



# Managing Test & Examination Anxiety

Directorate: Counselling and Career Development  
KZN Counselling and Career Development

Developed by: Dr Shariefa Hendricks  
Presented by: Candice Chetty in July & September 2022

**Define tomorrow.**

UNISA



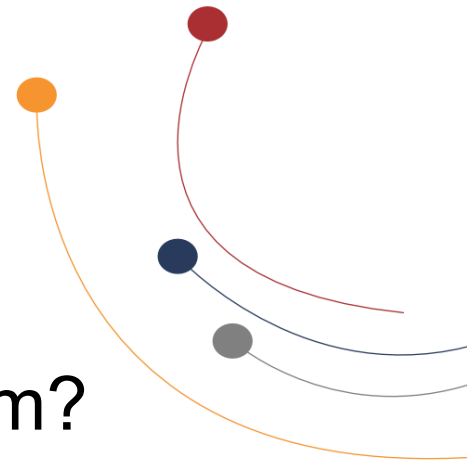
# In this session...



1. Understanding exam anxiety
2. Causes of exam anxiety
3. Symptoms of exam anxiety
4. Managing exam anxiety

# Sound familiar?

- Do you ever freeze right before or on the day of an exam?
- Do you feel overwhelmed or anxious about forgetting everything you studied?
- Has your mind ever gone completely blank even though you studied all your work?
- Are you unable to recall material during the exam but then recall everything afterwards?
- Have you ever had trouble focusing on exam questions because of interfering thoughts?
- Normal to experience some anxiety



# What is Exam Anxiety?



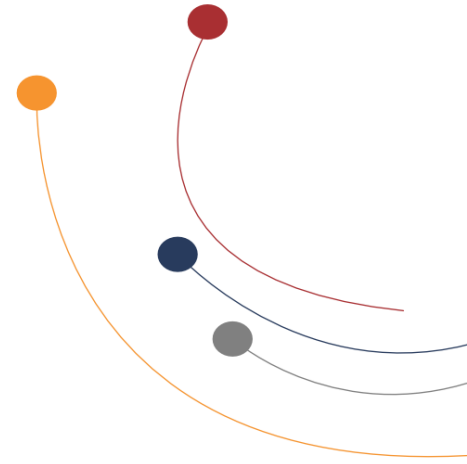
It is the **excessive worry** or intense nervousness caused by having to write a test/exam.

Consists of a combination of **physical symptoms and emotional reactions** that interfere with your ability to perform well in tests/ exams.

If not managed in time it negatively **affects your performance**.

It needs to be **acknowledged and managed**.

# Who is Affected by Test & Exam Anxiety?



Everyone experiences some test anxiety, but there are generally two types of students:

1. *Those who see testing as a challenge and a chance to show the lecturer what they know.*
2. *Those who view testing as a threat*

# Types of Exam Anxiety



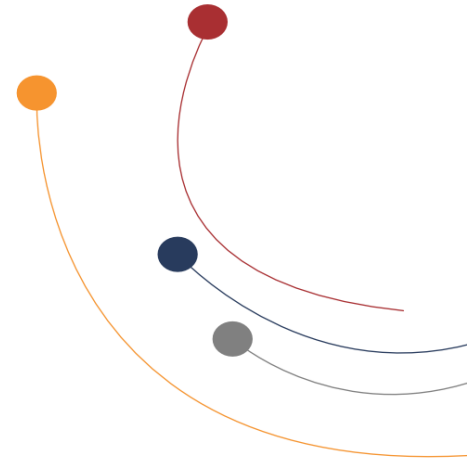
## Mild/ Moderate exam anxiety:

- Students may feel a little nervous about an upcoming exam, able to focus their attention on their studies or the questions;
- Students do not experience intrusive thoughts or feel debilitated by the exam
- **Student writes exam**

## Severe exam anxiety:

- Students show an immediate anxiety reaction when exposed to the feared test/exam situation.
- Attempt to avoid the situation by not showing up to the exam, or may endure it but with extreme fear.
- **Avoidance of test/exam situation**
- High anxiety can cause a panic attack: “I just really can’t do this!”

