

Twelve Rules to Achieve a Self-Confident and Successful Approach to Examinations

Although test anxiety can have individual and different reasons, there are some general rules that can help prepare successfully for exams, deal with the anxiety and master exams confidently.

1. Accept the Exams

Exams are a part of life of every university student. The upcoming exam will not be the last. In your professional life, you will also be in constant testing situations. That is why it is useful to make use of the exams in your study program to learn to handle examinations confidently and successfully. The first step in preparing for your exam is facing reality. Instead of dramatizing the examination situation, make a professional everyday task out of it.

2. Generate Motivation

To prepare successfully for an exam, one must be motivated. Think of the fact that an exam is a highlight and an end of a working-phase. You have the opportunity to show what you learned and you will be heard. Imagine the positive effects of passing the exam. Also, plan little rewards for yourself, for example after a successful workday.

3. Make Use of the Tension

One can use the tension before an exam positively and turn dysfunctional stress into beneficial/positive stress. This is called eustress because it is linked to a feeling of energy and increased performance. Use this extra energy to prepare determinedly and efficiently for exams! Physical and mental tension have a positive influence on attention and lead to increased performance. Too little tension (e.g. disinterest or exaggerated coolness) can lead to decreased cognitive functioning, just as a too extreme anxiety (like panic) would.

4. Develop Rituals

The preparation for exams should occur professionally. A clear separation of work and leisure time can help with that. Clear everyday rituals (getting up on time, a set time to start with the work, scheduled breaks, a fixed time to stop working) are essential. It is just as important to plan your leisure time: there should be a balance between work and leisure time on a physical, mental and social level. Sports, cultural interests and socializing with friends help with regeneration and increase productivity. Especially in stressful times, it is important not to give up everyday rituals like sports, cultural events and socializing with friends. In creating a healthy balance between work and leisure time, it is helpful to spatially and temporally separate work and private activities. Leisure times like mind-numbingly watching TV, mindless surfing on the internet, useless phone calls are to be controlled strictly and to be avoided during working hours. Develop clear rituals you can commit to!

5. Prepare well Professionally

A good professional preparation that leads to founded knowledge is the most important tool against test anxiety. A well-planned, founded intake of the study material leads to hope,

security and self-confidence. The study plan should contain times to revise the studied material. Repeating the studied material in the evening and the next morning is useful and leads to security on an educational psychology level. In the phase before the exam, the studied material should be repeated. In the repetition phase, it is important to use the same texts and books as during the study phase. Study groups can help in checking on the work-rituals and the developments.

6. Practice Exams

Frequent practice can help perceive exams as an everyday task and manage them better. Find peers with whom you can practice, perhaps as part of a study group. It is best to get used to an upcoming exam when there is a lot of overlap between the circumstances of the practice sessions and the exam.

You could consider the following factors:

- Time and place of the exam
- Seating position in the exam
- Length and procedure of the exam
- Which examiners will be present and how are they likely to react?

Use every method to show your knowledge!

7. Avoiding Disturbances and Relaxing Efficiently

Set up your learning environment to avoid disruptions. In preparing for exams, use the seminar rooms at your institute and the work-spots of the library. Other students studying there could be a source of motivation for you and help endure more while studying. Breaks and times of quiet are very important for productivity. Breaks do not have to be long to regain energy for studying. You can test yourself, for example by looking out your window for 30 seconds and watching the clouds in the sky. You will notice that the peace that comes with this is relaxing, but also stimulating. In addition, you will feel how long 30 seconds of doing-nothing can be. Efficient relaxing can be learned and used in your plan for the day, for example through creating a specific time and place for undisturbed thinking, taking a walk, etc. Sitting in front of the TV or playing computer games can be harmful for the mental and physical relaxation. The strong visual stimuli can prevent you from linking the learned concepts with each other. Alcohol and drugs also impair cognitive performance and memory.

8. Making use of Creative Freedom

Use the leisure times your study program provides creatively. Do not forget your other interests among all the exam preparation and your studies. Maintaining your interests, friends, and relationships is very important in handling upcoming exams. Music, film, theater and good conversations should be used, especially in stressful phases, to relax.

9. Right before the Exam: Stick to Daily Rituals and Professional Structure

Right before the exam, it is important to end the studying phase on time. During this phase, it is of special important to stick to the scheduled work and leisure time. It is useful to relax the evening before the exam, or to participate in a cultural or social event. Avoid alcohol and other drugs; do not use them to “loosen up” or to relax. Never use a medication to ease your anxiety right before an exam for the first time. The impact of medications is unique and not predictable. They can cause tiredness or, paradoxically, increase anxiety. On the day of the exam, repeat in a relaxed way what you already studied, affirm what you know and do not search for what you do not know. Look forward to showing off what you know!

10. Take an Active Part in the Exam

During an exam, it is about actively taking part in the situation and not just passively reacting to the examiners and their questions. The attitude of wanting to show what you know and viewing the exam as a challenge can be helpful with that. This means thinking, “I want to show what you know” instead of “I hope nobody notices what I don’t know”. Often it is possible, to a certain extent, to direct the conversation through the answers one gives to questions. That way one can speak about exam topics one is comfortable with. Remember: an exam is a professional situation and a normal part of the study program, not a life-or-death battle. Examiners usually are not hostile beings.

11. After the Exam: Plan Valuable Rewards

After an exam, it is not useful to let yourself go. Treat yourself with a creative break to relax and regenerate. Plan rewards that you really look forward to. Do something special, have a long walk with a friend, do sports, watch an interesting movie, read an interesting book so you can increase your joy. This way, a satisfaction will follow the tension; and that will prepare you for further success.

12. Conclusion: Productive and Creative Work-Life Balance

Exams and exam preparation are the best opportunity to learn how to achieve a productive and creative work-life-balance. Fundamentally, it is about establishing and strengthening a good balance between work and leisure. If this succeeds, you will have a stable base that gives you satisfaction, security and structure. You will be able to react calmly to the challenges of study and work and to work productively and creatively.

And: in case of doubt, look for a good counsellor, or, if necessary, a psychotherapist!