

A SHORT GUIDE

ON HOW TO DEAL
WITH EXAM
STRESS

- PSYCHOLOGIST -
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If it is difficult for you to focus on learning before an exam, because:

- you have a stomach ache
- you feel tension in your body
- you cannot fall asleep
- you have a sense of emptiness in your head
- during the exam you constantly think about the fact that you will not pass

...Then this guide is for you!

Anxiety and stress are constant companions of our lives, but while pursuing higher education they can become over-activated. This is because in college we are constantly exposed to assessment, and requirements are usually higher than in earlier education. The good news is that learning to deal with stress and anxiety in college can help you in the future challenges, for example, those connected with work. With this e-book you will understand your stress better, as well as learn quick methods to help you cope with it.

However, remember that in the case of some stress-related difficulties you should consult a psychologist. While meeting with a professional, you will be able to share your problems and get out of crisis. The foundation is to relieve stress and learn to cope with it. In turn, stress can bring us a lot of good!

So what... Can we start?

Chapter 1. What is Stress?

Stress is a condition in which our body reacts to stimuli that disrupt our mental balance, burden us, or exceed our coping capabilities. We usually associate it with negative experiences but... after all, we often get stressed when we do something cool and important for us. Stress usually accompanies us before an important exam, but also when we go on a date or when we prepare ourselves for bungee jumping. So stress appears in both positive and difficult moments. What is characteristic of it, is the need to adapt to a new situation. Stressful events make us change our behavior or thinking in order to regain balance. The more we need to change our actions, the more stress we feel.

Why We Need Stress?

Many people coming to psychotherapy say that they would most like to get rid of stress. However, if something has survived throughout evolution and all people are experiencing it – it means that it usually has an important function.

This is also the case with stress. In emergency situations, when we experience stress reaction, our body turns on the mode of fight or flight. Think of our ancient ancestors. Thanks to automatic fight or flight reactions, they were able to survive dangerous situations, for example attacks by wild animals.

Their body in fractions of a second decided to escape or take a fight. Without this mechanism, many of them would have died. In the present, we no longer have to fight with wild animals, but our body has retained its sensitivity to stress and the fight or flight switch works with us as much as with our ancestors. Very often in today's world the mechanism turns on for no apparent reason, it seems that it just works unnecessarily. It turns on because our mind has imagined a danger that may not really exist at all! And it's our role to take control of it in such situations.

Why Do Some People Get Stressed About Certain Events and Others Don't?

Surely you have noticed that among your colleagues some are very stressed about exams, and others are less. Some stress about entering a new group of people, while others do not. Finally, some like oral responses in class, while others are paralyzed when even thinking about having to speak in front of the classmates.

What makes these people different is how they assess their own ability to deal with the situation.

If we believe that we have the capabilities and resources to overcome it, the stress will be lower.

However, if we are not confident, or if we think that we do not have the abilities to cope, we will react with more stress. So, the level of stress depends on whether we see a certain future experience as a challenge (which we are able to deal with) or an insurmountable obstacle.

Chapter 2. Optimal Stress Levels

It turns out that optimal stress levels can help you face different tasks. Yerkes-Dodson's law says that the level of performance increases with the level of arousal (stress) but only up to a certain point!

When stress levels get too high, our capabilities drop. This is an important principle that can be applied directly to stress before exams. It's not good if there's no stress at all – then we're not motivated to act. However, if there is too much of it, we can't focus, our thoughts go away, our logical thinking skills decrease and, as a result, our performance suffers.

Another rule derived from Yerkes-Dodson's law is that for easy tasks, the optimal stress level is greater than for difficult tasks. This is justified – if we do something easy, the level of arousal can be higher to motivate us to act. If we are doing something difficult, there must be less stress to allow us to think clearly. These two principles are further evidence that stress can help us – e.g. achieve good exam results. On the other hand, it's no wonder that when we are too anxious, it's harder to focus on learning. In such situations, it is worth taking a break, applying several techniques that reduce tension and return to learning – it will certainly be more effective then.

