Assessment and Examination Anxiety

As a university student, it is perfectly natural to feel anxious and nervous when preparing for and taking an assessment or examination. A moderate amount of anxiety can sharpen concentration and performance, as well as to keep you motivated.

However, excessive anxiety, worry and fear can be overwhelming and may stop you from being able to recall and perform. Your academic results would thus be adversely affected.
What is it like to have Examination Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal part of our everyday life. It is also a natural response to threat or sense of an emergency. When we feel anxious, our bodies will go into a “fight or flight” response (also known as acute stress response) automatically. We then become prepared to fight or run away to deal with the dangerous circumstances.

Signs of Examination Anxiety

**Before**
- I have a hard time getting started studying for it.
- I find many things distract me when I am studying.
- I expect to do poorly no matter how hard I study.

**During**
- I experience physical discomfort such as sweaty palms, upset stomach, headache, shortness of breath and tension in my muscles.
- I find it difficult to understand the questions.
- I have difficulty organizing my thoughts.
- My mind often goes blank.
- I find my mind wandering to other things.

**After**
- I remember information I could not recall during the examination.
- I overly worried about the result and feel depressed.

Mal-adaptive Coping

*Some students may cope with the anxious and stressful feelings by the following mal-adaptive means:*
- Excessive drinking or alcoholism
- Smoking
- Taking drugs or substances
- Taking too much caffeine and energizing drinks
- Sleeping or idling
- Avoiding or procrastinating by other activities e.g., surfing internet, playing games, socializing with friends, watching television
These coping strategies may have a calming effect and help you to stay awake initially but not long term and effective ways to manage stress and anxiety. They may even make you feel on the edge and panicky if taking an overdose or misuse.

**Self Help**

**Take Good Care of Yourself**

- Rest and sleep well are good for mental preparation. Try to maintain 6 to 8 hours a night for sleep. Diaphragmatic breathing and muscular relaxation exercises, as well as meditation and mindfulness help to give your body a chance to relax. You may refer to our website on understanding emotions and stress management: [http://counsel.ust.hk/emotion.html](http://counsel.ust.hk/emotion.html)

- Eat and drink well are good for physical preparation. Try to get proper meals which include protein and vegetables and ensure that your diet is balanced. It is also important to maintain a good level of hydration. Mood, concentration and productivity do count on good and regular diets.

**Study Smart**

- Effective study and time management skills help reducing your anxiety and getting a better sense of control. Do plan ahead and take regular breaks from studying, say 15-minute break. Forcing yourself to continue studying for hours while your mind is wandering is not helpful.

- Set realistic expectation to achieve and break study tasks into small and realistic goals. SMART goals can be helpful - Be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely.

- Study skills advice and support is available from course instructors, School Advising Teams and numerous websites, including that from Counseling and Wellness Center: [http://counsel.ust.hk/academic_performance.html](http://counsel.ust.hk/academic_performance.html)

**Keep Your Mind Healthy**

- Focus on yourself but not others. Remind and recognize yourself of your past achievements. You may also need to take time to do your best.

- Forget the examination temporarily once you finished it. Turn your attention to new assignments and leisure activities. Continue to engage in some daily exercises. This will help to relax tense muscles and release endorphin for pleasurable and positive emotions.

- Reassure that you did well and tried hard in the examinations. Learn from past experience and mistakes, and explore new ways of improving study skills in future attempts.
On the Assessment or Examination Day

- Try not to learn and input more new topics as this may impair your ability to remember those you have learnt and registered before.
- Try to review some brief notes or reminder cards for easy recall and getting you refreshed.
- Try not to study an hour before the examination although you may still want to memorize everything. In the last few minutes you should not be thinking about the examination at all.
- Take some mini-relaxation exercises when you have only three minutes. Help yourself to slow down deliberately in stressful moments: http://counsel.ust.hk/images/mini-relaxation-exercise.jpg
- Time and plan your arrival to examination venue. Try not to be too early or late so that you can keep the anxiety level at your manageable range. Stay away from anxious peers before the examination sessions.

You are not Your Results!

The grades just show how much you have learned within a period of time, not define how competent and worthful you are as a student or person! It is not uncommon that we may have catastrophic thoughts for our results which generate a vicious cycle for our psychological health and academic performance. Instead, you may focus on what you can do to improve and enhance in future attempts.

Professional Help-seeking

The University provides professional counseling services for undergraduate and postgraduate students. You may check out the profiles of our Student Counselors on our webpage and make an appointment with them online. Two weeks’ advance booking is allowed. Please be reassured that all sharing and discussion during counseling sessions will be strictly confidential.

Counseling and Wellness Center
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