



University of  
Nottingham

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# Your exam toolkit

Managing assessments and exams



## Introduction

An exam is a way of assessing knowledge, understanding and skill in a particular subject.

It is an attempt to standardise and measure ability in this area. It's not a judgement about someone's personal worth.

From taking regular breaks to eating healthy food, there are plenty of simple things that you can do to make sure you are in the best possible frame of mind to tackle your exams.

A little stress can be a good thing – it can be the motivational push that we need to get things done. However, sometimes dealing with stress (especially during exam time) can be difficult.

This practical guide will help support you through this challenging time.

## What is stress?

Stress and anxiety is our natural response to threat or sense of emergency. When we feel under threat, our bodies go into a 'fight or flight' response. We become prepared to fight or to run away. The body responds by releasing adrenaline and cortisol, which gives us the surge of energy to act.

## Why does it affect me during the exam period?

We all experience stress and a bit of stress can have a positive effect on us as it can sharpen concentration and performance and help to create the extra energy and focus to keep studying. However, too much stress, for too long, can be overwhelming and prevent us from studying effectively. If unaddressed, stress can affect our mental and physical health.

## What are the signs?

Problems with short and long-term memory, the capacity to learn, concentrate and focus

Increased muscle tension

Increase in alertness to the slightest touch or sound

Problems with sleep

Increased heart and breathing rate



## Keeping it in perspective

The good news is you can learn new ways to manage anxiety. The skills you find most helpful will vary depending on what triggers may be contributing to your high levels of anxiety.

Self-care strategies (the actions we take to look after ourselves) during this time can include getting adequate sleep, nutrition, exercise and implementing a few relaxation routines. These small steps can make a big difference to how we feel.

## Bad habits, what doesn't help?

It is tempting when feeling stressed or anxious to resort to unhelpful coping strategies. Some of these might help in the short term but they are not ideal solutions and can become additional stressors.

Unhelpful coping strategies might include:

- Smoking more
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Using drugs
- Using stimulants such as caffeine
- Eating too much or eating unhealthy meals/snacks
- Insufficient exercise
- Over working and not taking breaks
- Not getting enough sleep

Although it is tempting to focus solely on your exams, it's important you don't cut out all the enjoyment from your life. Your brain needs a rest so it's a good idea to do other activities and take some time out.

# Self-care: what can help?

## Coping strategies

### Mental preparation

#### Sleep

It is recommended that we get around six to eight hours per night. Even if you cannot sleep, give your body a chance to rest. Try to avoid going on your mobile phone or electronic screen at least an hour before bedtime as it can interfere with sleep.

#### Study patterns

Take regular breaks from studying. Forcing yourself to sit at a desk for hours while your mind is wandering is not useful. If you get distracted, get up and take a short break.

If your mind is wandering repeatedly, try studying in very short bursts of time. Reduce the time to something that feels manageable, for example, 15 minutes at a time.

#### Study Resources

Effective study skills can reduce your levels of anxiety and encourage you to feel more in control of your work.

A wealth of study materials have been developed within Accessibility Support which are available here:

[nottingham.ac.uk/go/studyresources](https://nottingham.ac.uk/go/studyresources)

### Physical preparation

#### Healthy Eating

Try to eat at least one proper meal a day, which includes protein and vegetables. Paying extra attention to your diet and ensuring that it is balanced and protein rich will be of benefit. The positive effects of a good diet on mood, concentration and productivity are well documented.

Find out how food can affect mood: [mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/food-and-mood/#.XJECd-RvKUK](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/food-and-mood/#.XJECd-RvKUK)

#### Drink

It is important to maintain a good level of hydration. Try to drink around eight glasses of water per day. It may be helpful to take some water with you to the exam.

#### Caffeine

Limit your caffeine intake. If you are prone to anxiety, it can make it worse.

#### Exercise

Taking some form of daily exercise will help you to relax.

#### Meditation and Mindfulness

The practice of meditation and mindfulness can be useful in helping you to focus on your breathing, bringing a sense of calm.