Chapter 3. In the Circle of Thoughts, Emotions and Behavior

In previous chapters, we learned that our level of stress depends on whether we perceive a situation as a challenge or a severe obstacle. We can simply say that our mind, which interprets events and gives us different thoughts about them, is responsible for stress levels. Here's how it works:

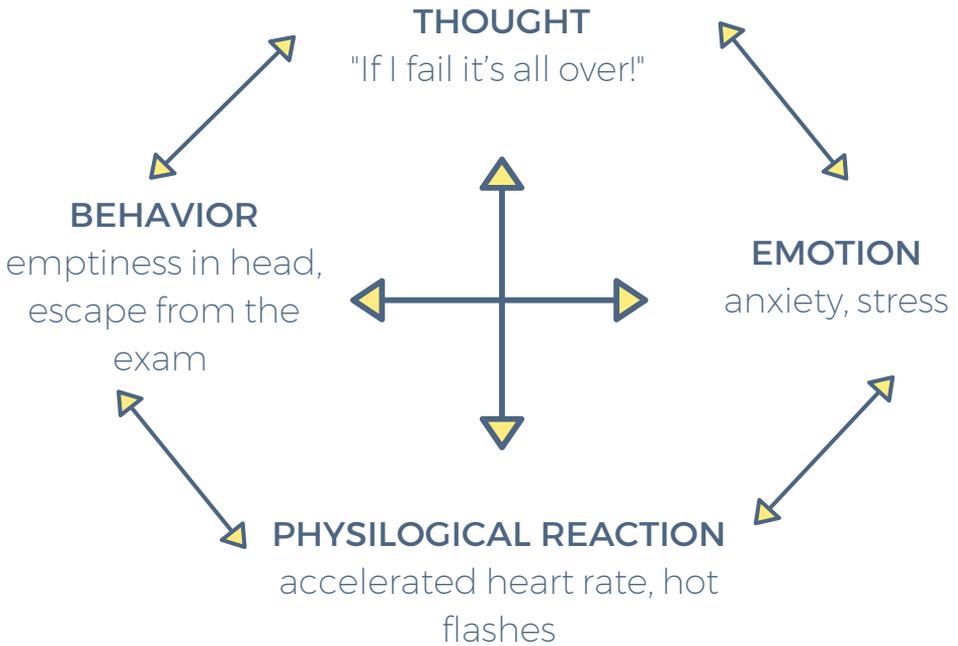
If you're very stressed before exams, you may have thoughts like:

- "It's only me that will write these tests so badly."
- "I can't remember anything."
- "If I don't do it, it means I'm hopeless."
- "Everyone will think I'm stupid."
- "Others have probably already done everything right."
- "For sure I will fail."

Their power of action does not end only in the fact that they arise. Thoughts affect how we feel, how our body feels and what actions we take.

Below you will see it in the diagram:

Five minutes before the exam:



All in all, the thought has power! And importantly, thoughts that come to our minds are not always true. All examples of thoughts listed above are so-called cognitive distortions – that is, interpretations that are distorted, exaggerated and false. After all, how do we know that only we will fail badly on the test? Is it true that if I don't pass, I'm hopeless? To answer the latter – its rather not true. However, our mind thinks of shortcuts and tells us such sentences, and as a result our stress levels increase.

Chapter 4. 5 Ways to Deal With Stress

Method 1 – Mindfulness

Stress takes us often from here and now to ideas about the future. In these perceptions, the future appears to be insecure, and we begin to consider different scenarios. This causes us to wind up even more, and the stress only increases.

In such moments, when we spiral this vicious circle, it is worth to say “stop” using mindfulness techniques. As the name suggests, these practices help us to be mindful, to be “here and now”, to focus on what's around us, and to distance ourselves from our thoughts. Practicing mindfulness helps us relax, reduce the level of anxiety and focus on the tasks that we have to perform in the present (not on catastrophic interpretations).

Mindfulness is a type of exercise that is worth doing regularly. Research shows that daily mindfulness training lowers stress levels. In addition, thanks to daily routine, it will be easier for us to use these techniques in tense situations. To start practicing mindfulness, it's best to use the apps available on your phone – e.g. Headspace or Calm, which provide step by step guide for the entire learning process. To take advantage of mindfulness, you only need to spend 5/10 minutes every day.

