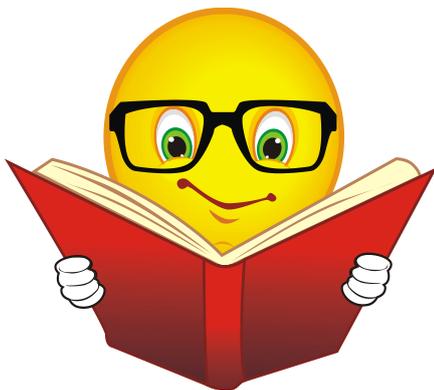


HOW TO COPE WITH



EXAM STRESS



BALDRAGON ACADEMY

March 2020



What is stress?

Stress is part of the body's natural response to a perceived threat. We all experience it from time to time. When we feel under threat, our bodies go into **fight or flight** response, in other words they prepare us either to stand and do battle or to run away. The main physiological change is the release of a rush of adrenaline which gives us the energy to act. If the perceived difficulty is not physical but psychological, the adrenaline is not used up and we may experience any of the following reactions:

- Increased muscle tension
- Increased heart rate
- Increased breathing rate
- Increase in alertness to the slightest touch or sound

How will you know if you are stressed?

You may experience changes in your physical wellbeing, mood or behaviour:

- Physical: Headaches, neck ache, stomach problems
- Mood: Irritability, tearfulness, feeling low or anxious
- Behaviour: Sleeping problems, increase or decrease in appetite, difficulty in concentrating

Exam Stress

Is it a good thing or a bad thing?

We respond to exams in different ways:

- Some of us thrive on them.
- Others take them more or less in their stride but get a bit stressed in the last couple of weeks.
- We may worry about exams for weeks beforehand and get so stressed we find it hard to switch off. We may become so anxious we can't study at all, find it hard to concentrate on anything and have difficulty in getting to sleep.
- If there are other problems, worry about exams may make them seem worse.

A moderate amount of stress may not be a bad thing. It can sharpen concentration and performance and help to create the additional energy and momentum we need to keep studying when we would rather be doing something else.

Too much stress, however, can be overwhelming and stop us from being able to study and get on with life.



The Continuum of Stress



Distress: A debilitating state, where we may feel exhausted and unable to cope. Physical and mental health problems may develop. Exam performance will be severely affected.

Hyperstress: Is beyond Eustress. This type of stress can make us feel pressurised and our behaviour may begin to change. We may feel edgy and irritable, less focused and more likely to make mistakes.

Eustress: A positive, exhilarating or challenging experience of success. This type of stress can give us the energy to think in an alert manner and a boost of power to work hard. We will feel motivated and be more likely to perform well.



Hypostress: Is a negative experience of having too little stress or stimulation. This can make us feel bored and lethargic. We will not be motivated to study, be easily distracted and lack enthusiasm to perform well.

