

## Beating the blues: Managing examination anxiety/evaluation apprehension during exams

Dear Students,

The half yearlies are around the corner. For some of you, this is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the consistent work that you have done over the year. Instead of leaving everything to the end, you were able to complete your syllabus on time and your hands are aching to fill the answer sheet with all that you now know.

While some of you may be at a point where you are now adding finishing touches to your overall preparation...not surprisingly, many of you might be placed at different levels. For some, the exams become the point where we first really see the syllabus in the academic session. Many of you may find yourselves gripped with nerves. Anticipating the many chapters that you could have completed if you had just started preparing on the day that you had marked for yourself. But then, you postponed it to the next day. 8 chapters could have been done within 8 days but you decided to postpone it by a day (again) and then decided to do 2 per day. Then you procrastinated (again) and decided to do 4 in a day. Lo and behold, now the deadline is on your head and suddenly you're wishing if you'd just made a plan and stuck to it, all the fear and nerves wouldn't have incapacitated you completely.

This is one of the many scenarios that students find themselves in when the examination season is around the corner. Procrastination, sleeplessness, binge watching, zoning out while trying to study, stomach related difficulties (a physical manifestation of emotional turmoil), panic and anxiety are some of the common psychological phenomena that afflict many during these times. If you find yourself in this situation often, then this writing can become a point of self-reflection. It offers you some practical tools that you can implement in order to use the examinations as an opportunity to acquire some necessary life skills.

Some important points before we begin is that in an ideal scenario revising ahead of time, being consistent

### 1) *Analysis Paralysis*

At the beginning of the write up, an example was shared where procrastination eventually leading to postponement was documented. A common scenario amongst students. Regardless of where you are in your preparation it is crucial that you make a rough blue print and then begin implementing it. There is nothing like a perfect plan. You can only modify things or improvise once the journey has begun. We get so stuck on implementing the plan perfectly that we just fail to start. Start somewhere. Beginning the process is important before we find ways to stick to it or maintain it.

### 2) *Acceptance – Mediating realistic expectations and ambition*

This is the most crucial step for those who have come to the realisation that a vast amount of work cannot be uniformly covered in a very short span of time. Even if we attempt to by over-caffeinating to perform well, the information wouldn't be retained for a longer period of time as

neurobiologically also...more time is needed for information to assimilate in our long-term memory. The analogy that I like to use is of digestion. When we eat a lot in a very short span of time, we experience a push back from our bodies. The same logic works when we condense an year or half an year's worth of work within a week. While optimism is crucial, unrealistic expectations can be more detrimental. Choose your chapters and try to maximise your areas of strength. It begins by a detailed skimming of the syllabus, sorting out what is realistically doable from what isn't. We cannot control all parameters but we can take the lesson from this experience to accommodate it for the next time. If you're a student who finds yourself in this situation often, reflect on the why's? Some people find it difficult to function when there's no adrenalin rush. Many even perform better because of it. Some degree of stress is necessary because it propels us forward (Eustress). However, excessive stress or the inability to regulate it can easily propel its destructive potential (Distress). Since we have repetitive experiences of performing well even with last minute prep (as shared by some students) 'winging it' what we think is that if we do it again, we'll manage but increasingly complex syllabi along with multiple other deadlines corner students emotionally. By the time they realise they're stuck, it is often too late.

If you're a student who is repeating this cycle year after year, think about why it happens? Discuss it with a friend, peer, mentor, teacher, parent or counsellor as the pattern is broken once we begin to understand where it's coming from.

Examinations aren't only a measurement of your cognitive capabilities but as continuously reiterated in this writing, an opportunity to learn time management and tools/strategies to optimise learning.

### **3) *Avoid excessive caffeine (REM Sleep and how it compromises its function)***

We need to allow our brains to process the information that they have taken in. In an ideal scenario, with the right planning and long enough gaps it becomes possible. However, we cannot eliminate the role of our anatomy when it comes to this. Sleep is crucial because this is the time when the body repairs itself and the brain processes all the information that it has taken in over the day. While all stages of sleep are crucial, REM/Deep sleep is crucial for mood, memory and our ability to learn. Excessive caffeine stretched onto the evening dehydrates the body, often comes with headaches and palpitations, intensifies symptoms of anxiety for those who grapple with it and compromises sleep quality resulting in that ugly feeling of too much alertness and chronic exhaustion if it's being abused instead of being consumed.

### **4) *Movement, sunlight and a nutrition dense diet***

As our mind works overtime, the body slips into non – activity for many. Light brisk walks, sports, gym, yoga, swimming or just listening to music as you move in the house could allow your body to regulate stress. This along with remaining hydrated and consuming a good diet which isn't extremely high in fats as well as carbs can be very helpful. This is because it is normal for us to gravitate towards comfort foods like chips and carbs when we're stressed. They're also hyperpalatable which makes us want to have them even more. They reduce our efficiency and bring down our energy levels. Having nutrition dense food, complex carbs and a diet which is high in protein can be helpful as it keeps one satiated for a longer period of time resulting in less binge eating.

### 5) *Common wisdom*

Regular is boring but it works during exams. Breaking the syllabus down in chunks, finding some time for a hobby or two, keeping yourself motivated and balancing between outcome oriented-ness as well as process oriented-ness is key here. While some pressure keeps one on their feet too much of it can be crippling. Finding a healthy balance is key. If you feel that you're well prepared then at this point adding some of these tips will equip you holistically. However, if you're placed in a slightly more complex space then adjusting expectations and doing what can be best done within the remaining time frame is a logical step forward. More than the syllabus, you can take this as an experience to build the skills that is needed to ace an exam as more than cognitive or intellectual capacities the exams also become an opportunity to master other life skills like acceptance, tolerating uncertainty, planning and time management which when worked on can render more depth to our lives as students.

If you find it difficult to regulate your feeling during this time then talking to a counsellor, teacher or a mentor that you can trust can go a long way.

All the best!

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