



# Beating Exam Stress

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Have you ever had one of those final exam dreams? The type where you arrive late to school only to discover that today is your final exam, you have ten minutes to write an exam that you haven't studied for, and you are standing in the exam room, in front of everyone, in only your underwear?

It's easy to feel exposed in an exam because really, the entire purpose of an exam is to expose your ability. You are being judged on how well you produce information, and you are being timed. There is no doubt that exams, and prepping for exams, can cause anxiety.

The best cure for exam anxiety is preparation. Good exam performance is dependent on good study habits; generally, the more prepared you are, the more confident you will be on exam day. Below you'll find tips for how to prepare and study for exams, what to do at the exam, and how parents can support their kids who are studying for final exams.

## Preparing and Studying for Exams

- Have a study place that is free of distractions.
- For every exam, be sure that you know all of the details. When is the exam? How long will the exam be? What is the format for the exam (will it be multiple choice, essay, short answer, true/false)? How much of your final mark is the exam worth?
- Set a goal for yourself for your exams.
- Set a schedule for your time leading up to exams. It is important to maintain a healthy routine. Plan how much time to study daily for each exam.
- Gather all pertinent textbooks, notes, handouts, past exams (if relevant), study aids, and feedback from past assignments or exams.
- Determine what the major concepts are. What do you need to know? Ask your teacher what information is being examined.
- Complete all necessary course readings.
- Create a "table of contents" for all of the information that is going to be covered. Note any areas of concern. Flesh out your table of contents with details to create a "summary sheet" of all of the information that is potentially going to appear on the exam. Check items off of your summary sheet as you review them. Spend more time on points that are more difficult for you.

- Write, talk or sing about what you know. You need to get comfortable expressing your understanding of the topic. Make up questions and answer them; fill in practice worksheets; talk with people about what you know; make colour-coded flash cards; write notes, stories or poems about the information; mind map; write practice essays or paragraphs.
- Time yourself, or have someone time you, as you answer questions. The more comfortable you are being timed, the easier it will be for you to work under pressure at the actual exam.
- Team up with others (even your parents). Practise teaching, quizzing, and building practice questions for each other.
- Once you know the location of the exam, it's very helpful to go there and study.

## What to Do at the Exam

- Be sure to get to the exam on time without rushing. Eat well, and drink enough water on exam day. Bring all of the supplies you'll need for the exam. If you have a favourite pen you write with, use that pen during the exam - but always bring a spare.
- Your exam is your performance. Maintain a positive, self-confident attitude. Focus on yourself; remember your goals; ignore what everyone else is doing.
- Before or during the exam, do shoulder rolls, or tighten your hands into fists and then release them slowly, breathing deeply.
- When the exam is first handed out, quickly review the entire thing. Budget your time. How long is the exam? How many questions are there? Which ones are worth the most?
- Begin with the easiest questions first. This will boost your confidence and get you some easy marks at the same time.
- Be sure to read all directions carefully and thoroughly! Read them twice. Read them five times if you need to!
- While you're writing the exam, focus your attention on answering the questions well.

## How Parents Can Help Their Kids Prep for Final Exams

- If your child is not confident with her ability with an exam topic, get her the help she needs: help her yourself; hire a tutor; check at school for a peer tutoring program; or direct her to other resources – like the internet, the library, books or videos.
- Talk about your experiences with exams and with this exam topic. How did you feel entering your finals? What strategies worked for you in coping with exam stress?
- Help your kids to maintain a healthy study schedule. Study sessions that are too long or that are too unvaried will actually lower memory retention. A healthy study schedule includes time for exercise,

plenty of sleep, and free time. It also includes eating well and drinking plenty of water.

- Be a cheerleader for your kids. Let them know that you believe in their ability to prepare for and pass their exams.

*Dahlia Miller is the director of Smart Tutor Referrals, a Victoria, BC tutoring agency, that matches students to tutors for academics and languages. Smart Tutor Referrals will be running exam prep workshops and study skills workshops through the school year. Check out the website for more information: [www.SmartTutorReferrals.com](http://www.SmartTutorReferrals.com) or call 995-2632.*