Using Stress Positively

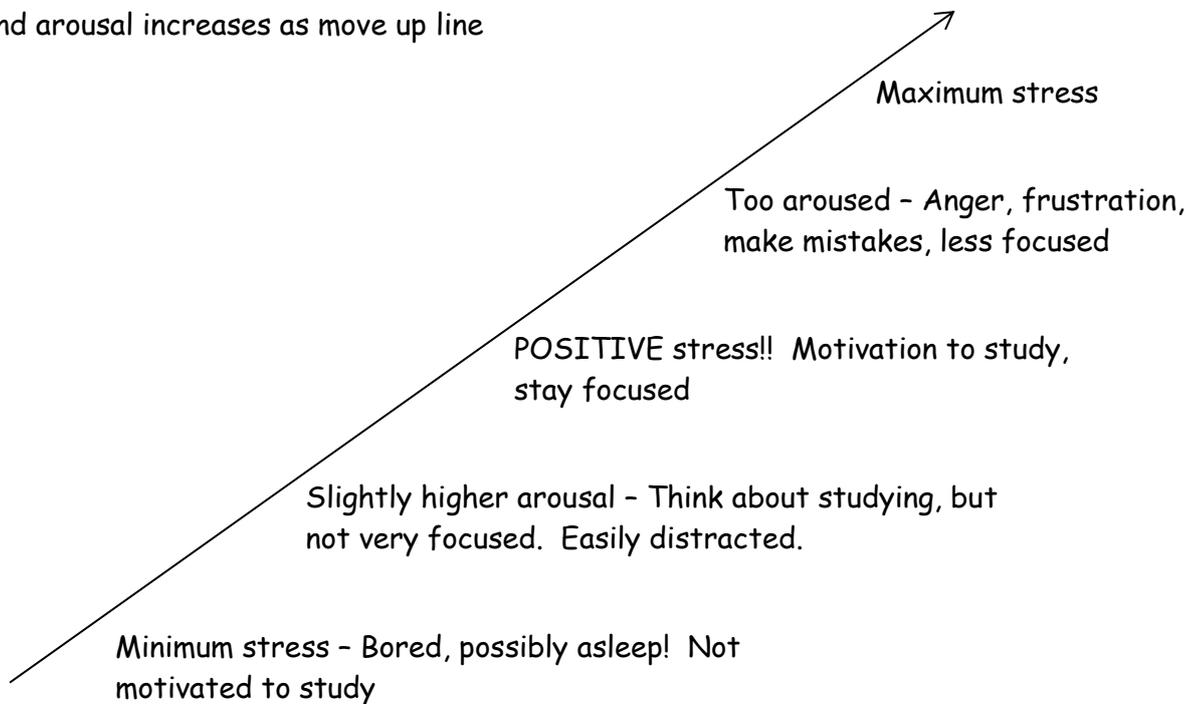
How Stress can be Positive!



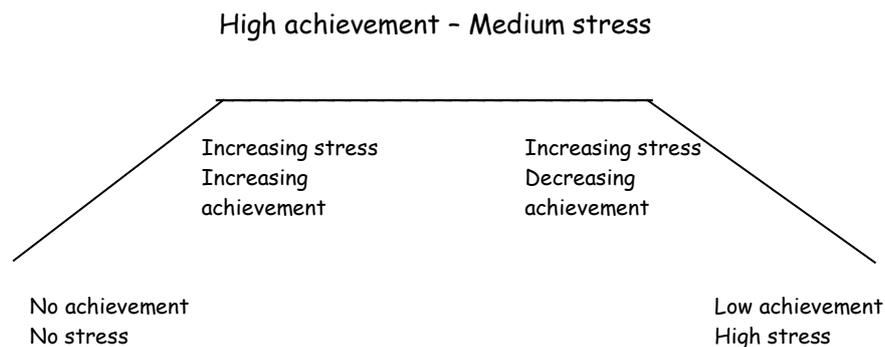
The idea that stress can be positive is a strange one. The aim of this session is to convince you that it's true!

Continuum of Arousal

Stress and arousal increases as move up line



Relationship of Stress to Achievement





Beacon House

Therapeutic Services and Trauma Team

The Anxiety Cycle

TRIGGER



Thoughts

"I'm not good enough"
"No-body likes me"



Behaviour

Avoidance, withdrawel,
aggression

Feelings

fear, worry, anger

Body

Sweating, faint,
fast heart rate

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Re-Framing Experiences of Exam Situations

We can all learn from our previous experiences and can re-frame these negative thoughts or feelings into more positive views which will help us cope better and to approach the exam with confidence



1	I know that I can do well	
2	I think I have as much chance as most in the class in the exam	
3	I have revised enough and I know the material	
4	I will remember the information by staying calm and in control	
5	I know I know this stuff	
6	I'm ready to sit this exam	
7	I know my parents want me to try hard and do my best	
8	I know what I need to achieve to get a place on that course	
9	I will plan and structure my writing and put as much down as I can in the time that I have	
10	I will feel fine	
11	I will stay calm and be able to concentrate	
12	I will just ignore what's happening around me and get on with the task	
13	I will do my best with writing and spelling and demonstrate what I know	
14	I will read the questions carefully and make sure I understand what they are asking me to do	
15	I will structure my time and allocate an appropriate amount to each question	