Information about mindfulness and podcasts can be found on the University Counselling Service web page:

[nottingham.ac.uk/go/self-help](https://nottingham.ac.uk/go/self-help)

#### Relaxation exercises

Try the progressive muscle relaxation and relaxation breathing exercise podcasts:

[nottingham.ac.uk/go/self-help](https://nottingham.ac.uk/go/self-help)



### Breathing exercises

Breathing exercises can help you to calm down.

#### Try it yourself

1. Sit comfortably and upright in a chair with your feet on the ground and your hands placed loosely on the tops of your thighs. If it helps you to focus, close your eyes and picture yourself in a safe, relaxing place.
2. Pay some attention to your breathing to begin with. Breathe in through your nose slowly and deeply, pushing out your lower abdomen to a count of five. If it helps, put the palm of your hand on your abdomen and try to push it away as you breathe in.
3. Breathe out through your mouth slowly pulling your lower abdomen in (imagine aiming to get your abdomen to touch your spine) to a count of seven. If you have followed the suggestion above your hand should move inwards.
4. Repeat this exercise for around five minutes.

You could progressively try to increase the ratio/difference between inhalations and exhalations from 5:7 to 7:11. Once you have an effective technique, it can be particularly useful because you can do it anywhere, anytime; for instance, before, during and after your exam or assessment. It is recommended that you do the breathing exercises three times a day, every day. It is worth maintaining your practice over time. What you will find is that focussing on your breathing to bring about calm begins to happen automatically when you feel anxious.

# Five ways to wellbeing

Evidence suggests there are five steps we can all take to improve our mental wellbeing

1

## Keep learning

Do something new; be open to change

**Try:** Finding out something new about a friend. Doing a crossword or Sudoku. Learn a new word or skill.

2

## Take notice

Be aware of the world around you

**Try:** Taking some time to enjoy the moment and the environment around you. Having a 'clear the clutter' day. Taking a different route on your journey to or from uni.

3

## Keep active

Find a physical activity that suits your level of mobility and fitness

**Try:** Taking the stairs instead of the lift. Going for a walk at lunchtime. Getting off the bus one stop earlier than usual and walking the final part of your journey.

4

## Connect

With family and friends

**Try:** Talking to someone instead of sending an email. Speaking to someone new. Ask how someone's weekend was and really listen when they tell you.

5

## Give

Research into actions for promoting happiness has shown that committing an act of kindness once a week over a six-week period is associated with an increase in wellbeing

**Try:** Doing something nice for a friend. Volunteer your time. Thank someone.



## Getting ready Tips for the revision period

**Leave plenty of time to revise** so that you don't have to do last minute cramming.

**Work out when is the best time to revise** – are you a 'morning person' or do you work better later in the day?

**Be organised and plan** – make a timetable and break your revision down into small chunks. Remember to add in things you enjoy.

**Prioritise your workload** – do something easy at the start to help you get motivated.

**Find a good place to study** – whatever works for you. Make sure you can focus; it is well lit and comfortable.

**Take regular breaks** – especially if you notice you are losing concentration. Get up and walk around; include regular breaks in your revision plan.

**Try not to eat too much junk food, avoid alcohol and additional caffeine** – eat healthy food that fuels your brain. Apples, bananas, nuts, seeds, oily fish, avocados, milk, cheese and eggs can help. Remember too much caffeine can make you feel anxious and disturb your sleep.

**Try different study techniques or studying with friends** – revising with friends can help you study more effectively. There are also emotional benefits to social support.

**Exercise and get plenty of sleep.** Exercise will make you more alert and positive. Get plenty of sleep – whatever is enough for you.





