Exam tips
Clammy hands? Racing heart? Shaky voice? We’ve all been nervous at one point or another, but it can get pretty annoying if it’s a common occurrence. Find out why we get nervous, how you know when it’s become a problem, ways you can stop it, and what to do if you’re really finding it tough.

This might help if...

- you can’t control your nerves
- nerves are stopping you from doing the things you want and need to do
- you want to learn how to manage nerves.

NEVER EVER GIVE UP!

Where do nerves even come from?

So, you’re going on that date tonight. Or the big game is coming up. Or today is the big presentation. Or you about to prepare for your exams. Or you are going for your ‘P’s’. Your palms are sweaty, your throat is drier than a desert, and butterflies have taken refuge inside your stomach. What’s going on? The answer - nerves, and they’re a totally natural reaction to some of life’s more challenging events.

It’s all because of an evolutionary reaction that’s programmed into our brains. When we’re confronted with a stressful situation (whether it’s an angry bear or a job interview or going for your "Learners") we have the same biological reaction, just to different degrees. Our body releases adrenaline (the hormone which prepares the body for sudden, physical activity), and redirects blood and energy to our heart and muscles to prepare them to react to the ‘threat’. This is why we feel physical symptoms when we’re nervous.

So, it’s totally natural to get nervous, but when nerves start to get in the way of your everyday life, something’s gotta change. The good thing is, there are heaps of easy ways you can do this.

When it becomes a problem

Getting nervous can be a good thing, because it shows that you care about something. It might be that you’re afraid of stuffing up a speech in class, or that you don’t want to look stupid in front of your mates.
There are lots of reasons we feel nervous, but if they’re starting to get in the way of your everyday life - stopping you from doing the things you need/want to do – there might be something more serious going on. In this case, it’s a good idea to chat to someone about it, like a close friend or adult or school counsellor.

So, how to stop?

Whatever the situation might be, here are some great tips on how you can stop feeling nervous:

**Breathe**: Taking the time to really focus on your breathing can do wonders for your nerves. Get comfy and really focus on taking deep breaths into the abdomen (not the upper chest), exhaling for longer than you’re inhaling. This can help you calm down and concentrate on what’s in front of you.

**Practicing breathing techniques**

When you’re stressed out or feeling anxious, your breathing speeds up, and becomes shallow, reducing how much oxygen reaches your organs. Learning breathing techniques is a great way of preventing you from experiencing the physiological symptoms of anxiety. To learn how to breathe efficiently:

- **Become aware of your breathing.** Place one hand on your upper chest and one on your stomach. Breathe in so that your stomach rises, and then falls back as you breathe out. The hand on your chest shouldn’t move too much.

- **Get a steady rhythm of breathing.** Try and take in the same amount of air each time you breathe in.

- **If you’ve managed the two steps above, try and slow your breathing rate down.** Add a short pause between when you finish breathing out, and when you take another breath.

It might not feel totally comfortable at first, as it can sometimes feel like you’re not getting quite enough air. But if you practice regularly it should begin to feel comfortable and easy.

- **Positive thinking:** When you feel the nerves creeping up on you, a handy question to ask yourself is - what’s the best thing that could happen? Thinking positively about the bigger picture, instead of assuming the worst, helps give you courage and perspective.

- **Practice, practise, practise:** Rehearsing as much as possible, whether it’s in front of a mirror or a friend, is one the best things you can do to avoid feeling nervous. When you practice something, you’re strengthening the connections in your brain and the stronger those connections get, the more skilled you become at something. Not to mention, the more confident you are about something, the easier it will be.

- **Look after yourself:** If the big event is coming up, it’s easy to forget that you’re an actual human who has basic needs like food and sleep. Sometimes eating a full meal might seem like the last thing you want to do beforehand. In this case, just eat a banana. It’s a great snack food and will give your brain a good old boost of energy. Getting enough sleep is also really important for feeling super fresh and on the ball.
(If you’re really struggling) Nerves can sometimes be too hard to shake. If you’ve tried out all these methods but you’re still finding it really hard to deal with certain situations, there might be something bigger going on. If this is the case, get in touch with a GP or talk to a trusted friend, teacher or family member about it. See your school counsellor. Being nervous shouldn’t stop you from living your life.

Knowing how to chill out and relax is really important for your mental and physical health, particularly if you’re finding something a bit stressful. Find out info on different ways people relax, learn about breathing techniques, and what to do if you’re finding it hard to chill out.

This can help if...

- you’re a bit stressed
- you’re a bit anxious
- your life is really busy

CELEBRATE

THE LITTLE THINGS

Why it’s important to chill out

Relaxation is really important for your mental health and wellbeing. Everyone needs time in their everyday lives to chill out and enjoy themselves, but it’s easy to forget this when things get busy. If you know how to relax, and make an effort to actually relax when you need to, it can be a great coping strategy to help you when you’re stressed out. People who are able to relax are more likely to bounce back from tough times, tend to be happier, have better physical health and are less likely to develop serious mental health difficulties.

How to chill out

There are a lot of different things you can do to relax and chill out. A lot of forms of relaxation, like walking and sitting quietly, are really simple, easy to do, and don’t take much time. Others require more discipline and some training. Everyone will find some strategies for relaxation work better than others. The best thing to do is try out some of the suggestions below and make the ones that best fit your lifestyle a regular habit.
Some relaxation activities include:

- Going for a walk.
- Taking some time out and really focusing on what’s happening around you. You can people watch or go to a park/outside place and enjoy the fresh air.
- Listening to some music you really like. Music has an impact on our heart rate, so quieter, less intense music is more likely to help you chill out.
- Going fishing.
- Playing your favourite sport.
- Taking a bath.
- Going to a movie or watching a DVD.
- Focusing your attention on a puzzle.
- Reading a book.
- Learning yoga or meditation.