Coping with Stress

There are a number of ways in which people deal with high levels of stress

Strategies for managing stress

Some people can play a part in supporting us during the exam period. Talking over your concerns with someone for example:

Subject
Teachers

Guidance
Teacher

Friends

Family

Educational
Psychologist

School
Nurse

- Food and Drink



Try to eat at least one proper meal a day. Your body won't respond well to a diet consisting of chocolate, chips and coca cola for several weeks at a time

- Exercise



Taking some form of exercise each day is beneficial. It can help relax tense muscles and the increased blood flow round your body can help you to think more clearly. You don't have to do anything strenuous. Ten minutes walking once a day, or preferably more often, will be helpful. It may also help to use up some of the extra adrenaline.



- **Sleep**

Get as much rest as you can; six to eight hours a night are recommended. Try not to worry too much if you have difficulty in sleeping. As long as your body is resting, you will still obtain benefit. It is possible to function even if sleep is disturbed for quite long periods, though this may not be at your absolute peak of performance.

Don't study right up to the time you go to bed. You need time to switch off.

- **Make time for relaxation**

Even in the four weeks leading up to the exams it is important to give yourself time off to do something you will enjoy. The occasional evening out or a few hours at the weekend will remind you that the world does not consist only of exams and academic achievement and should also help you to feel more mentally refreshed.

Some people also like to give themselves a little treat each day.

- **Breathing exercises**

If you notice that you are starting to feel very stressed, there are some simple breathing exercises that can help to calm you down. Most work on the principle of focusing your attention on counting breaths. For example:

- 7:11 breathing
- Relaxation exercises
 - ➔ muscle relaxation
 - ➔ visualisations



Strategies to Help Cope with Exam Stress

- **Mind-Mapping**

A mind-map can help people who are more visual learners. You pick a central topic, write the heading in the middle, then write subtopics on branches coming from the middle. Each branch (subtopic) should be kept a different colour to make it clearer. You can include pictures as well as words and should make it very colourful and visually interesting.

Effective study can reduce stress by making you feel more in control of your work.

Breathing exercises are particularly useful because you can do them in public and no-one will notice, for example, when you are waiting to go into the exam, or in the exam room itself.

- **Study skills**

The Linking System

One technique that you can use for remembering the list of words is by establishing links between the ideas in your mind.

Link each word to the last in the list in a meaningful way in your mind, e.g. telephone-sausage, sausage-monkey, monkey-button, etc.

<p>Memory game - linking system</p>

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Telephone2. Sausage3. Monkey4. Button5. Book6. Cabbage7. Glass8. Mouse9. Stomach10. Cardboard |
|---|

- You use visualisation to picture what the words represent. The more vivid you can make the images, the better.
- The important thing is to make the images interact with each other in some way. It is a much more powerful technique if the objects are interacting rather than if they are just next to each other.
- The more feeling you can put in you image, the easier it will be to remember so sausage as a telephone is good but dialling a telephone with a slimy, uncooked

sausage that is cold and squidgy is better because it is gross and would be quite funny to try to do.

- Think about all your senses when you imagine your images. Think about touch, sound and smell, even taste, as well as the look. The more involve you are with the image, the easier it will be to recall.

Mnemonics

This is a simple but effective way to remember key words and sequences. The first letter of each word in the list corresponds to a word in a nonsense sentence, eg:

Red	Orange	Yellow	Green	Blue	Indigo	Violet
Richard	Of	York	Gained	Battle	In	Vain

Again, the more vivid the image and the more feeling you can put into the sentence will help you remember the mnemonic better.

- **Study patterns**

Take regular breaks from studying. Few people can concentrate for hours at a stretch and if you spend weeks doing nothing but studying for hours at a stretch and if you spend weeks doing nothing but eating, sleeping and studying, you will be likely not only to feel miserable but also increase your level of stress which may well make it harder to sleep and concentrate.

If you are having a problem concentrating, don't make yourself sit at the desk for hours while your mind is wandering elsewhere. Instead, when you notice that you are distracted, get up and take a break. If this happens repeatedly, try studying in very short bursts of time, bringing down the time you set until it is manageable, for example, 15 minutes at a time and then building it up again slowly.

