

Beating Exam Stress - Techniques

Student Workbook



The
Psychological
Service

Activity 1

'Exams/tests'

What 'exams/tests' have you had to take before or will you be taking in the future?
Please list below all the 'exams/tests' you can think of:

Right at this moment in time:

What are your **thoughts** about 'exams/tests'?

What are your **feelings** about 'exams/tests'?

Figure 1: Negative response to 'exam/test' situation

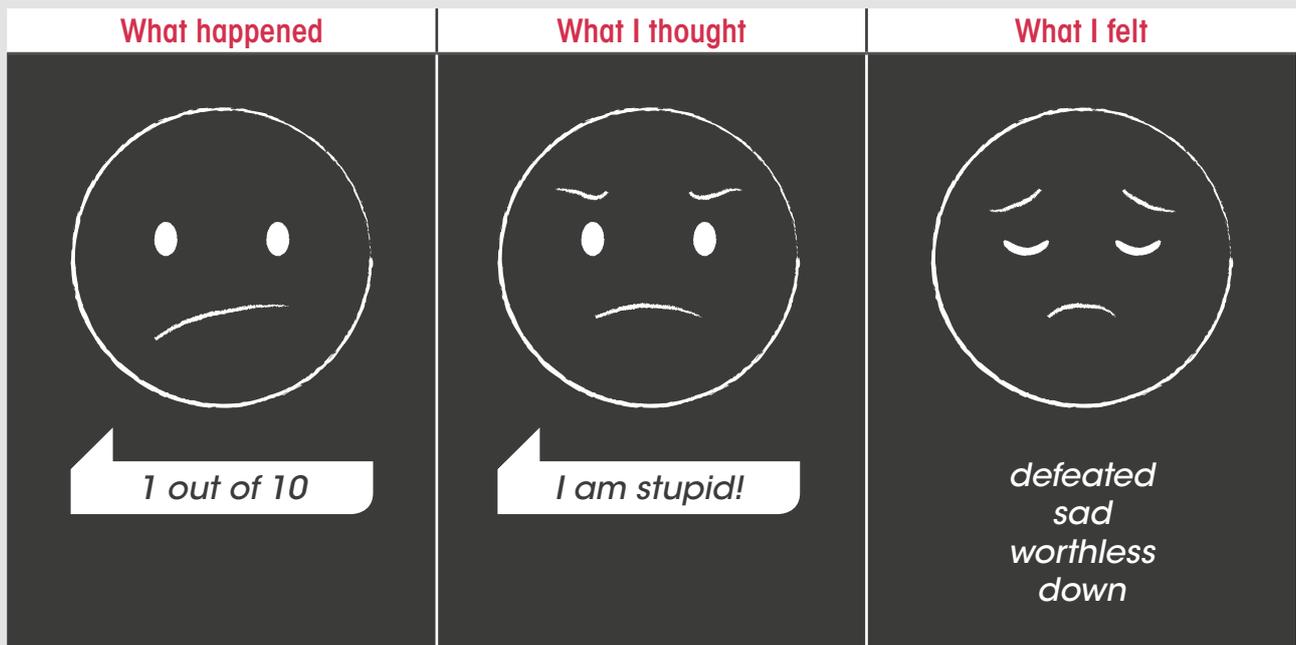
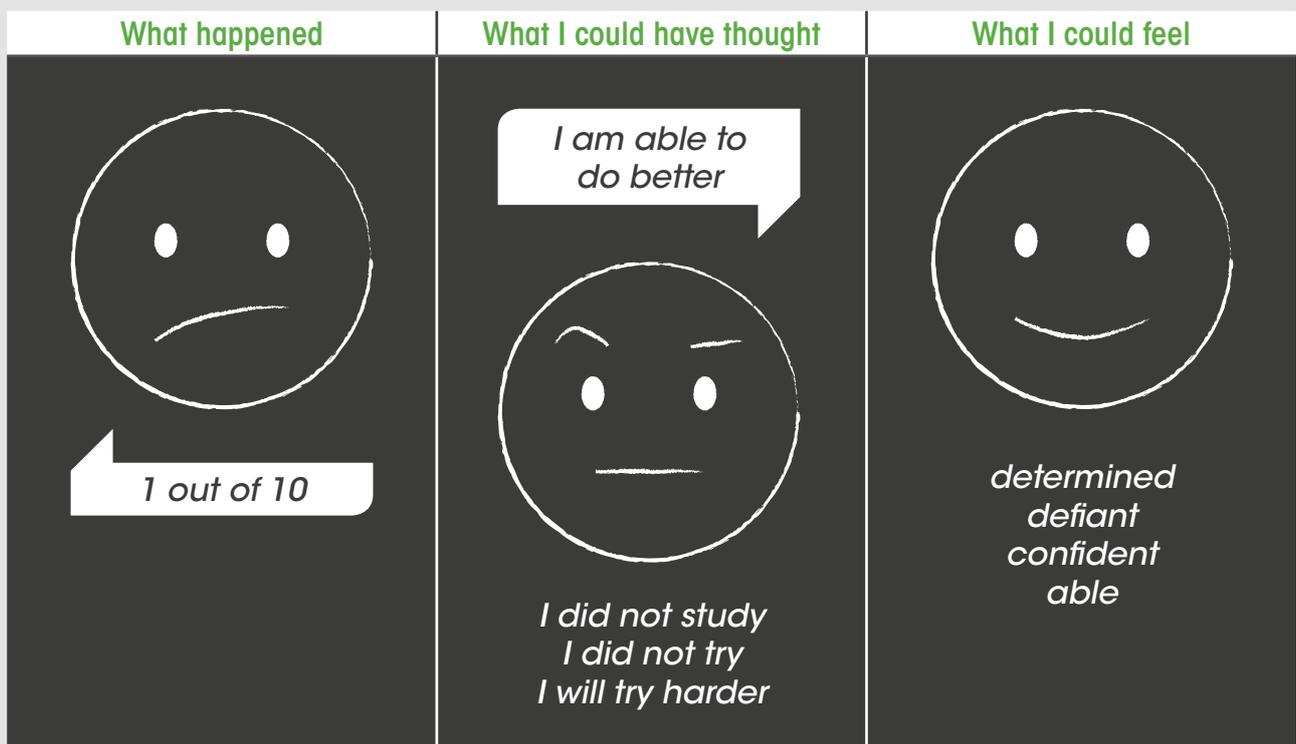
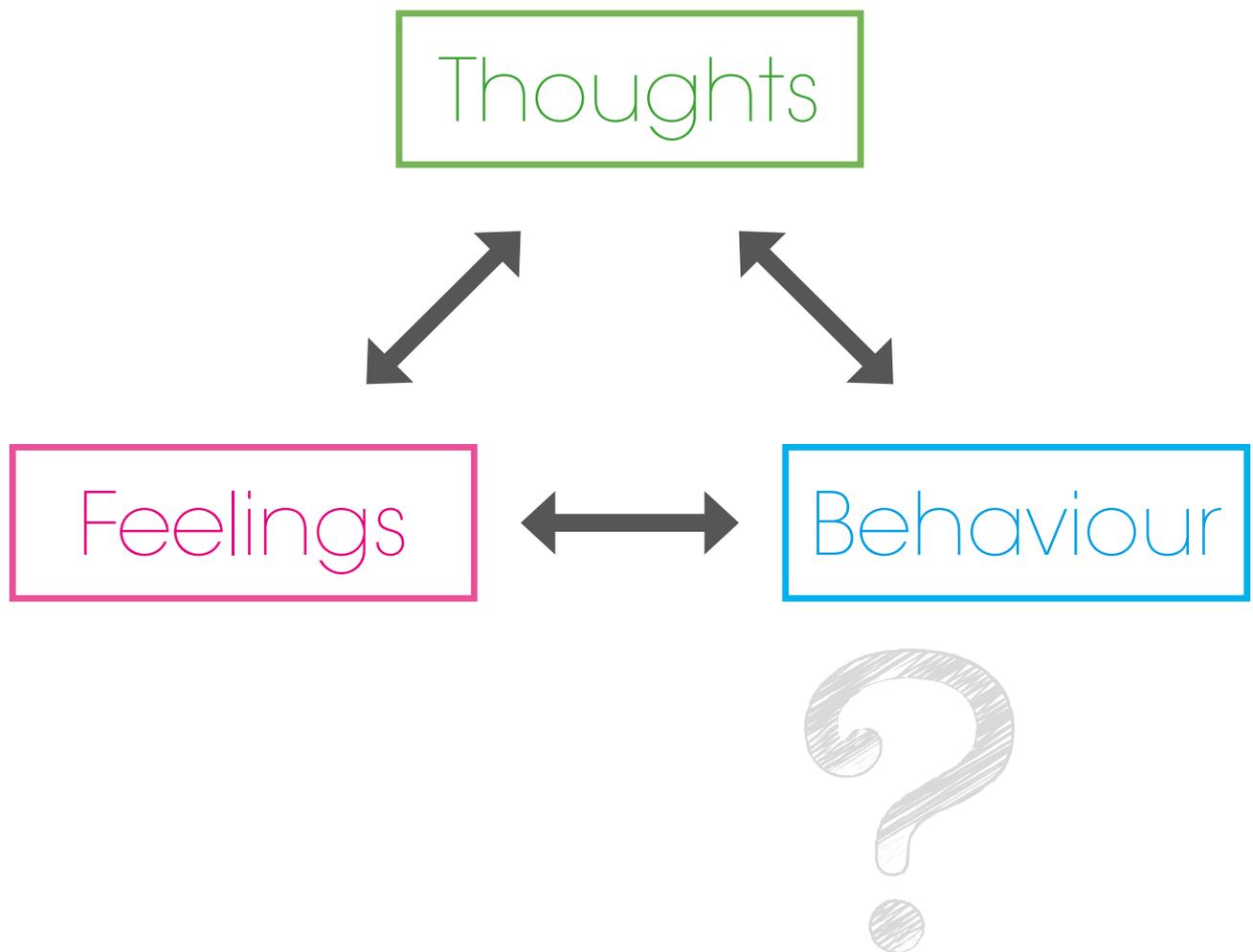


