

Hi guys, Patrick Sherratt here. Let me ask you: do you have any tests or exams coming up? How do you go about preparing for them? I know I didn't prepare well for exams when I was at high-school. I didn't learn the ideas I am about to share with you until much later and when I applied them for my university exams, I started to get great results. I realised that doing well in exams isn't so much about how naturally smart you are – it's about how well you prepare. Have you heard of the 5 Ps: proper preparation prevents poor performance? It is true. Good preparation is your key to travelling successfully towards academic excellence.

So in this topic and in the next three topics I want to offer you some strategies that will hopefully help you improve your preparation. I call this topic academic excellence because it is useful to know how you can engage the kind of thinking that helps you achieve it.

I think of academic excellence as being exceptional at your studies. In order to become like this, it is useful to develop a mind-set: a habit of thinking that as you are trying to get really good at a subject, you not only give it your best shot, but you deliberately look to extend the ideas of how good you are. You see, right now you have ideas about how good you are at maths, the sciences, economics, history, art, the languages and so on. These ideas are stored in your mind as academic self-images and what we know about self-images is that they can be deliberately modified and enhanced through the affirmation process. I talked about this more in Topic 8: Self-image Psychology.

### **High Performance Thinking**

What high performance people do, is look for any upcoming event or performance as an opportunity to challenge themselves to do better than they have ever done before. If they do get an improved result they build that success into their self-image as a belief about their improved ability. This is called self-efficacy – simply put: an idea you hold about how good you are. I discuss this in detail in Topic 14: Self-efficacy and Control.

Likewise, as you are aiming for academic excellence in your school subjects you have opportunities to sit tests or exams that if done well, can help you improve the ideas you hold about how good you are. For two or three hours you are seated in a room, reviewing your exam questions and recalling and writing responses. An exam is a performance that requires a variety of preparation skills.

The problem with tests and exams is that when you are starting out, you have not done enough of them to learn the best most effective skills you need to keep you motivated, or to concentrate, or reduce distractions, or focus your attention, or understand your content, or memorise your revision notes... and all the other things you need to learn to do well at exams.

So you have to take another route to excellence and that route is purely in your mind with your imagination. You see, one of the great things about the human brain is you can practice revising for exams in your imagination and it will 'wire in' the response you want. Two thirds of your brain activity is the same when you imagine something

as opposed to doing it for real. The last third relates to the physical movements that do not actually happen when you visualise.

### **Visualising for Academic Excellence**

There are two types of visualisation you can use in your exam preparation. They are called process visualisation and outcome visualisation. In other words, you can visualise the ideal skills you need for your preparation for your exams – that is process of revising, and you can visualise how you want to perform on the day – the outcome you want.

The first step is to make a list of all the difficulties or challenges you face in both your exam preparation and your exam performance on the day.

Here is a list of some common challenges many students face during the build up to exams.

#### **PROCESS**

- Lack of motivation
- Difficulty concentrating
- Easily distracted
- Unable to understand content
- Poor memory retention

#### **OUTCOME**

- Disorganised thoughts
- Memory block
- Poor time management
- Anxiety issues
- Misunderstanding the exam question

The next step is to take one process or one outcome challenge and imagine what it would look like when it is fixed. For example, If you get easily distracted: you could visualise yourself organised and focused, sitting alone at a study desk, effectively reading and rewriting your class-notes into key points.

As you picture yourself doing this, write a sentence that describes the scene so that it will help you see it again repeatedly in the future. This is called an affirmation statement – and it is used as a tool to engage positive self-talk that can enhance your self-image and ultimately your performance. In this case, something like: *I am organised and focused when I revise for my exams.* The words help generate the ideal picture and feeling that you want, as if they were real.

Your statements need to be written in the first person present tense. ‘I am...’ Or, ‘I have...’ so that your mind accepts that this is true now. You write them just one little step ahead of your current situation. Do not write them too far out that they seem impossible to achieve. Just a little step ahead of where you are now should give you a sense of expectation – a feeling that it will be possible to achieve. For instance, if imagining yourself being organised and focused while revising makes you think ‘yeah right – that will never happen’ then it is too far out. Perhaps you could step it back a bit and write an affirmation that said: *I am learning to become more organised and*

*focused when I revise for my exams.*' This might be more believable for now. Later, you can modify it again to help imagine the next level of improvement - you keep doing this until you become well organised and focused for real.

It is important to remember that you create what you expect – not what you want. This means that as you visualise something you want to change or improve in yourself or your life, it is more likely to happen when you get a strong sense of expectation – a feeling that it is possible to achieve. When you have this feeling, it means your beliefs are aligned with what you want and you are more likely to be motivated to achieve it. If it is too far out, your mind will say 'whatever' and just not engage any thinking to help you.

This possible self you are creating with your imagination starts to build the neural pathways in your brain that will enable you to become like you imagine. And as your preparation improves, your chances of getting better results in any tests or exams improve. You then can use your results as evidence that will allow you to extend the ideas about your ability in that subject. You will enhance your academic self-image for that subject.

But it is done in small steps and on a consistent basis. First at home visualising and then using every revision session, every test and every exam to provide an opportunity for you to practice being and doing what you have imagined. In time, your expectations will grow higher and your level of success along the journey towards academic excellence will also improve. You have far more potential than you realise and this is one way to release it!

### **Overview**

Think of tests and exams as a performance where you can compete with yourself

Good preparation is your key to doing well at exams.

Aiming for excellence helps you extend the ideas of how good you are.

These ideas about your ability are called self-efficacy.

You can practice revising for exams in your imagination.

Identify any exam related difficulties and use affirmations to imagine them fixed.

You create what you expect, not what you want. Believe in yourself.

