

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.

Other useful guides from Learning Development: *Revision and exam skills, Organising your time.*

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 from time to time. Many aspects of university life have the potential to cause stress, including adjusting to a new living environment, fulfilling academic requirements, 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.

What causes stress?

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 is a whole range of different signs which may indicate that someone is feeling stressed. The signs could include: strong *feelings* such as feeling scared or irritable; *changes in your thinking* such as being unable to concentrate and remember things; *behavioural changes* such as changes in your appetite, increased use of drugs or alcohol and sleeping difficulties; *physical changes* such as headaches or other pains from muscles that have become tense. 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.

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.

Six 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 and drink which are beneficial | Food and drink which you should try to limit |
|--|--|
| <p>Fresh fruit Fresh vegetables Pasta Potatoes Milk Herbal tea</p>  | <p>Biscuits Cakes Sweets Fizzy drinks Tea and coffee Alcohol</p>  |

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 actually need it.

Step Five: Make time for fun

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. Check out the study guide **Revision & exam skills**; attend one of the exam skills workshops run by Student Development or review your approach in an individual consultation. (Details of how to contact Student Development are provided in the resources section at the end of this guide.) It may also be useful to talk to your course tutor to get subject specific advice to help make your revision more focused.

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.

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.
- Have a plan for how you will use your time in the exam hall (see the study guide: **Revision and exams skills** for guidance).

Resources for more help and advice

The following information outlines sources of further help which provide assistance to students who want to improve their exam preparations/performance and/or stress levels. These services are all very experienced in supporting students during the examination period (and at other stressful times).

Resources within the university

Departmental Staff

Your personal tutor can offer academic guidance and support during examination periods. Discuss your exam preparations with them and talk to them if you are feeling under stress. Similarly, your course tutors may also be able to allay some pre-examination fears by discussing your exam preparations with you.

Learning Development Service

The Learning Development Service can be found in Learning Development Zone on the 2nd floor of the library.

Tel: (0116) 252 5090. Website: <http://www.le.ac.uk/succeedinyourstudies>

Email: studyhelp@le.ac.uk.

The Service offers a range of options to develop your revision and exam skills. You can collect free study guides from Learning Development in the library, attend an interactive revision and exams skills workshop, or book a consultation with one of the Study Skills Advisers.

AccessAbility Centre

The AccessAbility Centre can be found on the ground floor of the library.

Tel and minicom: 0116 252 5002. Website: <http://www.le.ac.uk/accessability>

Email: accessable@le.ac.uk

If you have a disability or special need, the Centre's staff can assist you with devising the most appropriate revision strategies, time management and exam techniques, taking into consideration any additional needs that you have. The Centre also offers a quiet place where you can work or rest. For more information call in or email the Centre.

Counselling Service

161 Welford Road, behind the Freeman's Common Health Centre

Tel: 0116 223 1780. Website: <http://www.le.ac.uk/counselling>

Email: counselling@le.ac.uk

Talking to a counsellor about stress can help you develop a better understanding about why you are feeling stressed. Counsellors can help you to explore possible options that may help to reduce your stress levels, including making the choices or changes which are right for you. The University counsellors are all very experienced in helping students cope with stress, particularly around the examination times, and hope that by attending for some counselling you will start to feel more positive about the situation. If you feel it may be useful for you to see a counsellor, try to arrange an appointment as soon as you can, as this may prevent any problems or difficulties from escalating.

Welfare Service

The Welfare service is located on the first floor of the Percy Gee building

Tel: 0116 223 1185. Website: <http://www.le.ac.uk/welfare/>

Email: welfare@le.ac.uk

The Welfare Service offers practical support to students during the build up to the exams and if necessary immediately before the exams. For further information, call at the Welfare Service in the Percy Gee Building, or contact the Service by phone or email.

The Freeman's Common Health Centre

161 Welford Road

Tel: 0844 815 1105. Website: <http://www.le.ac.uk/healthcentre>

For those students who have registered with the surgery, doctors are available to assist with any physical or psychological concerns.

Special Exam Arrangements

Under certain circumstances students may be able to negotiate special exam arrangements such as sitting examinations in a different venue. If you feel that you require alternative arrangements talk to your personal tutor, another member of academic staff or a GP at the Student Health Centre (if you are registered with the practice) as soon as possible prior to the exams. The AccessAbility Centre will also support students' requests for special exam arrangements where appropriate. Requests need to be backed up by official confirmation of the difficulties that you are experiencing.

In the event of a crisis situation you should bring it to the attention of one of the following as soon as possible: a member of academic staff in your department, the Examinations Office in the Fielding Johnson Building or the Welfare Service.

Useful websites:

The following websites all have information and resources to help with relaxation and overcoming stress.

<http://www.relaxationforliving.co.uk/>

<http://www.newworldmusic.com/uk/>

<http://www.mind.org.uk/>

This study guide is one of a series produced by Learning Development at the University of Leicester. As part of our services we provide a range of resources for students wishing to develop their academic and transferable skills.

studyhelp@le.ac.uk | www.le.ac.uk/succeedinyourstudies