Figure 2: Positive response to 'exam/test' situation



Our performance in 'exams/tests' (**behaviour**) can impact on how we see ourselves (**thoughts**) and how we feel about having to do 'exams/tests' (**feelings**).

Figure 3: Relationships between thoughts, feelings and behaviour



How we think (**thoughts**), how we feel (**feelings**) and how we act (**behaviour**) all interact and go together.

Changing one can have an effect on the others.

Activity 2

Case studies

Below are three case studies where someone has had a negative experience.

1. John failed his driving test for the second time.
He said that he is no good at driving and always fails all kinds of tests.

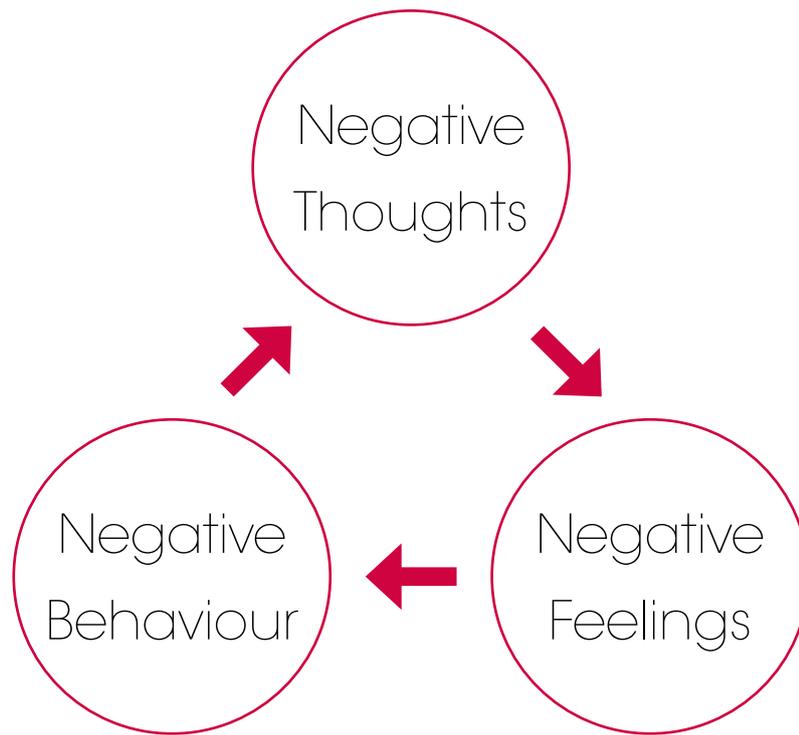
He didn't have the chance to practise in his mum's car because she was using it all the time. The test route was on roads that he didn't know very well.
2. Marie has got good qualifications and was well thought of at the school she attended, but didn't get a job offer after going for an interview.
She said that she is rubbish at interviews and will never get offered any job.
3. Laura had wanted to go to university but failed 2 of her Highers.
She thinks she'll never have a chance of getting to university and that she is no good at anything.