Want to briefly try mindfulness now?

Sit back or lie down. First focus on your breath, feel the air going into your lungs and exhale. Second, focus your attention on your body – feel exactly all the places where the body comes into contact with the ground, check which muscles are tense and which are not. Third, transfer your attention to the surroundings. Listen to the sounds around you. Try to focus even on smallest noises. Finally, return to a short focus on your breath.

How do you feel right now?

Method 2 – Discuss Your Thoughts

As you know from the examples above, our thoughts influence how we feel. You also know that thoughts that come to our mind can be distorted and untrue. So now it's time to ask yourself – what does your mind tell you in times of stress?

Does it tell you you're not going to pass? Or do you hear that everyone can do it for sure, and you can't? What else comes to your mind?

Write all these sentences on a piece of sheet. Look at them as objectively as possible. We often treat all these sentences as a truth about our lives, and in fact these are only thoughts, scraps of letters written on a piece of sheet. Once you distance yourself from your thoughts, make sure that what you've written is true.

Make a table and on one side write out the arguments which prove that a given thought is true, and on the other side write down all the facts from your life that show it is false (if the second point is difficult for you, answer the question: "Is this sentence 100% true?" If not, write out all those situations as evidence where it was not true).

Finally, summarize your notes and try to create a new, more balanced thought. Write it down. Return to it whenever stress increases and black thoughts accumulate over your head. This will reduce stress levels and change emotions.

Method 3 – Split Task

Remember – the more stress we experience, the worse we perceive our ability to cope with a task. If we are facing an upcoming large and difficult exam, and we assess our initial knowledge at 0 – it is not surprising that we are stressed.

But! Rome was not built immediately. Each large goal can be divided into small steps that will allow you to achieve it. Again, it's about shifting perspective and changing the way we think. If we focus on the finish line – e.g. memorizing a 900-pages book by heart – it can seem scary and overwhelming at first.

However, if we divide this goal – e.g. into 50 pages each day, the perspective is different and the goal becomes achievable. We rate the possibilities of dealing with it higher, so the stress is lower, and we can focus on the task at hand.

Method 4. Changing Perspective

Stress is a body's reaction that is supposed to help act quickly and evoke one of the two responses – fight or flight. To do this, stress narrows our field of view – we focus only on possible danger. This is often the case before the exam as well. You certainly know this feeling when concerns take up most of your time and it's hard to focus on something else.

In that situation try to change your perspective and distance yourself from all affairs. Ask yourself: “What will this moment mean to me in the perspective of 10/20 years?” In most cases, the conclusion is that the importance of our current stress situation will be small.

This, in turn, allows us to slightly reduce the pressure we put on ourselves and return to the optimal level of arousal from the Yerkes-Dodson law mentioned earlier.

Method 5. Just Before the Exam

If you are very stressed during, or just before the exam, the best life hack will be to reduce stress at the physiological level. Remember the graph that shows the connections between our thoughts, emotions, physiological reactions and behavior?

It shows that we can change our well-being not only by controlling our thoughts, but also by changing other elements of the puzzle – e.g. behavior or physiological response.

So it can be helpful to take care of calming and prolonging our breathing. This is a signal to the body that if your breath is calm, nothing bad is happening – so there is also no reason to stress.

A good way to calm your breath is called box breathing.

We will draw a square – each side of it, will correlate to one step of the breathing process. When we draw the first side we inhale the air while counting to 4. When we draw the second side we hold the air in our lung, and count to 4. When we continue on the third side, we exhale while counting to 4. Being on the last side of the square, we hold our breath again, and count to 4. And so on... Thanks to a few such repetitions, we are able to reduce the level of our arousal.

Summary

Stress is needed for all of us, it allows us to achieve important goals and find motivation for them. It also gives us a sense of pride and satisfaction when we finish a difficult task. The problem arises when there is too much of stress and when it is completely out of our control. I hope that with this e-book, you saw that everything starts in our head, and with knowledge on how emotions arise, we can become the lords of our emotional world.

Of course, if you need the help of a psychologist/psychotherapist – I invite you to a consultation.

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