

Stress and anxiety

“Worry often gives a small thing a big shadow.”

Swedish proverb

What exactly is stress?

At different times and stages of life **everyone experiences stress**. The things that stress us are called **stressors**.

Stressors can be **external**—things going on around us, such as financial worries or a relationship break-up. Stressors can be **internal**—things going on inside us, like negative thinking patterns that drag us down.

A certain amount of **stress can be good: it’s necessary to help us avoid danger and perform at our best**. But if one stressor is so big, or a whole bunch of them get together, we feel stressed. And when stress, and the anxiety it can generate, get out of proportion to the situation, it becomes a problem.

How we handle (or don’t handle) stress

Each of us responds differently to stressors: some students cope and come out the other side; others bite their nails, quake in their boots, get anxious and panicky; some have panic attacks.

How we handle stress is influenced by personality, cultural background, support networks, social circumstances and life experiences.

What we need to remember is that **we can choose how we react to stress**.

Humans are designed to handle life-threatening stress: the body, via our sympathetic nervous system, adopts the ‘fight or flight’ response. Heart and breathing rates increase, our digestive system is suppressed and adrenalin is released into the blood stream. This is great if we’re being chased by a T-Rex.

(BTW, **exams are not life-threatening.**)



NOSSAL WELLBEING NOTES

Longer-term stress is more likely to be experienced as:

- not coping with life's normal demands and responsibilities
- increased frustration and irritability
- increased moodiness; becoming quite emotional
- lack of motivation
- difficulty in concentrating
- insomnia
- headaches
- gastrointestinal symptoms such as nausea or diarrhoea
- anxiousness or feeling 'overwhelmed'
- a change in eating and drinking habits.

Some common (Nossal) stressors

The need to be perfect (see Wellbeing Note 8 for more)

Nobody is perfect. Some people judge themselves very negatively or harshly. We are allowed successes and failures, but should not focus on the failures. The times we have done well almost certainly outweigh the times we've struggled.

"There is no failure. Only feedback."

Robert Allen

"Mistakes are the portals of discovery."

James Joyce

Catastrophising

One mistake or failure is one mistake or failure.

Sometimes we turn one failure into a failure into a

catastrophe, make more of a mistake than it really deserves. **Nothing is unfixable**; it may take a bit longer or a different pathway, but things will resolve themselves.

We shouldn't let ourselves be spooked with **what might happen**—"It's going to be

a disaster!"—or blow things out of proportion. Mistakes happen (how would we learn anything if they didn't?) but disasters are rare.



NOSSAL WELLBEING NOTES

Comparison

Comparing yourself to others is a trap. They can appear stress-free and in control, but is that how they really feel? They might be hiding their fear very well.

On the flipside, we should try not to take much notice of someone else's opinion of us or our ability, unless it in some way empowers us.

Identifying stressors—the fear of fear itself

Sometimes we stress about 'getting' stressed.

This creates a screeching feedback loop. Being round others who are stressed is not good at times like this. One plus one equals four when two stressed people get together.

The key to finding practical ways to **reduce the source(s) of our stress** is to identify our stressors and to name them.

The student wellbeing counsellor can help students to do this. Anything talked about is private and confidential.



Stress breeds anxiety

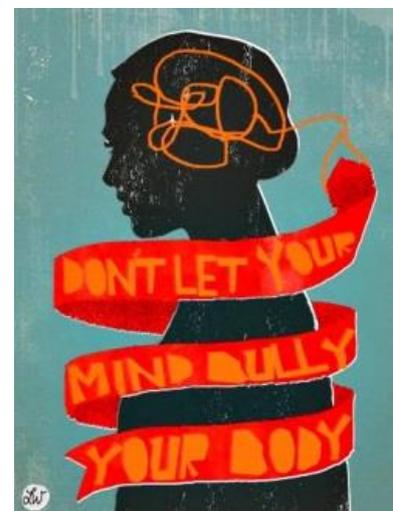
Anxiety is worry on steroids. While most stressors are external to the person experiencing them, internalising them often leads to anxiety. **We get anxious about things that really matter to us**, and we can get quite worked up about them. Anxiety becomes unwelcome when:

- it's excessive
- it feels uncontrollable
- it intrudes into or disrupts a person's life
- it persists and won't go away
- it's distressing and gets in the way of normal daily functioning.

With the right mindset, we can control anxiety and not let it control us. Easier said than done, but there are strategies to keep it under control.

"Don't let your mind bully your body into believing it must carry the burden of its worries."

Astrid Alauda



Handling anxiety

Most people experience anxiety at some time. It's normal. Feeling anxious is not a sign of weakness or failure.

So **how do we go about handling or controlling our anxiety?** The first thing is to stop and take a deep breath, both literally and metaphorically.

Control what you can control

Identifying, naming and knowing our stressors is critical to gaining control in the longer term. But in the short term, like right now?

After stopping and taking that deep physical breath—preferably several of them, slowly, we need to ask if the stressors are within our control. **Exams are a stressor not in anyone's control:** every student must sit exams.

Exams are not life-threatening, as previously noted. They are a stressor not in our control. Anxiety generated by exams consumes and wastes time, effort and sanity. **Exam anxiety reduces the chance that we will perform at our best in exams.**

One way to turn down the worry dial is by reframing.