She'd had a lot of family difficulties and had moved house recently.
She also didn't get on with the two teachers in the subjects that she failed.

- Can you identify the **negative thoughts**? (Please highlight or underline).
- How do you think each of the characters is **feeling**?

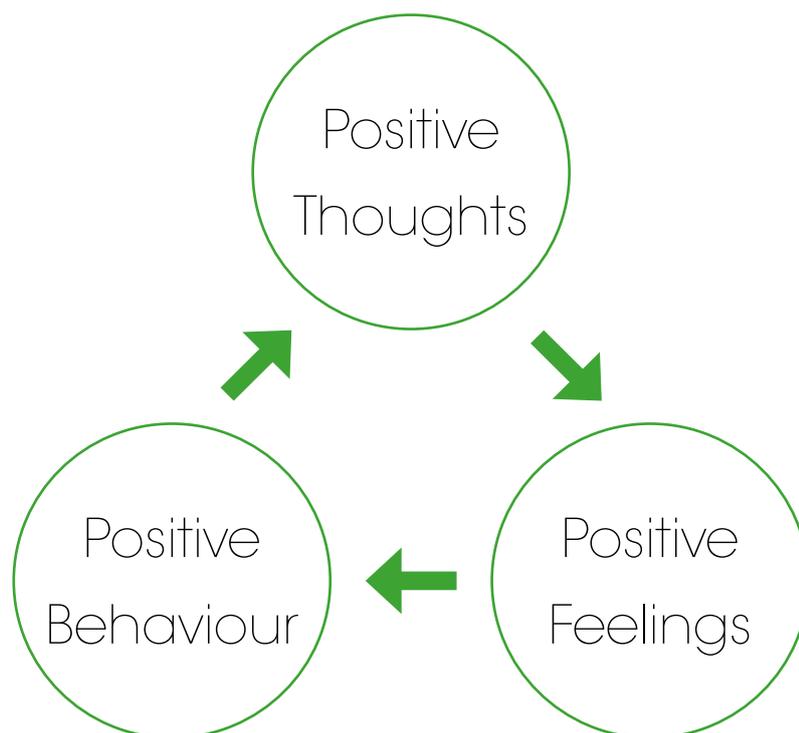
- Do you think any of them are motivated to try again?

Figure 4: **Negative thought cycle**



Our beliefs (**thoughts**) about the causes of events can affect how we approach future events.

Figure 5: **Positive thought cycle**



Activity 3

Figure 6: Ways of thinking

Three dimensions

1

Internal

It is me



External

It is something else other than me

2

Rigid

It will always be the same



Flexible

It can change

3

Global

It happens every time, all the time



Specific

It happened once this time

Figure 7: Helpful pathways

Negative

Is it me?
I'm stupid!

Or something outside me?
This is too hard

Is it always?
I will always be stupid

Or just sometimes?
This is too hard for me now

Is it everything?
I'm bad at everything

Or is it just this?
I have great ideas but I need more time

Activity 3 (continued)

Thinking about Thinking

Let's look at the case studies from Activity 2 again.

1. John failed his driving test for the second time.
He said that he is no good at driving and always fails all kinds of tests.

He didn't have the chance to practise in his mum's car because she was using it all the time. The test route was on roads that he didn't know very well.
2. Marie has got good qualifications and was well thought of at the school she attended, but didn't get a job offer after going for an interview.
She said that she is rubbish at interviews and will never get offered any job.
3. Laura had wanted to go to university but failed 2 of her Highers.
She thinks she'll never have a chance of getting to university and that she is no good at anything.

She'd had a lot of family difficulties and had moved house recently.
She also didn't get on with the two teachers in the subjects that she failed.