# Symptoms: Night before the exam



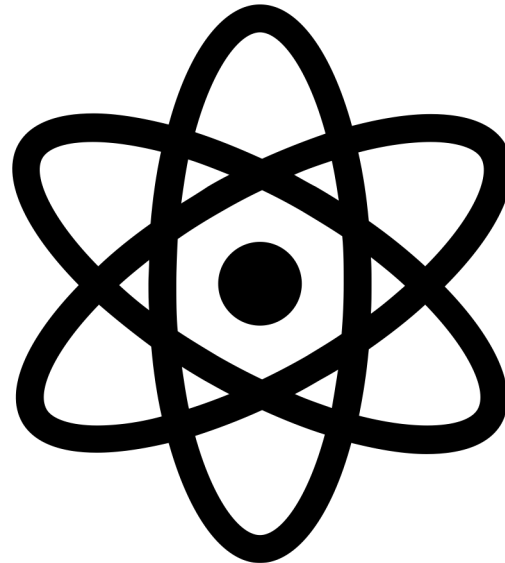
Restlessness/  
agitation

Loss of  
focus/easily  
distracted

Inability to focus or  
sustain attention or  
to concentrate

Lack of  
sufficient sleep

Indifference



Feeling confused

Mental blocks



# Symptoms: During test/ exam



## Physical responses

- Sweating/Fainting
- Difficulty breathing
- Dizziness
- Tension, Headache
- Runny tummy/butterflies in your stomach/Upset stomach, nausea
- Perspiration/Sweating
- Rapid heartbeat

## Emotional responses/ states

- Nervousness/Anxiety/ Panic/ Confusion
- Mental blocking/“blanking out”
- Loss of concentration or
- Excessive fear/Worry
- Overwhelm, Paralysis



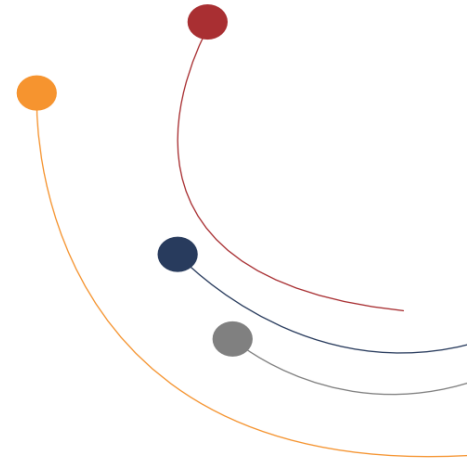
# Where might it come from?

Fear of failure/ a past failure?

A lack of confidence?

Feeling unprepared?

Pre-existing anxiety?



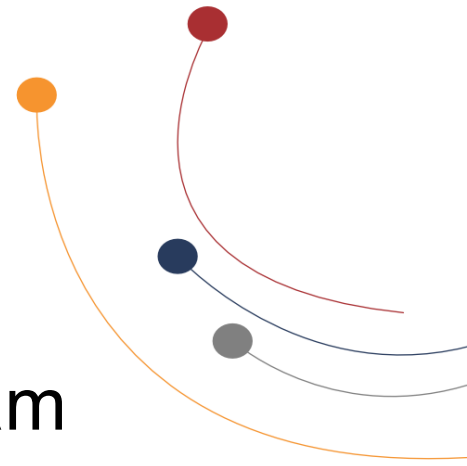
# What causes anxiety during exams?



- Irrational and/or negative thinking/self-talk
- Lack of adequate preparation
- Feeling overwhelmed/Cramming
- Perfectionistic thinking
- Pressure to succeed/need to get top marks/“A’s”
- Previous poor academic performance
- Self doubt or decreased self-confidence
- Attitude need adjusting
- Fear of failure

# Did you know?

- Managing anxiety effectively can actually help with exam performance.
- Your emotional state affects your ability to test well.
- It takes a calm and controlled emotional state for your memory and judgment to work most effectively.
- When you are anxious, your BRAIN shuts down! Does this sound familiar “my mind went blank?”



