

Hi guys, Patrick Sherratt here. In my coaching work to help students with test or exam preparation, I find that coping with stress and managing revision time are two areas of constant challenge. It's normal to feel nervous around exam time – especially if you have not done a lot of exams yet. Likewise, it can be a challenge to organise your revision time around the host of other things you have got going on in your life.

In this topic, I want to provide you with some useful tips to help you switch on your brain, cope with stress, and manage your time in a way that keeps your life in balance.

Learning to deliberately relax around exam time is a useful skill to have. Firstly, research suggests that when you are relaxed, the electrical frequency of your brain-waves slow down to what is known as the Alpha range. When this happens, this alert relaxed feeling causes your brain to become a lot more receptive to the information you are revising.

Another reason why it is good to learn a few relaxation strategies is that they give you tools to cope more effectively with any stressful situations that arise. Symptoms of stress can be categorised into four areas: mental, emotional, physical and behavioural. For instance, if you are feeling totally overwhelmed by the study you have to do for an up-coming test or exam, you might find that your symptoms of stress show in a number of different ways.

Mental: You begin to think you will fail.

Emotional: You feel overwhelmed.

Physical: You are unusually tired and lethargic.

Behavioural: You are short-tempered with your family.

Sometimes you might not even recognise you are stressed, so separating the symptoms out into categories like this, helps to bring more awareness to the situation. In time you will recognise the symptoms and deal with them.

There are two approaches to reduce the symptoms you may be experiencing from stress. The first approach helps with the mental / emotional symptoms while the second approach deals with the physical and behavioural symptoms.

### **Coping With Stress**

The Mental and Emotional Approach.

All stress is the result of how you interpret a situation or event. What does that mean? The event itself is not stressful. The idea of a difficult up-coming test or exam can be stressful to one person, but not to the next. It is your interpretation of the event that is causing the stress and the good news is that your interpretation can be changed.

In psychology, researchers call this change of interpretation, *reframing*. While you may not be able to change the situation itself (the test or exam will happen), you can reframe the assumptions of why you find it stressful? In other words: is the glass half empty or half full? Is this a problem or an opportunity to change things? You can chose how you want to see the situation.

The first step is to identify why you see tests or exams as stressful. For instance, is it the perceived difficulty of the subject content that is causing you to feel stressed? Is it the time you have available to prepare? Is it just being in a high pressure situation that freaks you out?

To reframe these, you could consider the first one: the difficulty, as an opportunity or challenge to extend your current ideas of how good you are. If it is the lack of time, look at creative ways to free up your time – perhaps by temporarily releasing some of your other time-consuming commitments during the lead up to the test or exam. If it is being out of your comfort zone - look at this as good practice to learn to cope in high-pressure situations that you will undoubtedly face in the future. All these suggestions will help you create a new frame for how you interpret the situation: one that allows you to feel challenged, yet organised, focused and ideally more relaxed.

### **The Physical and Behavioural Approach**

Sometimes the reframed interpretation influences the physical and behavioural symptoms of stress as well. You change how you see the stressful situation and you find yourself feeling like you have more energy and being more patient with your family. Similarly, you can also approach these symptoms head on through physical relaxation techniques.

It is useful to have a tool-box of relaxation techniques that can be used for different situations. For example, when you are about to revise, begin to relax by taking some deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth. As you breathe deeply, say to yourself the words: 'relax, relax, relax'. Try to imagine any tension in your body going out with the out breath.

When you are sitting in the test or exam and something happens that causes you to feel anxiety: try breathing deeply, again in through your nose and out through your mouth – but this time holding your breath in between. If you use a ratio of 1:4:2, you could breathe in for four seconds, hold your breath for 16 and breathe out for eight seconds. When you breathe out twice as much air as you breathed in, it helps calm your nervous system.

### **Life Balance: Planning Your Time**

As you are drawing closer to your tests or exams, draw a time-planning page showing two full weeks of days leading up to the event. Schedule your revision at least three times for each subject, before the test or exam. For example: Maths on Monday and Tuesday (within 24 hours) – and then the following Monday (within a week). Include some practice tests if possible and give more time to weaker subjects. It is also important for your life-balance to schedule leisure activities as well as a treat after the test or exam to motivate and reward yourself for your efforts.

Plan revision around times of the day when you are feeling most alert. Do you think of yourself as an early bird or a night owl? Your body has natural biorhythms which you can chart on a simple 1-5 alertness scale (with 5 being the most alert) how you are feel throughout a typical day. If you can revise when your chart shows that you are generally more alert at that time, then your revision time is likely to be more effective.

Revision can also be undertaken when you are doing other activities that may not require much attention. For example, if you record your notes onto an audio device, you can revise while exercising. If you laminate your notes, you can revise while taking a shower or doing the dishes. This is called NET time techniques. Net stands for No Extra Time. You can revise when you are doing something else!

Finding ways to prioritise your time into what is important and what is urgent is also a useful time-tool. Draw a quadrant with these headings and then write your to-do list under the appropriate heading. When you can see that revising for maths is more urgent and important than finishing that assignment, which is important but not urgent, you will soon know what to do first.

Finally, another way to balance your life is to observe and note down how you spend your time during a typical day or week. As you go, make a list of all the things that distract you from test or exam preparation and/or generally waste your time. These distractions and time-wasters can be habitual which means you do them without really thinking about them. By bringing them more into your awareness, you can take action to reduce or stop them from happening.

I hope these relaxation and life-balance time-tools have been useful. I will leave you now with a quick summary of this topic.

### **Overview**

Feeling stressed is caused by your interpretation of a situation – not the situation itself.

Identify the mental, emotional, physical and behavioural responses you have to a situation.

Actively try to reframe the stress-producing situation in your mind.

Use breathing techniques to help you relax.

Life balance occurs through good time management.

Organise revision time by scheduling your activities on a two-week planner.

Discover your daily biorhythms and revise when you feel most alert.

Revise when you are doing activities that don't require your attention.

Prioritise activities under urgent and important headings.

Identify your distractions and time-wasters - invent ways to reduce them.

