Exam Anxiety

For some people the examination period is an extremely stressful time. Stress can cause medical problems or reduce the efficiency of exam performance. Of course, most people have some reaction to examinations. The problem is to know if we ourselves are the ones who have an excessive anxiety which affects exams and life as a whole.

How do I know if I am Excessively Anxious?

There are two good indicators which will help you identify whether your concern about exams might be something greater than the usual unease which most people feel:

1. You will be aware of a history of nerves at various times before and/or during exams. See below for a checklist of possible reactions.

2. You will be aware that you begin to feel uncomfortable. The worries suddenly seem to appear. You wake up one morning, or somebody says something and that reminds you about an exam, and you have unpleasant feelings without any other apparent cause.

Worry may start:

- Long before the event - at the beginning of the exam year or before you even arrive at university.
- About three months before exams.
- The week preceding exams.
- 36 hours before the exam.
- At the start of the exam.
- During the exam.
- After the exam.

You may have strong reactions at more than one of these times.

Typical Reactions to Exam Stress

Physical Symptoms:

Sleep may be short and interrupted. Sometimes oversleeping occurs. Occasionally there's loss of appetite or skin rashes develop, neck-ache, headache or increased craving for alcohol, stimulants, caffeine. There may also be sensations of panic, dizziness, muscular tension, hyperventilation and nausea.

Thought Patterns

You may be preoccupied with exams even though the exams are ages away. Some of the thoughts are uncomfortable ones and may contain self-critical ideas, running yourself down and comparing yourself unfavourably with your colleagues. You may see the future as bleak with you as a loser - not getting your degree or being inferior to others. Some people develop a fear of loss of memory - “blanking out” as it is sometimes called.
Actions: You may find yourself tending to try and block out the subject of exams - avoiding going near exam halls, leaving lectures or switching off when the subject is mentioned. You may be too easily distracted with very short spans of concentration and your normal functioning at study tasks may be badly affected.

Images: These usually take the form of unpleasant scenes or flashbacks from previous exams. They can be very vivid. There may be nightmares. The future can be imagined in alarming ways.

Effect on Interaction with Others: You may find yourself withdrawing, unable to talk to friends as much as usual. You might feel frightened of what people say about exams. People may seem less reassuring than usual.

Feelings: Your mood is usually slightly down or anxious; it can be exclusively one or the other but often both feelings co-exist. There may be feelings of terror. You may experience some despair.

Unpleasant though these symptoms are, they are very common and they can be overcome - see over for positive suggestions.

How to Deal with Exam Anxiety

1. Stop avoiding the issues.
   - Try to face up to what lies ahead and plan for the event.
   - Review your exam skills and plan to deal with any deficiencies.
   - Set up a timetable to manage revision more effectively.
   - Schedule relaxation time in between study sessions (but avoid over-partying!).
   - Be realistic when planning your time; don't be too ambitious otherwise you will become exhausted.
   - Create an area where you can study effectively ie. Good lighting, comfortable chair etc. The area should be free from clutter which might cause a distraction.

2. Learn to handle anxiety more effectively.
   - You will keep your stress at a low level if you have a routine which allows for regular meals, sleep etc.
   - Make a concerted effort to discover a successful ‘winding down’ routine for the evenings and get to sleep.
   - If you begin to panic concentrate on breathing techniques and take a little time out to calm down fully before resuming work. The Counselling Service can advise further on relaxation skills.
   - Picture yourself positively; maybe struggling with aspects of an exam - but doing so competently and winning through.

3. Strengthen exams and revision skills.
   - To help reduce anxiety you need to practice answering questions under exam conditions using old papers etc. Don't be frightened to ask for support from your department.
   - Books can offer instructions on skills for use in an exam room. There isn't one set way to succeed in exams. Try a range of options so you don't feel trapped and worried. There are a number of text books which explore these topics. There are also some useful self-help books which will assist you in changing your negative beliefs.
• The Student Union produces an extremely practical leaflet entitled Exams...Help!
• The Student Counselling Service runs an Exam Anxiety Workshop designed to help you deal with exam stress and give yourself the best chance of performing well.

Perhaps the examination period is the time when physical and social activities are most needed to reduce stress but take care not to overdo the pubs and clubs as this may leave you with regrets and guilt as well as a hangover the next day! Sometimes we need someone else's help to get us to face up to a problem and new skills develop more easily when you have a chance to talk it out. Research has suggested that support from the Student Counselling Service can be very helpful in improving exam performance.

If you would like to discuss your anxieties with a counsellor or would like to know more about the Exam Anxiety Workshop telephone 01784 443128 or call in to FW171 between 9-12 & 1-4pm or email counselling@rhul.ac.uk