# During the semester: Plan Effectively to Avoid Anxiety

Be well prepared  
for exams

Do NOT  
procrastinate

Understand your  
work

Use sound study  
methods

Notes/ summaries  
need to be up to  
date

Test yourself

Ideally revise 3-4  
weeks before  
exams

A week before do  
final revision

Being prepared =  
increases  
confidence =  
**GIVES YOU UPPER  
HAND**

# During the semester: Plan Effectively to Avoid Anxiety



**Work as many hours as you can manage everyday**



**Prepare ahead of time by working on sections of the content each day**



**Take good notes/ summaries before exam starts/keep notes organized**



**Review notes soon after going through a section and consolidate your work**



**Keep a calendar with test/exam dates and deadlines – draw up a study timetable**



**Schedule several short review sessions, rather than one long “cram” session**

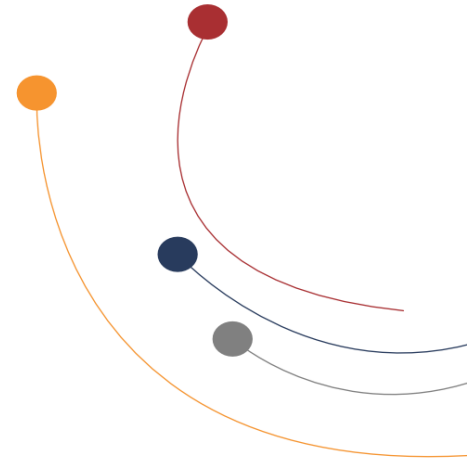
# Tips for before the exam



## How can you avoid or decrease anxiety and study more effectively before the exams?

- Choose a space where you find it easy to concentrate – avoid distractions and interruptions
- Be organised and study where it is conducive for you
- Use good lighting – straining your eyes can make them tired
- Avoid caffeinated drinks – can increase anxiety
- Get sufficient rest - you will study better when you are rested

# Tips for before the exam

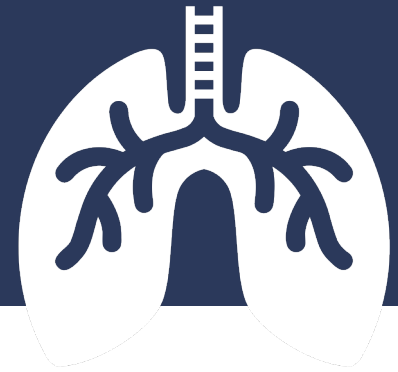


## When getting ready for exams try to:

- Identify your anxiety early by noticing your physical responses
- Learn a few skills for reducing your physical reactions of anxiety
- Practice focusing your attention on the task at hand (mindfulness), rather than getting tangled in your anxiety and thinking of the “what if?”
- Schedule some free time to re-energize



# Panic the night before



- Learn and practice the relaxation and breathing techniques in advance so that you can utilise them if you need to.
- Try to avoid working too close to the exam
- No Cramming
- Don't stay up late the night before. A good night's sleep is more valuable than an extra few hours of revision.
- Check that you have all the exam details/information that you need
- Remember to eat – your brain will need the fuel in the exam! Dry bread, crackers and cereal all help settle an upset stomach.

# Stop the cycle of worry: Visualise your success



People tend to live up to their own expectations, good or bad.



Spending loads of time focusing on failure, you are mentally rehearsing what you will do if you fail, increasing your chances of failure. Stop the cycle of worry now!



Instead, focus on rehearsing success and what that would feel like.

# Let's practice: Visualisation exercise



**Close your eyes**



**Visualize yourself taking the test/exam successfully.**



**Imagine that you know all the answers or that you aced the exam.**



**See yourself, answering all questions, finishing the exam on time and writing quickly and confidently. In your mind's eye see yourself submit with confidence.**



**Visualize your celebration when you find out that you have passed.**



**As soon as you realize you are feeling anxious about an upcoming test/exam, begin using this technique.**

# Reverse Negative Thinking



The skills you need to conquer test/ exam anxiety will take time, so work at it every day!

If you believe you CAN do it, then you WILL!

**It all starts with your thoughts**

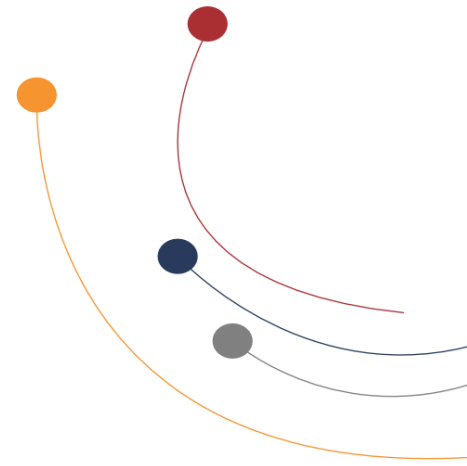
**Develop positive self-statements such as:**

“I CAN do well.”