- Which '**way of thinking**' is each of the characters showing? (look at figure 6) (see page 7)

- What else could they have **thought** (from the information given) to make themselves feel a bit better?

- If they had **thought** like this do you feel they would be more motivated to try again?

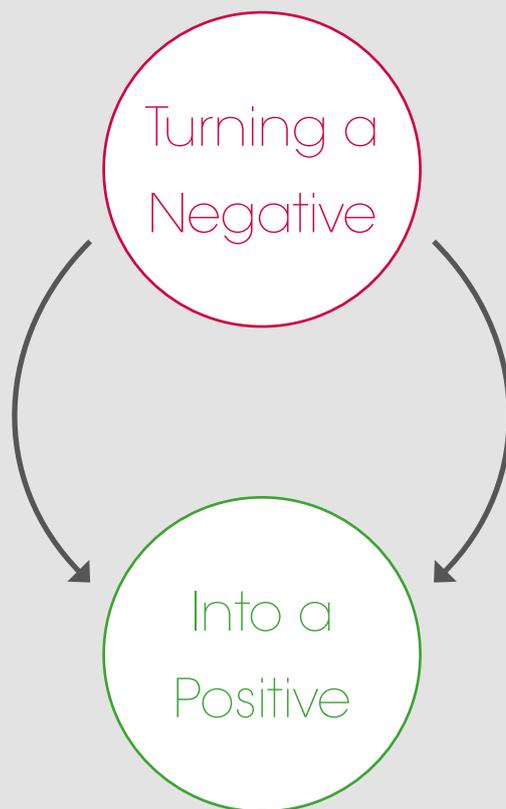
- When things go well who takes the credit?

You should

- When things don't work out is it **always** your fault?

No

- Look for ways of explaining bad things that are outside of your control
- Successful people are good at finding other explanations



$\frac{1}{2}$ Empty

$\frac{1}{2}$ Full



Activity 4

Turning negatives into positives

Figure 8: Pre-exam positive thinking

How would you like to be 'feeling' going into the 'exam/test'?	What do you need to be thinking?	What can you do (behaviours) to be thinking and feeling this way?

- On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not confident at all and 10 being very confident), how confident do you feel at present going into an 'exam/test'?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not confident at all

Very confident

- (i) What are you doing that lets you know you are at this point in the scale?

- (ii) What would need to happen for you to move up one point on the scale?

- (iii) At what point on the scale would be 'good enough' for you to be feeling going into an 'exam/test'?

Experiences of 'exam/test' situations

Figure 9: Examples of turning negative thoughts into positive thoughts

	Negative Thoughts	Positive Thoughts
1	I am worried that I won't do well	I know that I can do well
2	I think that everyone else will do better than me	I think I have as much chance as everyone else
3	I don't think I've revised enough	I have revised enough and I know the material
4	I am worried that I won't be able to remember the information	I will remember the information by staying calm and in control
5	I just don't know the material	I do know the material
6	I don't feel ready to sit this test	I am ready to sit the test
7	I am worried that I will let others down	I know others want me to try hard and do my best
8	I don't think I can get the results I need to get where I want to go	I know what I need to get where I want to go
9	I can't write/read quickly enough to complete the test	I will do the best I can in the time that I have
10	I will feel ill	I will feel fine
11	I can't concentrate	I will stay calm and be able to concentrate
12	I am easily distracted by my surroundings	I will just ignore what's happening around me and get on with the task
13	I will be marked down for my poor writing/spelling	I will do my best with my writing/spelling and demonstrate what I know
14	I won't understand the questions	I will read the questions carefully and make sure I understand what they are asking me to do
15	I won't be able to get through the whole paper in the time allowed	I will structure my time and allocate an appropriate amount to each question.

Activity 6

Stress!

- (i) Group discussion: What are the signs of stress?
How do we feel? What do we think? How do we behave?
- (ii) On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being very stressed and 10 being not stressed at all), how stressed do you feel going into a 'exam/test' situation?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Very stressed

Not stressed at all

- (iii) What are you doing that lets you know you are at this point in the scale?

- (iv) What would need to happen for you to move up one point on the scale?

- (v) At what point on the scale would be 'good enough' for you to be going into an 'exam/test' situation?

Activity 7

Relaxation

(i) Group discussion: How do we know we are relaxed?