Fifteen minutes when you can concentrate is better than 3 hours of staring into space and feeling guilty or anxious.

Some people are brighter in the morning and will take more in - go to bed early, get up early.



A Self-Guidance Checklist to Reduce Stress

<p>You are MORE likely to feel anxious when you think:</p> 	<p>You are LESS likely to feel anxious when you think:</p> 	<p>Tick (✓) the thinking approaches that will help you to feel less anxious</p>
About the PAST	About the PRESENT , here and now	
About the FUTURE , especially the long term future	About here and now, about the VERY NEXT THING YOU DO	
NEGATIVE self- statements	POSITIVE self- statements	
About YOURSELF	About TASKS : things you can achieve today	
About WIDER or LARGER issues, concerns or tasks	About SPECIFIC issues, concerns or tasks	
Of SATISFYING others, e.g. what other people will say	Of SATISFYING yourself	
About things YOU CANNOT DIRECTLY AFFECT , even if you try	About things YOU CAN DIRECTLY AFFECT , if you try	
That you are UNABLE TO STOP YOURSELF THINKING ABOUT A CONCERN	That you are ABLE TO STOP YOURSELF THINKING ABOUT A PARTICULAR CONCERN	
You are UNPREPARED	You are PREPARED	
POSTPONE thinking or doing anything	You are going to take IMMEDIATE APPROPRIATE ACTION	

Know what examiners want - and don't want



Examiners DO want	Examiners DO NOT want
To give marks. Examiners are often teachers and lecturers sympathetic to students. In many internal exams they will be your own lecturers and teachers, with good reason to seek to award you marks.	To take marks away (examiners are not poised with pens ready to penalise your mistakes).
You to pass.	You to fail.
You to answer the question that has been set.	Waffle and bluffing which may irritate them; to be told all the candidate knows about a topic, whether it answers the question or not.
You to present the best of what you have done.	To know what you haven't done.
You to demonstrate what you understand and its relevance to the question.	Indiscriminately writing all you know, stuffing facts and figures you have memorised into an answer.
Scripts to be legible. They have a large number to read in a short time with the same fee for each script.	Illegibility. See Legibility.
All the required number of questions to be attempted.	Extra questions to be attempted - not only do they not gain more marks, but the reverse is usually true as answers tend to be shorter. Fewer than the required number of questions to be attempted - they are disappointed for the candidate.
Short, simple sentences and a direct style of writing.	Over-elaborateness, over-wordiness.
Opinions to be backed by relevant argument.	Unsubstantiated opinion, i.e. 'I think' or 'I believe' without adequate explanation or argument for the belief. In Social Science, the use of 'I ...' in this manner is frequently frowned upon and opinions are expressed impersonally.
All parts of a question to be answered.	You to neglect the second part of a question, which is frequently worth the same marks as the first part (a common fault of candidates).
Appropriate examples and illustrations.	A catalogue of examples before a point is properly explained.
You to answer the question immediately you start to write.	You to copy out the question, unless you are specifically asked to do so. Long background introductions to the topic.
Humour - intentional or unintentional!	To be bored by a candidate who has evidently put in little effort.
A structure to your answer, i.e. a beginning, middle and end, with a number of separate paragraphs in written answers.	A written answer with paragraphs, lacking structure of a clear story-line.