“I studied hard and I know the material.”

“I’m smart and will succeed no matter what!”

# Changing negative thoughts to positive ones



## **Discourage negative self-talk**

- Try replacing unhelpful thoughts with more encouraging self-talk by challenging your worries and negative thoughts

## **Avoid Unrealistic statements.**

- You might say, for example, “I must get 90% for Maths” (but you have never achieved higher than 50%)
- You are making unrealistic demands on yourself. This unrealistic statement could be changed to: “I’ll work hard to obtain at least 5% more than last time.”
- Unrealistic demands made by other people can also lead to unrealistic self-statements. Work at changing these as well.

## **Avoid Self-defeating statements.**

- Self-defeating statements place you in a losing position before you have even started. For example, “I’ll never get through this work “
- Change to: “If I plan studies step by step and stick to the plan, I should be able to finish”

# Developing a growth mindset positive ones



INSTEAD OF...	TRY THINKING...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I am not good at this</li><li>• I give up</li><li>• It's good enough</li><li>• I can't make this any better</li><li>• This is too hard</li><li>• I made a mistake</li><li>• I just can't do this</li><li>• I'll never be that smart</li><li>• Plan A didn't work</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What am I missing?</li><li>• I will use a different strategy</li><li>• Is this really my best work?</li><li>• I can always improve</li><li>• This may take some time</li><li>• Mistakes help me to learn</li><li>• I am going to train my brain</li><li>• I will learn how to do this</li><li>• There's always Plan B</li></ul>

# Panic during the exam: Test taking strategies



- **Budget your time:** Read through the exam paper at the beginning and figure out how much time to spend on each question
- **Read through the instructions and questions slowly and carefully,** highlighting keywords/points (e.g., discuss, define, compare)
- Read the full exam - **Mark questions you know.**
- To build confidence, **start with easier questions or those you know first** - this will relax you.
- Skip a question if you don't know the answer yet or it has you puzzled - leave spaces in answers – come back
- **Answer each question:** even if you can not answer the question completely, write what you know – writing may spark your memory



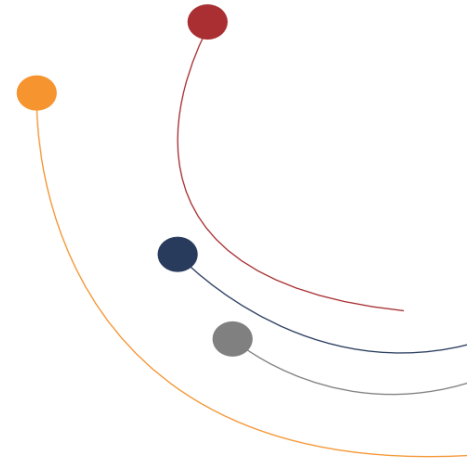
# Panic during the exam: Test taking strategies



- Start with any Multiple-choice or True/False section to gain clues that might help you answer other questions.
- Take 30-second “mini-breaks” Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Repeat this at specified points during the exam whenever you begin to feel anxious.
- Plan your answers. This helps your writing flow and means you don’t end up panicking.
- Answer each question: even if you can not answer the question completely, write what you know – writing may spark your memory.
- Use the full time allowed: if you finish before time is up, go back and review your answers to make sure you’ve answered all the questions, fix errors or add information.

# Practice 5-4-3-2-1

## Grounding technique



- Use your senses to list things you notice around you.
- Start by listing:
  - **5 things you hear**
  - **4 things you see**
  - **3 things you can touch from where you are**
  - **2 things you can smell**
  - **1 thing you can taste**

# Contact us



**We are available by e-mail:**

Send an e-mail to [counsellingkzn@unisa.ac.za](mailto:counsellingkzn@unisa.ac.za) or [counselling@unisa.ac.za](mailto:counselling@unisa.ac.za) should you need to discuss any needs you may have in terms of further support

**For more resources like these, visit our website:**

<http://ww.unisa.ac.za/counselling>

**DCCD YouTube Channel:**

<http://www.youtube.com/unisacareers>

**Book an online counselling session:**

<https://tinyurl.com/mtr3xyks>



**Thank you**

**Define tomorrow.**

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