Exams and Mental Health
The exam period can be an incredibly stressful time, so it’s only natural for students to feel nervous about upcoming events. Sometimes, nerves can help us perform to our best potential. However, sometimes people can experience a heightened level of stress known as exam anxiety. This can make it hard to concentrate and you may find yourself worrying a lot about important tests.

This guide will tell you about the common signs and symptoms of exam anxiety and its potential causes. It will also provide some useful tips to help you manage the stressful period and advise you how to access professional help if you experience it over a prolonged time.

What is Exam Anxiety?

Sometimes people can feel like they have little or no control over exam situations, causing them to feel helpless and overwhelmed. Typical signs of exam anxiety include excessive worry about exams or a fear of being judged based on exam grades. People often report negative or critical thoughts such as “I’ll fail no matter how hard I try!” People may put a lot of pressure on themselves, such as “I will look stupid if I fail!” or unnecessary demands, “if I don’t get an A* it will be a waste of time!”

This can be accompanied by physical sensations of anxiety, such as headaches, nausea, diarrhoea, sweating, shortness of breath, fast heartbeat, light-headedness and feeling faint. In some instances, people might have panic attacks. The combination of these symptoms together can make it difficult to concentrate, lead to poor sleep or negative comparisons to peers.

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What causes Exam Anxiety?

While there are many factors that can contribute to exam anxiety, it’s not possible to identify an exact cause. However, research suggests exam anxiety may be caused by a combination of several factors, including the consequences of exams, how people perceive the exams and the pressures individuals experience from others.

Whilst exams are stressful in their own right, this stress may be exacerbated by the educational and/or occupational consequences of the exams. Individuals may feel the pressure of exams as they need particular grades to get into the college, sixth form or university of their choice. Additionally, there is a general consensus that higher grades are required for particular jobs.

Self-esteem can play a big role in exam anxiety. Students may feel that their worth is tied to their grades. In this way, a good grade results in higher self-esteem and a perceived bad grade results in lower self-esteem. This can particularly be the case if you have perfectionist tendencies or critical self-thoughts if you do not get the desired grade you were hoping for. Pressures from others such as teachers and parents can also have an effect. Students can be repeatedly told that the exams are the most important thing they will complete, and this can result in feeling under pressure and overwhelmed. Moreover, parents may have high expectations of what their children will achieve, and this can cause adolescents excessive worry about potentially disappointing their parents.

Some people might experience exam anxiety if they have not prepared for the exam. This can include last minute cramming or not studying at all, which can leave people feeling anxious and overwhelmed. Lots of lifestyle factors can contribute to exam anxiety. This can include staying up late to study and not getting enough rest or not having a balanced diet. Sometimes, people can drink lots of caffeine to try and keep them alert but too much caffeine can make us feel tense and on edge. Perhaps you are not scheduling time for regular exercise or enjoyable activities and spending most of your day sat down studying. This can make us feel gloomy, fed up and can affect our concentration.
How common is Exam Anxiety?

Exam anxiety is common in the general population, particularly in females. Research argues anywhere between 10-40% of students experience exam anxiety, and women are more likely to face it in the UK. The number of adolescents in Britain seeking counselling over exam stress has increased by 200% in recent years according to the NSPCC – who received record numbers of approaches from students worried about exams. In 2013-14, Childline received more than 34,000 approaches from adolescents worrying about revision, exams and workloads.

The American Test Anxiety Association proposes exam anxiety can affect as much as 20% of school age populations, with another 18% experiencing a moderate form of it.

What can we do about Exam Anxiety?

There are several practical steps you should take to help you manage exam anxiety. This can range from putting things in perspective to getting into good habits from the get-go.

**Perspective**

It’s important to remember that your success in life is not based upon a grade. Whilst exams are important, you should prioritise your mental health and ensure you are looking after your wellbeing. Employers also look at other qualities and experiences when selecting candidates. This may include your work ethic, previous experience and transferable skills. Once you have completed the exam, it’s vital to put it behind you, as worrying about the outcome won’t make any difference.

**Speak to someone you trust**

This could be a family member, teacher or friend. Whoever it is, ensure it’s someone who will have your best interests at heart and you know you can confide in without fear of judgement. It’s common for people to bottle things up as they think everyone experiences it from time to time, or the opposite, that nobody will understand. Either way, it’s incredibly important to discuss this with people. They may be able to offer some helpful advice or just a listening ear. Many mild mental health problems can be resolved this way.

**Organisation**

Try to manage your time effectively. This will help with feelings of being overwhelmed and despair. It’s vital to balance out studying with regular breaks and time to do enjoyable activities. Revision is most effective in regular chunks with things to look forward to in between. It might be useful to create a revision timetable with one enjoyable activity each day. This could be watching your favourite TV programme or going out for tea. Free time is essential to give your brain a rest and let it consolidate what you have learned.

**Good habits**

It’s important to get into good habits when you are studying. This includes having regular breaks to recuperate and implementing regular exercise. Perhaps you could go for a walk or a gentle jog to break up the day and get some fresh air. It’s also essential to have a balanced diet with lots of brain food such as leafy vegetables and omega 3! Finally, make sure you keep yourself hydrated and get a good night’s sleep.
What next?

If you are struggling a lot with exam anxiety and the above practical tips have not alleviated your symptoms, it may be worth contacting a professional. This is especially the case if the anxiety has not subsided following the completion of exams. Many schools, colleges and universities offer counselling services. These are confidential in-house services ran by professionally trained counsellors and psychotherapists who will help you identify tools and techniques to improve the way you are feeling. Furthermore, you may be entitled to reasonable adjustments such as extra time during exams, extended deadlines or specialist mental health mentor support.

Lots of online self-help resources are available. For example, NHS Choices offers Moodzone and Students Against Depression Website.

If the anxiety persists, we strongly advise you to contact your GP. They will be able to make you aware of the help and resources available to help you manage the anxiety. They may inform you about medication options like beta-blockers. A commonly prescribed beta-blocker for exam anxiety includes propranolol which helps reduce physical sensations of anxiety such as fast heartbeat and sweating. If you are considering medication options, you should always discuss this with a GP or pharmacist.

Your GP may signpost you to therapy and counselling services to help you explore the underlying worries or concerns in a safe environment. This may include looking at the unreasonable demands you are placing on yourself and the self-critical thoughts of perfectionist tendencies. The therapist or counsellor will help you identify what is contributing to the anxiety, and showcase techniques and strategies to help you cope and manage.

For more information on living with a mental health problem please visit our website: www.shawmindfoundation.org
References


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