Problem Checklist



I may have problems with	Tick (✓) if it applies to you	Brief tips
Knowing enough about what I have to do in the exams		Check you know the number of papers, questions and instructions to candidates. Are there any changes this year? Speak to your teachers/ lecturers.
Getting started in the exam		Read instructions carefully. Read carefully through all the exam paper. Underline important words. Make brief answer plans.
Knowing which question to answer first		Most students answer their best question first. Examiners agree that this is a good idea.
Never having taken such an important exam before		You don't have to be brilliant to pass exams. Be positive. Know the standard expected of you beforehand.
Settling down in the exam room		Be methodical. Read instructions, have pens, etc. ready. Read all questions. Learn some relaxation techniques in case they are needed.
Getting used to taking exams		Practise answering old exam questions in exam conditions with the same amount of time as in the exam.
Knowing what examiners are looking for		Examiners are looking to give marks, not to take them away. They are looking for answers that actually answer the question.
Knowing how much time to give to each question in the exam		Take away at least 30 minutes of a 3 hour exam for reading instructions, choosing questions, planning answers, etc. Divide the rest of the time equally.
Fearing I will not be able to answer any questions when I read through the exam paper		This is often caused by reading through the paper too quickly. Read it again underlining all important words in each question. Learn to think more positively.
Making sure I read each question properly		Underline words in questions. Try writing brief outline notes (linear or patterned) as a first answer to the question.
Wondering if I know enough to pass		Concentrate on what you are doing, not on worrying.
Wondering if I will be penalised for my spelling, handwriting or use of grammar		It is important to be legible with the minimum of grammar and spelling errors but examiners are often instructed not to penalise this unduly in exams.
Not being able to write fast enough; running out of time		Write in shorter sentences if you struggle to express yourself. Most people run out of time: timed questions will minimise the effect of doing so.
Not answering all questions in full		If time is running out, answer two half-questions. This can gain more marks than one longer answer and a missed question.
Planning outline answers in the exam room		Practise this technique in revision as part of testing yourself. You do not have to write these outlines but they often help.

On the day of the exam

- Don't try to learn any new topics since this may impair your ability to remember those you have learned previously.
- You may find it helpful to look at some brief notes or revision cards.

Try not to study for the last hour before the exam.

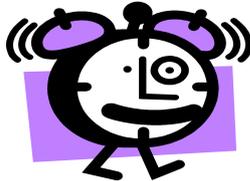
- Time your arrival at the exam room so you don't need to wait about outside with others who may increase your anxiety level.
- Give yourself time to settle before reading the questions and starting to write. It may help to use a breathing exercise that you have practised to regulate your breathing and calm yourself down.

Have a plan for how you will use your time in the exam room.



Appendix 1

Exam Technique



Planning and Timing

Here are some things to try in your exams to help break up the task and keep you focused.

Skim the whole paper

When you start your exam, skim through the whole paper. The reason for doing this is to see what questions are there, how many there are and if there are any that might require more time. It is good to check the **front and back** of **all** the pages so you are not surprised later in the exam by an unexpected question.

Plan your time

Plan your time in exams, especially in exams with essay questions. With essay questions, look at how many **you have to answer** (as it may not be all of them) and how many marks each question is worth. Then divide your time for each question, with time to plan at the start and read through at the end. Write your time plan on your question paper. Questions worth more marks will need a bit more time. Remember though, this is a rough guide to give you an idea and can be a bit flexible.

Plan your answer

It is a good idea to spend a few minutes (no more than five) on a quick plan for your response to an essay question. This will help you organise your thoughts and stop you from going off on a tangent. A couple of words for each paragraph is enough, do not make the plan elaborate. Make sure your answer has a clear beginning (a few sentences as an introduction), middle (your arguments, one point per paragraph), and end (a few sentences to sum up your points as a conclusion). When you have completed the essay, draw a line through your plan.

If stuck, move on and come back

If you are completing a paper with questions that require short answers, remember you do not need to do the questions in order. If you are really stuck, rather than spending a long time thinking about one answer, move on to another question. You can go back to that question after tackling other questions that you find easier, by which time you may have a better idea of how to attempt it.

Attempt every question

Try to answer **every** question as best you can. You have far more chance of a mark if you attempt the question rather than leaving it blank.

Appendix 2

Relaxation Techniques

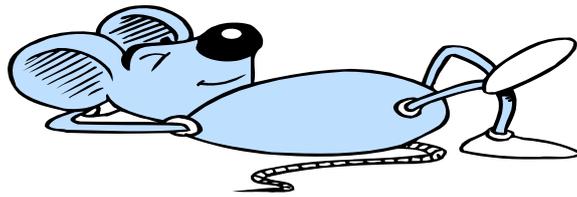


Relaxation Technique 1 - 7:11 Breathing

Many people find that the easiest way to relax is to concentrate on their own breathing. If you find that paying attention to your breathing makes you more anxious or does not make you feel calmer then try one of the other relaxation techniques below. This technique can help you instantly calm down if you feel tearful, angry or panicked.

