

Exams and how to survive them

Article provided by Frances Ive

In June thousands of British teenagers will be sitting the last of their GCSEs and A-levels, and university students will be coming to the final modules of their 'finals'. After the long slog and with exam fatigue sapping their resolve, they all need to be on top form to stay healthy, calm and alert. Interviews, driving tests, public speaking and exams can turn the calmest people into quivering wrecks.

It's tempting to reach for chocolate bars, crisps, sugary drinks and caffeine boosters such as Red Bull and Pro Plus to keep going, but unfortunately these are often counter-productive. Too much sugar in the body can bring about mood swings and poor concentration, while healthy eating and drinking plenty of water help much more.

REMEMBER:

- Take a bottle of water in with you – your brain needs fluid.
- Conversely go to the loo before the exam so you don't have to cross your legs throughout.

Life coach, Carole Gaskell, advises:

• 'Focus on the big picture on what you want to achieve – not just the test or the exam, as they are a means to an end. This helps to lift the pressure slightly and make the brain clearer.'

- Believe that as long as you give it your best shot you'll be fine.
 - Visualise feeling good during the exam instead of nervous and stressed, and imagine a positive outcome and how you will feel when you get good results.
- 'We all carry our own reality in our heads with words buzzing around so make them positive. Say positive things to yourself such as "I owe it to myself to do my best".'

Getting zzzzzs

Stephen Palmer, director of the Centre for Stress Management, has a few tips:

- 'It's helpful to get into a routine before going to bed so that you calm down and can sleep well;
- Don't do anything too exciting, like watching a horror film;
- Maybe read a book, drink a glass of milk – avoid Coke or anything with caffeine in it – and unwind.'

He also suggests:

- Playing some relaxing music before bedtime;
- Making sure the bedroom isn't cluttered.

'If there are school bags around it reminds them of exams, or if the room is messy they may think about their parents nagging them to tidy up. It's really helpful to lie

down and imagine they are on the beach, walking the dog or anything else they really enjoy.'

Some other ways of getting a good night's sleep:

- Put a few drops of lavender or geranium essential oils into a night time bath to relax you;
- Put a couple of drops of lavender oil on a tissue under the pillow;
- Take the herb Valerian half an hour before bedtime to promote normal sleep: a trial on students at the University of Surrey found that after a seven day course of Valerian the volunteers were more relaxed and found tests less stressful without feeling dozey - if on medication consult your GP before taking herbal medicines.
- Drink a glass of milk at night, rather than coffee or fizzy drinks which contain *caffeine*?

Eating for energy

Nutritionists stress the importance of good eating when you're doing exams. It is tempting for kids doing exams to put off their meals and just snack on crisps and chocolate. This often puts them off eating a proper meal when they need to be well fuelled. Eating sugary snacks such as chocolate and drinking soft drinks and coffee gives you a short burst of energy but it doesn't last. And it interferes with blood sugar levels so you get slumps of mood and concentration and brain fatigue.

To calm nerves and boost brainpower a high fibre diet can help. This is because when people get stressed all their body's energy is diverted to deal with how they are feeling. Less energy is put into the digestive system and for that reason people start to get stomach problems – nervous diarrhoea, bloating and feeling sick.'

A healthy energy-boosting diet will undoubtedly help and should include:

- Fish – particularly oily types like mackerel and tuna – because it builds healthy brain cells;
- Fruit and vegetables rich in nutrients to keep the system in top gear;
- Plenty of fibre – brown rice and wholegrains such as lentils and beans, wholemeal bread and pastas.
- Healthy snacks – fruit and vegetables, nuts or seeds, or even healthy snack bars.
- Vitamin C and Vitamin B are particularly needed as stress busters, so taking a good multivitamin supplement every day will help.

Breakfast is essential

Don't skip breakfast is sound advice, exams or not. Scrambled eggs on wholemeal toast or eggs with bacon provide plenty of protein. Try to avoid sugary cereals. If they're going to sit in a three hour exam they don't want to be starving in the middle of it.

Calming nerves

When we panic we shallow breathe prompting headaches, muscle tension, dizziness and a general feeling of tiredness.

Stephen Palmer of the Centre for Stress Management recommends, 'Don't take deep breaths. Breathe slowly and let your stomach go up and down as you do. To really

switch off from panicky thoughts pick a number at random and say it in your head as you switch off.'

Weeks of revising and exams can take their toll and it becomes harder to concentrate and focus, but natural remedies can help. Years ago, schoolchildren were given a spoonful of cod liver oil every morning with good reason. Fish oils contain essential fatty acids that are required for healthy brain function, improving focus, and the ability to deal with stress.

Xynergy comment:

Essential oils and massage oils like Brahmi Mind Oil should also help to soothe the furrowed brow and restore a sense of calm and normality. And, there's always Klamath Algae for heightened brain function.

Frances Ive is a journalist and author specialising in natural health and nutrition. Visit her excellent website www.healthysoul.co.uk