How do we feel? What do we think?

What physical signs does our body give? How do we behave?

What makes us relaxed?

List the top 3 things that relax you:

1.
2.
3.

(ii) On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not relaxed at all and 10 being very relaxed), how relaxed do you feel going into an 'exam/test' situation?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not relaxed at all

Very relaxed

(iii) What are you doing that lets you know you are at this point in the scale?

(iv) What would need to happen for you to move up one point in the scale?

(v) At what point on the scale would be 'good enough' for you to be feeling going into a 'exam/test' situation?



It's all about balance. Making sure we have enough of the 'good stuff' will help us to manage and cope with the challenges we face. A little bit of stress can help us to focus and perform well. As humans, we are designed to cope with one-off stressful situations.

Activity 8

Mental Relaxation

1. Make yourself comfortable, lying or sitting down.
2. Begin by clenching your right hand into a tight fist and at the same time taking a deep breath, take a really deep breath and hold it – feel the tension in your right hand and forearm and in your lungs – hold your breath – feel all the tension – and breathe out and relax your hand and feel your body relax. Close your eyes and relax comfortably - feel heavy, warm and relaxed, without any effort.
3. Let your whole body relax more and more deeply as you breathe smoothly and slowly, using your stomach. Feel yourself becoming heavier, relaxed and warm each time you breathe out slowly and smoothly using your stomach.
4. Relax your muscles deeply as I name the different parts of your body.
5. Relax your forehead; your face; your eyebrows; your eyelids are heavy and relaxed; relax your mouth; your tongue and your jaw.
6. The more you relax, the heavier your body will become. All your muscles become heavier and heavier – a feeling of warmth and heaviness is spreading throughout your whole body.
7. Relax your neck; let your shoulders drop and feel heavy, warm and relaxed.
8. Let the relaxation spread to your arms, all the way out to the tips of your fingers.
9. Let it spread through your back and lower part of your body. Notice the feeling of complete relaxation. Breathe smoothly and slowly from your stomach, feeling heavier, limp and slack each time you breathe out slowly and smoothly from your stomach.
10. Let all thoughts and noises drift through your mind like passing clouds. Nothing disturbs your deep relaxation – there is nothing that makes you feel worried or uneasy. Everything feels calm and peaceful.
11. Notice how heavy and relaxed your body has become. When your body is completely relaxed you cannot be bothered to move a single muscle.
12. Continue to breathe slowly and smoothly, using your stomach. Each time you breathe out, you feel as if you are sinking down deeper and deeper. It feels good to let things drift through your mind like passing clouds – and to let yourself drift deeper into a heavy, warm and comfortable feeling of relaxation.
13. Continue to relax on your own for a while (2 minute pause).
14. Now you can listen to me again. Each time you relax like this you will find that it becomes easier and quicker for you to relax more deeply. You will notice that this type of relaxation gives you complete rest, both physically and mentally. After each session you will feel rested, calm and alert.
15. Feel yourself becoming more alert now. Before you open your eyes, take some really deep breaths and stretch your whole body like a cat. Feel completely alert and well in every way as you open your eyes.

Bad breathing

Shallow breathing from the chest delivers less air per breath to the lungs. Less air per breath leads to a higher number of breaths, putting in motion a series of physiological changes that constrict blood vessels. An imbalance between the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels in the lungs delivers less oxygen to the brain, the heart, and the rest of the body.

