break up topics and your time into manageable chunks (eg 45 minute blocks), then take a short break away from study. This keeps you focused and helps motivation by allowing you to see progress as you tick off each task.

Don't spend too much time with people who

- Make out it's not cool to make any effort at all
- Are stressheads who get together and work each other up

After the exam –don't spend too long worrying about it or discussing it with others. What's done is done and no amount of worrying will change it.

Accept that you did your best at the time, let go and move on to the next thing!

Look after yourself!

- Eat healthily and avoid too much junk food
- Avoid using lots of caffeine to keep yourself going (increases the stress effect), for example, coffee or soft drinks like Red Bull
- Avoid relying on alcohol or drugs (legal or illegal) to get you through (they can take their toll on your general health, may have harmful side effects and can be addictive)
- Drink lots of water (good for your brain as well as your physical health)
- Stop work ideally at least 1 hour before bedtime and allow yourself to wind down mentally and physically
- Take some physical exercise regularly – it uses up the stress hormones so that they don't stay in your system
- Learn and use relaxation techniques to reduce physical tension and to give your mind a refreshing break and help to switch off

- Build in one or two 'completely different' activities to refresh you and remind you that there's more to you than exam success
- Learn and use breathing techniques to control the stress reaction triggered by worry, tension or panic



Beware of trying to be perfect: 'I must get the top possible grades for everything'

Substitute: 'I will try hard, but look after myself and that will be good enough. The world will not end if I give a good performance instead of the absolute best I am capable of'

Beware of always putting things off: 'It's too depressing to face any work now – I'll start tomorrow'

You risk the danger that 'Tomorrow' will never come. Set yourself a small, manageable task to do (see above) to get you going and give yourself credit when you achieve it. This helps motivation and shifts 'workblock'.

Beware of always thinking the worst: 'It's the end of the world, I'll be a complete failure if I don't get a grade X'

If you don't get the grade you were hoping for, there is often a way round it or another option.

Relaxation and 'Switching Off'

a) Physical relaxation

Either: lie down somewhere comfortable on your back, with your arms and legs relaxed and slightly apart

Or: sit in a chair, with your knees parallel and feet flat on the floor and your back relaxed but straight

Starting with your feet, work your way through your body, tensing then

relaxing slowly all groups of muscles, finishing with jaw, eyes and forehead. Imagine all tension flowing away into the ground and your limbs warm, heavy and relaxed.

b) Breathing

Sitting or lying down as above, focus on the natural rhythm of your breathing. Feel your stomach (not your chest) rise and fall with each breath. Breathe in to a count of 4 and out to a count of 4. Continue for at least 5 minutes.



c) Switch off and give your mind a break!

Give your mind something peaceful, relaxing and refreshing to think about, rather than worries.

Imagine yourself somewhere quiet, peaceful and beautiful, for example, a wood, a meadow, a beach.....

Imagine the sounds (birds; waves; a stream; leaves rustling etc), sensations (warm sunlight; cool breeze; warm, soft sand; soft grass etc), scents (sea air; warm earth; flowers; pine; pure mountain air etc)

Allow yourself 5 – 10 minutes to explore and enjoy the environment you have created, before returning to an awareness of your own body and present surroundings.

Contact Us

If you would like help or support dealing with exam stress, you can find a referral form for counselling on the Counselling Pages of the Intranet (under Support Departments/Student Services). You can email the referral form to **counsellingservice@yorkcollege.ac.uk** or ask for a paper copy at the InfoZone, once completed hand it back to the InfoZone. We will contact you as soon as possible to arrange a meeting after receiving your form.



Useful Websites (usually includes helplines):

- Find out how to cope and get support – Support Services are for Birmingham based clients but online resources are available.
www.youthspace.me
 - Childline has message boards, email, phone lines for under 18's
Helpline: 0800 1111 (Type in 'Exam Stress' in the search bar)
www.childline.org.uk
-

Books

There are many books available that may help and there is also a self-help booklist on the Counselling Pages of the Intranet (under Support Departments/Student Services).