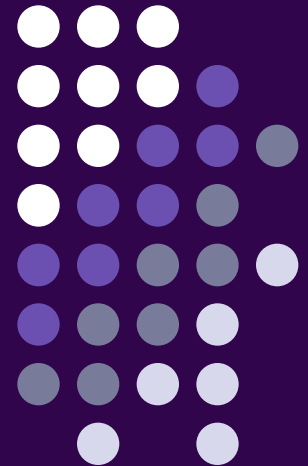


Coping with Academic Anxiety

Bureau for Counselling, Career
and Academic Development

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www.unisa.ac.za/counselling



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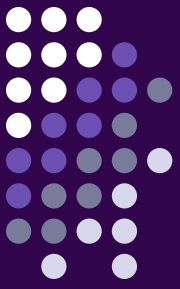
Source: Van Schoor, A., Mill, E., & Potgieter, D. (2002) *Effective Study*. Unisa Press

What is academic anxiety?



- Normal tension is essential for performance...
- Academic anxiety: type of fear, a nervousness or apprehension about any form of academic activity
 - Creates excessive tension

What causes academic anxiety?



- General Academic Anxiety
 - Attending group lectures/tutorials where you might have to answer questions or give oral presentations/participate in group discussions
 - Drafting and submitting assignments/reports
- Examination Activities
 - Exam preparation (studying)
 - Writing the exam

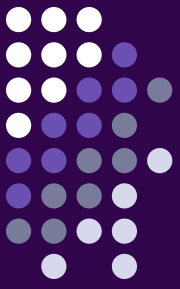
Symptoms of academic anxiety



What do you experience when you're anxious about your academic work?

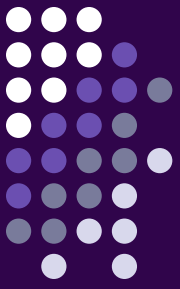


Symptoms of academic anxiety



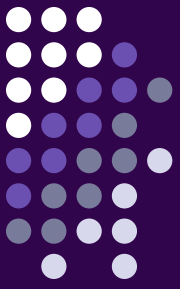
- Physical symptoms
 - Headache and/or muscle pains when studying/writing your exams
 - Excessive sweating (hands and face)
 - Fast or irregular breathing
 - Fast or irregular heartbeat
 - Overeating or lack of appetite
 - Disturbed sleeping patterns – insomnia, too little sleep or too much sleep
 - Nervous physical reactions – facial muscular spasms, itching body, scratching face, restlessness
 - Nausea
 - Stomach problems – indigestion, diarrhoea, “butterflies”
 - Rapid and nervous speech, stuttering

Symptoms of academic anxiety



- Intellectual symptoms
 - Problems remembering & recalling newly learnt material
 - Problems with logical thinking and problem solving
 - Difficulty in understanding simple instructions
 - Inability to choose between 2 options
 - Difficulty in concentrating during the exam
 - Delayed thought processes and having to make a great effort to think
 - Accelerated but inaccurate thought processes

Symptoms of academic anxiety



- Emotional symptoms
- Feelings of panic, especially when feeling that there's not enough time to complete an exam
- Feeling inadequate, with negative thoughts such as: *I'm a bad student, I'm stupid and worthless*
- Thoughts of punishment and humiliation if you do badly in the exam
- Anxiety & concern about how well you're doing while writing your exam
- Anxiety & concern about how well you're doing compared to your fellow students
- Feelings of pessimism & hopelessness about the outcome of the exam
- Lack of confidence in your ability to answer a question correctly



Effect of academic anxiety

- Results in poor academic performance
 - Overall
 - Exams
- You need to rid yourself of this negative anxiety, otherwise you will not be able to reach your full potential



How to deal with academic anxiety



- Physical symptoms – result of negative attitudes & thoughts
- Need to combat negative attitudes & thoughts
- But how?
 - Positive thinking
 - Physical relaxation



Positive Thinking



- Positive thinking technique:
 - Positive statements
 - Stopping negative thoughts
 - Rewards
 - Accepting responsibility for academic setbacks



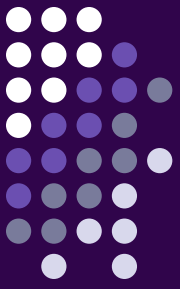
Positive Thinking

- Positive Statements:
- Often, negative statements have no foundation & are unrealistic
- So why should we listen to them?
- Replace negative statements with positive statements

Positive Statements



- Example:
 - Negative Statement: *I don't understand this work, but I won't contact the lecturer because he might think I'm stupid*
 - Positive Statement: *It doesn't matter what the lecturer thinks. If I don't understand, I have the right as well as the obligation to ask the lecturer to clarify the matter*
- If you have difficulty understanding, rest assured that other students will be in the same predicament! So if you don't understand something, you have the right to ask the lecturer to explain!