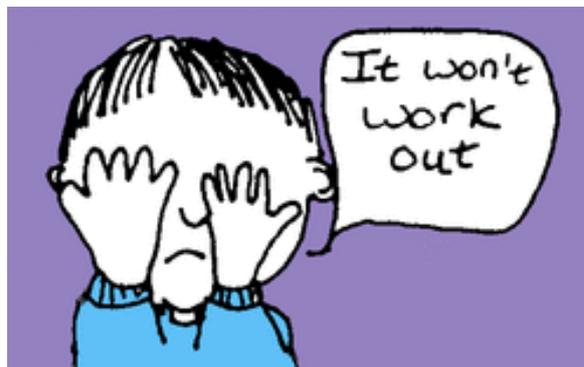
Reframing

We can control how we respond to stressors, both external and internal.

Internal stressors are often **self-imposed and generated by patterns of thought**. We need to reframe our thinking.

Negative self-talk like

- “There's no way I'm going to do well in this exam”
- “I'm just so dumb”
- “What if I get the answers all wrong”
- “I know I'll stuff up and disappoint everyone”



stirs the vortex of worry and triggers anxiety and distress.

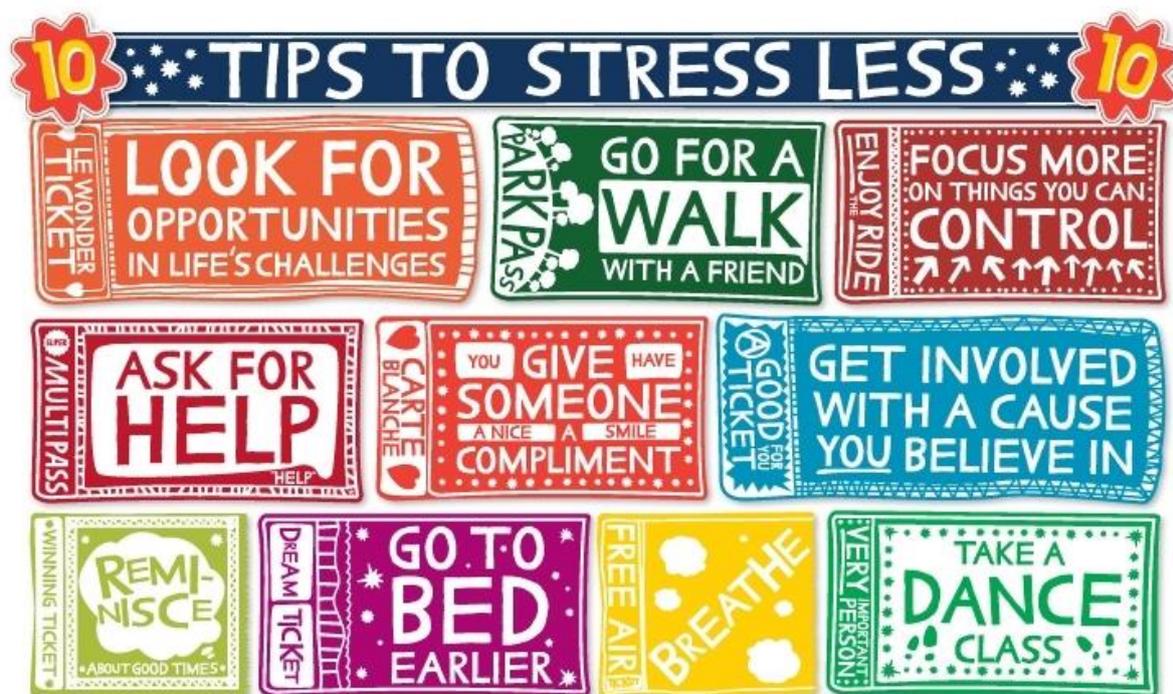
Recognise what **this sort of self-talk is—a distortion of our thought processes** that undermines confidence, fuels anxiety, and can trigger panic attacks.

The Muhammed Ali approach—“I am the greatest”—is not a realistic or useful reframing, but these are:

- “I don't know how this exam will go, but I'll give it my best shot”
- “I may not be a genius, but I know my best is good enough”

NOSSAL WELLBEING NOTES

- “I’ll get some things wrong, but plenty right”
- “The only person I need to please is me.”



Four simple principles to beat exam anxiety before it happens

Be healthy

Some students still overlook a **fundamental principle for handling anxiety: good health**. It's simple: get adequate rest and **sleep**; eat well and **drink** plenty of water; **exercise** regularly; and **enjoy** 'guilt-free' time for relaxing social activities.

Be prepared

The second principle is the scout's motto: be prepared. **Practise and rehearse good exam practices**. The more our responses become automatic, the less anxiety affects our performance.

- Use available academic learning and study skills resources
- Attend classes regularly and complete set work
- Do practice tests or exams from previous years
- Ask teachers to clarify the exam format
- Know where the exam is and get there early
- Tap into the knowledge and generosity of teachers: ask for help
- Learn and practise these anxiety management techniques.

NOSSAL WELLBEING NOTES

Regulate (or lower) arousal

Anxiety reveals itself physically. Some antidotes are physical: breathing and relieving muscle tension.

We take quick shallow breaths when anxious. Breathing deeply into the diaphragm reduces blood pressure, heart rate and arousal.

Consciously and progressively relaxing muscles helps the body and mind relax. Focus on a particular muscle group (e.g. shoulders) and alternately tense and relax the muscles. Focus on releasing all the tension in the muscles.

Combine muscle relaxation with deep breathing.

Stand up to catastrophic thinking

Thoughts cause anxiety. Negative or catastrophic thinking about exams increases anxiety. In order:

- be alert for and aware of negative or catastrophic thinking
- challenge it by reframing
- give the negative self-talk a cartoon voice (Daffy Duck is hard to take seriously)
- acknowledge the thought but don't buy into it
- practise good self-talk: if anxiety levels are high, combine relaxation strategies with thought management for increased impact.