## Getting ready

### On the day of the exam

- Have a good but moderate breakfast and lunch, and don't drink too much caffeine.
- Accept that it is natural to feel a bit of stress before an exam.
- Try to do something relaxing for the last hour before the exam.
- Do not try to learn any new topics as this may impair your ability to remember those you have learned previously.
- You may find it helpful to review some prepared brief notes or prompt cards.
- Time your arrival at the exam room so that you don't need to wait outside with others who may increase your anxiety level.
- Give yourself time to settle prior to reading the exam questions and starting to write or beginning your presentation.
- Use the breathing exercises listed earlier.
- If you find even getting into the exam room a problem, ask a friend to walk there with you.
- Take time to read each question carefully.
- Plan your timing and write it down. Regularly check how much time you have left for the rest of the questions.
- Do not rush through the exam.

## Tips to help with verbal tests assessments

- Make a plan of what you're going to say beforehand – try out model answers and practise.
- Listen carefully to questions and try to play back some of the words or phrases used in your answer.
- Don't rush to start talking; take a minute to think and, if you don't understand the question, ask for it to be repeated.
- Be careful not to speak too quickly or quietly.

## How can I support others?

- By accepting that your friend is worried and listening to their concerns, without necessarily offering solutions or advice.
- If possible, encouraging them and/or helping them to prepare their ideal working environment.
- If appropriate, working together to prepare for assessments.
- Encouraging them to seek further guidance and help from resources available (detailed at the end of this guide).



## After the exam

- Take time out to do things you enjoy and treat yourself after an exam before you start to revise for the next one.
- Try not to focus on what you did or did not do in the exam.
- Concentrate on preparing for the next exam in good time.
- Don't spend endless time criticising yourself for where you think you went wrong.

## What happens if I don't get the results I was hoping for?

Whatever the outcome, there are always options – so don't panic. Remember to care for yourself, you have worked really hard so it's important to look after yourself. Take some time to explore what your options are. Can you resit? Can you repeat another year? Ask for support and advice. You can discuss your concerns with your personal tutor, welfare officer, Students' Union Advice or Careers.

## What do I do when the exams are finished?

**Congratulate yourself for taking the exam!** Remember to look after yourself. Reflect on what went well and don't be too harsh on yourself.

**Congratulations, the exam period is over. Time to do something you enjoy.**



# Useful resources

## Useful resources to support you at the University

**Examinations**  
[nottingham.ac.uk/go/examinations](https://nottingham.ac.uk/go/examinations)

**University Counselling Service**  
[nottingham.ac.uk/counselling](https://nottingham.ac.uk/counselling)

**Accessibility (for students with specific learning differences or disabilities)**  
[nottingham.ac.uk/go/support](https://nottingham.ac.uk/go/support)

**Study Resources**  
[nottingham.ac.uk/go/studyresources](https://nottingham.ac.uk/go/studyresources)

**University of Nottingham Health Service**  
[unhs.co.uk](https://unhs.co.uk)

**Counselling Groups and Workshops**  
[nottingham.ac.uk/go/counselling-workshops](https://nottingham.ac.uk/go/counselling-workshops)

**Exam Anxiety**  
[nottingham.ac.uk/go/exams-anxiety](https://nottingham.ac.uk/go/exams-anxiety)

**Nightline**  
[nottinghamnightline.co.uk](https://nottinghamnightline.co.uk)

**Wellbeing support**  
[nottingham.ac.uk/healthyu](https://nottingham.ac.uk/healthyu)

**Careers and Employability Service**  
[nottingham.ac.uk/careers](https://nottingham.ac.uk/careers)

**Students' Union Advice**  
[su.nottingham.ac.uk/advice](https://su.nottingham.ac.uk/advice)

**Student Services**  
[nottingham.ac.uk/student-services](https://nottingham.ac.uk/student-services)

## Other helpful resources

**Student minds: Exam stress resources**  
[studentminds.org.uk/examstress.html](https://studentminds.org.uk/examstress.html)

**Mind: 14 ways to beat exam stress**  
[mind.org.uk/information-support/your-stories/14-ways-to-beat-exam-stress/#.Wt24-C7wblU](https://mind.org.uk/information-support/your-stories/14-ways-to-beat-exam-stress/#.Wt24-C7wblU)