Activity

- Write down any negative thoughts you have about the upcoming exams
- Which positive statements can you replace with these negative statements

Positive Thinking



- As soon as you find yourself starting a negative line of thought & becoming tense, say to yourself:

“Stop it! I am playing with fire. I must start thinking more positively!”

- Practise this strategy as soon as you feel yourself becoming tense

Stopping Negative Thoughts



- Another way to stop negative thoughts, is just to say to yourself:

“STOP THAT!”

- Do it immediately before it affects your performance
- Reinforce decision to stop negative thoughts by using a bracelet, watch strap, elastic band

Reward

- Use your successes to boost your confidence in academic activities
- Reward yourself for success with a positive statement
- E.g., after an exam:
“Well done. Now I know that I can be successful, and that I am capable of doing well!”



Accepting responsibility for academic setbacks



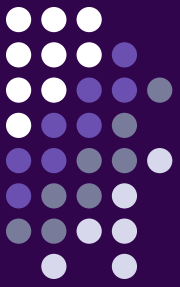
- Be realistic about academic setbacks
- Aim to improve your performance
- Don't blame others for your failures
- Accept responsibility

Ask yourself:



- **Reflection about the exam**
- Did I complete the exam?
- Did most of the exam questions come from the content and activities of the study guide, the textbook or the assignments?
- What was my emotional state like on the day of the exam?
- How were the questions different from those in the study guide, textbook or assignments?
- Where was the greatest source of error? (careless errors; lack of time; lack of understanding the material; uncertainty of which method to choose; lack of prerequisite information; exam anxiety)
- Which changes need to be made to my studying habits to adjust for the errors that have been made?
- Should I have studied more? If yes, what should I have concentrated on?
- Should I have approached the work differently? If yes, what should I have done?

Physical Relaxation



- The breathing technique
- The peaceful scene technique
- Progressive relaxation

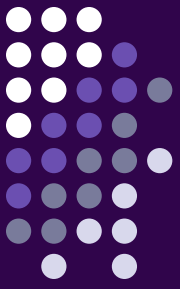
The Breathing Technique



- Can be used in any stressful situation
- Lowers your level of tension & heartbeat
- *I feel calm, refreshed and in control of myself*



The Peaceful Scene Technique





Progressive Relaxation

- Working through different muscle groups to stimulate relaxation
- Used if there is difficulty in noticing tension



Remember:



Relaxation techniques & positive thinking alone cannot prevent academic anxiety

Need to be supported by proper preparation & sound study methods!

- For help with effective study methods, please contact the Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Development

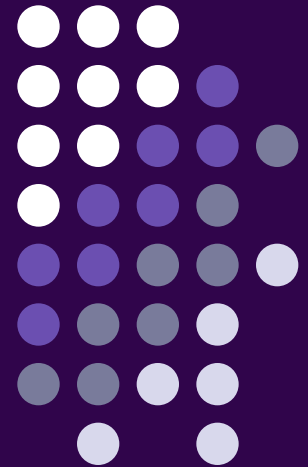


Further Resources:

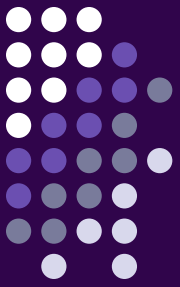
- Available on the BCCAD website:
www.unisa.ac.za/counselling
- Information and pamphlets regarding
 - Learning styles
 - My memory – can I improve it?
 - Concentration
 - Notemaking
 - Managing stress, anxiety & tension
 - Exam preparation
 - Time Management

Braingym Exercises

Useful to do before / during
exams

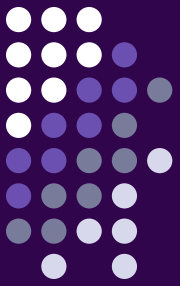


Activity



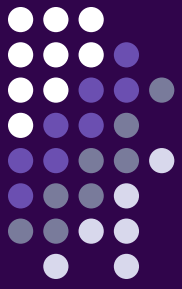
- Activate your brain
 - Place hand on stomach below belly button.
 - With thumb and middle finger, find hollows below collar bone.
 - Press firmly and rotate.

Activity



- Calm yourself
 - Cross feet.
 - Stretch arms out in front with palms towards each other.
 - Turn hands under and link them.
 - Close eyes and breathe deeply and slowly.

Activity



- Wake yourself up
 - With tips of fingers pressing firmly, rub all the way around the edge of your ear lobe.



Activity



- Ease tension in your shoulders
 - Lift your shoulders up as far as possible.
 - Squeeze tightly.
 - Hold for at least thirty seconds.
 - Relax.

Good luck with your exams!