- Sit (or lie) in a comfortable position with your legs uncrossed and arms at your sides or put your hands in your lap. Loosen your clothing if you can.
- Closing your eyes will help you focus.
- Become more aware of your body. Think about your feet on the floor, your legs and arms resting, your back against what you are sitting (or lying) on.
- Keep your shoulders down and take a slow, deep breath. Try to breathe from your tummy and fill your lungs. A hand on your tummy will let you know if you are doing this right. Breathing in through your nose will help slow down your breathing.
- Then breathe out slowly and make the out-breath last longer than the in-breath (this is important as it triggers the body's relaxation response). This technique is based upon breathing in for a count of 7 and breathing out for a count of 11. This is quite a long time so, when you are starting to use this technique, you may wish to try shorter counts, eg in for 3 and out for 5 then progress to in for 5 and out for 7. Remember that the out-breath should always be longer.
- Repeat this until you start to feel more relaxed (around 10 to 20 breaths).
- Concentrate on the counting, try to block out other thoughts and be aware of your body relaxing.

Appendix 3



Relaxation Technique 2 - PMR (Progressive Muscle Relaxation)

PMR releases tension in muscles so can help you feel less tense and feel physically and mentally more relaxed. This is a useful technique to use if you are having trouble sleeping.

You are going to be tensing groups of muscles in turn. Only clench your muscles comfortably and if you feel discomfort or pain then stop. If you have any injuries, muscle spasms or muscle pain, just skip those areas as you work up your body or the tensing could make it worse.

- Sit (or lie) in a comfortable position with your legs uncrossed and arms at your sides, or put your hands in your lap.
- Closing your eyes will help you focus.
- Start at the bottom of your body and work up so think about your right foot first. Breathe in slowly then tense your right foot and hold it for 5 seconds before letting the tension go. Breathe out as you let go and let the tension drain out of your foot. It should feel more relaxed and warm.
- Now do the same thing with the left foot. Breathe in, tense your left foot for 5 seconds and release while breathing out.
- Now tense and relax the right leg.
- Tense and relax your left leg.
- Clench and relax your bottom.
- Tense and relax your lower stomach and lower back.
- Tense and relax upper stomach and chest.
- Now tense your neck and shoulders. Breathe in and bring your shoulders up to your ears. Hold for 5 seconds and breathe out as you release. Feel the tension flow out of your shoulders. They should feel warmer and more relaxed.
- Now tense your face by screwing it up, holding it for 5 seconds and releasing.
- Be aware of your body. It should feel more floppy and relaxed. Concentrate on the warm, relaxed feeling and on breathing slowly.
- When you wish to stop, in your head or aloud count backwards 5.. 4.. 3.. 2.. 1.. and now you are wide awake and feeling calm.
- Open your eyes for a few seconds before your stand up.

Appendix 4



Relaxation Technique 3 – Visualisation

Sports people often imagine that they will run the fastest, beat the other side at football, or jump the highest at long jump and these positive images and positive mental attitudes can help them be successful. The same is true in our lives. If we imagine that we will succeed, we are more likely to do so.

We are therefore going to practice imagining being successful in exams:

Imagine walking into the exam room and feeling relaxed and calm. You set out the pens and paper you need on your desk. You are still feeling calm and are excited to be able to demonstrate to the examiners your knowledge on the subject. You remember all the information you have revised. You turn over the exam papers and you understand all the questions. Nothing can distract you in the exam room as you are focused, concentrated and feeling fine. You work hard on the exam, keeping an eye on the time, so you answer all questions. You know you are doing your best and you can feel proud of yourself. You have time to check over your exam paper. You are pleased with the work you have done. The exam is now over. You leave feeling relaxed and positive.

You can change this visualisation to make it even more personal to you, by thinking of positive sounds, smells, feelings and incorporating them into a visualisation narrative (like the one above). Positive visualisation can be used for any situation such as an interview, learning to drive, giving a band performance - any situation where you can imagine yourself being successful!