**BBC Radio 1: Beating Exam Stress**  
[youtube.com/watch?v=7AgswlakjRw](https://youtube.com/watch?v=7AgswlakjRw)

**Papyrus: Coping with exams**  
[papyrus-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Coping-with-Exams.pdf](https://papyrus-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Coping-with-Exams.pdf)

**Samaritans: Exam stress coping strategies**  
[samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/schools/deal/deal-resources/coping-strategies/exam-stress-coping-strategies/](https://samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/schools/deal/deal-resources/coping-strategies/exam-stress-coping-strategies/)





# Wellbeing support at the University

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HealthyU



Being at university can be exciting but there may be times when you struggle with the demands of studying or life in general. There are a number of people and places that can help support you during your time at the University of Nottingham.

[nottingham.ac.uk/healthyu](https://nottingham.ac.uk/healthyu)

## Wellbeing support

### Within schools

**Personal Tutors** provide one-to-one support and play an important part in identifying and supporting students who are struggling. Every school also has a Welfare Officer who can support with significant or complex issues. **Welfare Officers** have current knowledge of University specialist services and can refer students onwards as needed.  
[nottingham.ac.uk/student-services/services/student-welfare-support.aspx](https://nottingham.ac.uk/student-services/services/student-welfare-support.aspx)

### Where you live

University Halls of Residence have a **Warden and Resident Tutor team** who provide key welfare support. This pastoral care extends into the community where students in other accommodation receive support from our **Off Campus Student Affairs team**:  
[nottingham.ac.uk/student-services/services/off-campus-affairs.aspx](https://nottingham.ac.uk/student-services/services/off-campus-affairs.aspx)

### University Security Service

This service is available if a student is concerned for themselves or a friend.  
**0115 951 3013**  
or in an emergency **0115 951 8888**

### Other help and support

#### General Practitioner (GP, Doctor)

The GP will decide what kind of support may be required and can make a referral onto a specialist service. Cripps Health Centre:  
**0115 846 8888**

#### Chaplaincy and Faith Support

Whatever your background or faith, University chaplains offer spiritual and pastoral support.  
**0115 951 3931**  
[nottingham.ac.uk/chaplaincy](https://nottingham.ac.uk/chaplaincy)

#### Funding and Financial Support

Able to discuss the support available for students facing an unexpected financial hardship. **0115 823 2071**  
[nottingham.ac.uk/student-services](https://nottingham.ac.uk/student-services)

### Students' Union Support

Students' Union Advice can help students with information, advice and representation around all aspects of student welfare and education, such as financial, housing and course issues. **0115 846 8730**  
[SUAdvice@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:SUAdvice@nottingham.ac.uk)

**Nightline** is a student-run service providing confidential listening and information.  
**0115 951 4985**  
[nightlineanon@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:nightlineanon@nottingham.ac.uk)

**Positive Minds** is a student-run service providing a free and inclusive six week programme to support students who may have low mood, depression or anxiety.  
[positivenottingham@studentminds.org.uk](mailto:positivenottingham@studentminds.org.uk)

### Specialist support at the University

Accessibility team provides specialist advice and support for students who consider themselves to be disabled.  
**0115 823 2070**  
[nottingham.ac.uk/go/disability-support](https://nottingham.ac.uk/go/disability-support) and  
[nottingham.ac.uk/go/acadsupport](https://nottingham.ac.uk/go/acadsupport)

### University Counselling Service

Provides free one to one support for students and staff. They also run a range of groups and workshops. **0115 951 3685**  
[nottingham.ac.uk/counselling](https://nottingham.ac.uk/counselling)

Sometimes students are referred to the **University Mental Health team**, who support students with significant mental health problems or students who are in crisis. To access this service, students need to be referred by a member of University staff, GP or the NHS.



[nottingham.ac.uk/healthyu](https://nottingham.ac.uk/healthyu)