

12 rules for successfully and confidently handling exams

Even though the reasons for anxiety around exams vary, there are some general rules that can make it easier to prepare for exams, overcome exam anxiety and confidently master exams.

1. Accept exams

Exams are part of every student's life. The upcoming exam will not be your last one. You will constantly be exposed to exam-like situations in your professional life. That's why it is helpful to learn how to deal with exam situations successfully and confidently while you are still studying. The first step when preparing for exams is to face reality. Don't turn the exam into a drama, instead treat it like a professional everyday situation.

2. Generate motivation

Being motivated is important when you want to successfully prepare for an exam. Remember, an exam is the culmination and conclusion of a period of work. You have the chance to show off what you have learned while people are listening to you. Keep the positive consequences of passing the exam in the back of your mind. Be sure to reward yourself in a small manner, e.g. after a successful day's work.

3. Use the tension

The tension before an exam can be used to your advantage. In addition, dysfunctional stress can be turned into "positive" stress. This concept is called "eustress" and it enhances function by connecting a feeling of energy with performance. Use the extra energy to prepare for the exam with determination and efficiency!

Physical and mental tension has a positive effect on attention and concentration and lead to an increased performance. Too little tension (e.g. disinterest or being too laid back) or very high levels of anxiety (e.g. panic) both lead to poor cognitive performance.

4. Develop rituals

Exams should be prepared in a professional manner. Establishing a separation of *working time* and *free time* can be helpful. Daily rituals (getting up on time, defining a specific starting and ending time for your work, as well as planning for breaks) are essential. Equally important is planning out your *free time*. There should be a balance between your *work* and *free time* in regards to your physical, mental and social well-being. Sports/exercise, culture and socializing with friends regenerate your ability to perform, thus increasing the productivity of your work/studies. Especially during times of stress, it is important to not give up on familiar everyday rituals such as sports, cultural events and socializing with friends.

The spatial and temporal separation of work and private life help create a healthy balance between *work* and *free time*. Down time such as channel surfing on the TV, aimlessly surfing on the internet, unnecessary phone calls etc. should be avoided during *work time*. Create rituals that you can stick to!

5. Being well-prepared

Preparing in a manner that leads to a well-grounded knowledge is the most important way to manage exam anxiety. Following a long-term plan to acquire the learning material will provide you with optimism, certainty and self-confidence. The learning plan should include times where you repeat what you have already learned. According to the psychology of learning, actively recalling what you have learned in the evening and the next morning is effective and provides you with confidence. Shortly before the exam, you should repeat what you have learned. Make sure that you use the same texts, textbooks etc. during the revision phase as you did in the learning/study phase. Study groups help you check your own work routines and progress.

6. Practice taking exams

Frequently practicing exams makes it easier to see exams as everyday tasks and learn that you can handle them. Find fellow students with whom you can practice, perhaps as part of a study group. The best way to get used to upcoming exams is to maximize the similarity between the practice situation and the later exam situation. You should consider the following factors:

- Time and place of the exam
- Seating arrangements in the exam room
- Duration and timing of the exam
- Which examiners are present and how do they react?

Take every opportunity to present your knowledge (to others)!

7. Avoid disturbances and learn productive relaxation techniques

Set up your learning environment in a way that avoids disturbances. Use seminar rooms in the institute and workstations in the library for the exam preparation. As there are usually other students studying here, this can be an important source of motivation while promoting persistence when studying.

Breaks and times of rest are very important for your own productivity. To recharge, the breaks do not necessarily have to be long. Try this quick test: look out of the window for 30 seconds focusing on the clouds in the sky. You will find that the calm you experience is both relaxing and stimulating. In addition, you may find that 30 seconds of doing nothing can feel quite long.

You can learn productive relaxation techniques and incorporate them into your daily schedule, e.g. by setting aside time and space for undisturbed reflection, going for a walk, etc. However, sitting in front of the TV or playing on the computer as a means to “tune out” or take a mental break is detrimental to both mental and physical relaxation. The strong visual stimuli prevent mental associations or links from forming between the learned content. Alcohol and drugs also impair concentration and memory.

8. Use your creative freedom

Use the freedom that your studies give you to be creative. Don't forget your other interests. Upcoming exams are a good reason to consciously experience and cultivate your own interests as well as friendships and partnerships. Use music, film, theater and good conversations to relax, especially during stressful phases.

9. Shortly before the exam: maintain everyday rituals and a professional structure

Shortly before the exam, it is important to complete the learning phase.. During this time, it is particularly important to stick to the schedule of *work* and *free time* that you set up at the beginning. It can be helpful to relax the evening before the exam and engage in something cultural or social. However, stay clear of alcohol and other drugs and refrain from using them to “relax” or tune out. Never take anxiety-reducing medication for the first time immediately before the exam. The effect of anxiety-reducing medication varies drastically and is difficult to gauge. You may become too tired or, paradoxically, react with increased anxiety. On the day of the exam, relax and repeat what you have already learned. Make sure you know what you know and don't look for what you don't know. Enjoy the opportunity to show off your knowledge!

10. Actively shape the exam

During the exam, it is important to take control of actively shaping the exam situation, without merely reacting to the examiner and their questions in a passive manner. It is helpful to develop an attitude of wanting to show of your knowledge while viewing the exam as a challenge. Start with the thought: “let me show you what I know”, instead of thinking: “hopefully they don’t notice all the things that I don’t know!” To a certain extent you can also steer the conversation in a specific direction with your own answers. Allowing you to expand on the knowledge you feel confident about. Remember: an exam is a professional situation and a completely normal part of studying, not a fight till death. Usually examiners are not hostile beings.

11. After the exam: plan a valuable reward

After the exam, it is not a good idea to simply let yourself go. Allow yourself a creative break to recover and regenerate. Plan rewards that really make you happy. Do something special, take a long walk with a friend, participate in sports, watch an interesting movie, devote yourself to an interesting book, to let your joy fully unfold. This way the tension can drop and the satisfaction that follows will prepare for further success.

12. Summary: Productive and creative work-life balance

Exams and exam preparations are the best ways to learn a productive and creative work-life balance. At its core, it's about establishing and strengthening a good balance between *work* and *free time*. If successful, you will have created a stable base that provides satisfaction, security and structure. You will be able to react calmly to the challenges of your studies and professional life, while working productively and creatively.

In addition: when in doubt, seek out a good counselor, or consult a psychotherapist!