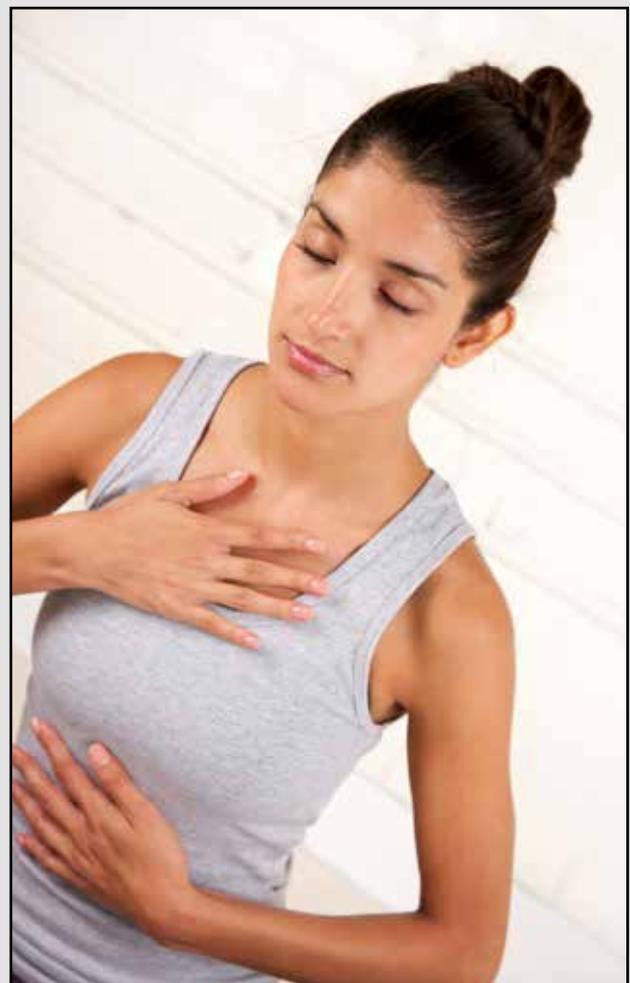
Too much oxygen and not enough carbon dioxide can create an agitated state. As you learn to exhale slowly, you conserve carbon dioxide and rebalance the system. However, too much carbon dioxide, and not enough oxygen, can create feelings of fatigues and depression. Learning to inhale slowly re-balances your system by taking in more oxygen. Stress, anxiety, and emotions all affect our breathing – the natural “fight or flight” response that increases respiration.

Good breathing

It is easy to develop good breathing habits, but it takes practice. To achieve normal levels of oxygen and CO² in your system, you begin by focusing your attention on breath!

Good breathing used in relaxation techniques comes from the diaphragm/abdomen. Concentrate your breathing by placing one hand on your diaphragm (just under your ribs at the top of your stomach) and the other hand on the upper part of your chest. If necessary, adjust your breathing slowly until it is only your bottom hand that is moving. You are now using your diaphragm to control breathing.

When you feel any of the “fight or flight” responses, take three slow breaths. Count slowly to three when you breathe in through your nose (and stomach rather than your chest). Breathe out on a slow count of six through your mouth.



Breathe in **1 — 2 — 3**

Breathe out **1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6**

Practise this and it will become a strategy available to you in a stressful situation.

Exam de-stress: Summary of things to remember:

- **Thinking** strategies: remind yourself of challenges that you have encountered in the past and coped with. Tell yourself that you can cope again. Keep things in perspective: the exams are important but not the 'be all and end all'. Doing your best is as much as you can do. Turn negative automatic thoughts into positive ones: if you're thinking 'I can't do this' or 'I'll never pass this exam' you can instead be telling yourself 'This is hard for me but I'll do my best' or 'I can pass this exam if I avoid getting too stressed and keep focused'.
- **Relaxation** strategies: remember that you can try the things that work for you. Examples include: deep, slow breathing; progressive muscles relaxation; lying down and listening to music; soaking in a warm bath; reading a magazine; taking exercise to help switch off. Find what works for you and use it when you can. Remember that feeling a little bit stress or pressure can be a positive thing in helping to give you the energy and motivation to focus on studying.
- **Balance**: it's important to keep a balance in life even when you are entering a phase that might be quite a stressful one. So when it gets close to exam time, you need to make sure that you still get enough sleep (for most people that's 7-8 hours a night). You should also make sure that you have good eating habits: not overeating or missing meals. Drinking plenty of water is a good idea, while avoiding too many sugary and caffeine drinks. Keep in touch with friends, so that studying for exams doesn't become overpowering. Remember to take short breaks during your study sessions.
- **Exam day**: keep calm and tell yourself that getting too stressed might affect your performance. While getting to the exam venue in plenty of time is important, avoid getting involved in any panic talk with other people waiting to enter the exam hall. It might be better to stand aside somewhere until you can enter the exam hall. If you feel stressed during the exam, remember the breathing exercises that you can use. If it helps, take a lucky charm with you!!



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Phone: 0303 123 1015

Email: equalities@southlanarkshire.gov.uk

www.southlanarkshire.gov.uk

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