If you’re finding it really hard to relax

- Sometimes it can be really hard to unwind. It seems kind of ironic to get stressed out about not being able to chill out to reduce stress, but it can be a frustrating experience.
- If a particular technique isn’t working try another one. It might also help if you have space away from other people in which to relax, to prevent being distracted.

**Exam Stress/Anxiety**

Exam stress/anxiety is:

- excessive worry about upcoming exams
- fear of being evaluated
- apprehension about the consequences
- experienced by many normal students
- not mysterious or difficult to understand
- manageable by following a plan of helpful suggestions

Four main areas which can contribute to your exam stress/anxiety are:

**Lifestyle issues: inadequate rest**

- poor nutrition
- too many stimulants
- insufficient exercise
- not scheduling available time
- not prioritising commitments

**Poor Studying Styles:**

- Inefficient: inconsistent content coverage; trying to memorize the textbook; binge studying; all-night studying before exams

- Ineffective: reading without understanding; cannot recall the material; not making revision notes; not revising
Psychological Factors:
- feeling little or no control over the exam situation (rather than knowing and applying exam strategies)
- negative thinking and self-criticism (rather than being one's own best friend)
- irrational thinking about exams and outcomes
- irrational beliefs "If I don't pass, my (family/boyfriend/girlfriend/friends) will lose respect for me"; "I will never go to University, get a job etc"
- irrational demands "I have to get at least B or A or I am worthless."
- catastrophic predictions "I'll fail no matter what I do—there's no point."

Tips for the Revision Period

Leave plenty of time to revise so that you don't have to do last minute cramming. Giving yourself adequate time will help to boost your confidence and reduce any pre-exam stress as you know you have prepared well.

Develop a timetable so that you can track and monitor your progress. Make sure you allow time for fun and relaxation so that you avoid burning out.

Plan your study time. Too much material + Too little time = Anxiety. Plan your studying with regularly scheduled study sessions about 50 minutes long separated by 5 – 10 minute breaks.

Take a short break as soon as you notice your mind is losing concentration. Make yourself a snack. You will then come back to your revision refreshed. Be careful that you don't reward yourself during your break with five minutes of TV or checking your e-mail or Facebook. A few minutes can easily turn into an hour before you know it.

Experiment with alternative revision techniques so that revision is more fun and your motivation to study is high. Try mind-mapping, get yourself an assortment of highlighter pens.

Don't drink too much coffee, tea or fizzy drinks; the caffeine will 'hype' you and make your thinking less clear. Eat healthily and regularly; your brain will benefit from the nutrients.

Regular moderate exercise will boost your energy, clear your mind and reduce feelings of stress. Try out some yoga, pilates, tai chi or relaxation techniques. They will help to keep you feeling calm and balanced, improve your concentration levels and help you to sleep better.

Information needs:- strategies for exam-taking

- academic information such as course requirements, teachers expectations, exam dates and exam location
- knowledge of how to apply anxiety reduction techniques while studying before any exam

General Exam Stress-Busting Tips

Believe in yourself. If you prepare for the exams properly you should do fine, meaning that there is no need to worry excessively.

Don't try to be perfect. It's great to succeed and reach for the stars, but keep things in balance. If you think that "anything less than B or A means I've failed" then you are creating mountains of unnecessary stress for yourself. Aim to do your best but do recognise that none of us can be perfect all of the time.
Take steps to overcome problems. If you find you don't understand some of your course material, getting stressed out won't help. Instead, take action to address the problem directly by seeing or talking to your Teacher or getting help from your classmates.

Don't keep things bottled up. Confiding in someone you trust and who will be supportive is a great way to alleviate stress and worry. You are welcome to talk with your teacher or see the School Counsellor.
Email: jwilloughby@calvin.tas.edu.au

Keep things in perspective. The exams might seem like the most crucial thing right now but, in the grander scheme of your whole life, they are only a small part. Interrupt negative thoughts with positive ones. Examples: "I can do this", "I will do my best", "I can pass this test", "I will focus only on the question in front of me.", "I have done it before, so I can do it again." Actively challenge your irrational thoughts. Life will be worth living regardless of this exam. Respect yourself for taking this course and getting this far, regardless of the outcome.

Try to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Anxiety increases when one feels tired, run down and overwhelmed. Overall resilience depends on one's physical and mental health, which can be strengthened by:

- enough movement and exercise (vs. couch potato lifestyle)
- balanced life (vs. over-stress)
- positive thoughts/beliefs (vs. self-defeating thoughts/cynicism)
- health focus (vs. self-neglect)
- replenishing nutrition (vs. junk food)
- regular and adequate sleep (vs. late night lifestyle)

Get accurate information. Check your School Handbook and get an understanding of the grading procedure. If you don't understand, ask. Well before the exam, make sure you know where it will be held, the start time, how long it will last, whether extra time will be allowed. Ask your teacher any questions like when the marks will be available, what materials can or should be brought into the exam room.

Get yourself into exam mode. Practice on sample tests in the textbook or study guide. Look at past exams. Ask for suggestions from your teacher what to expect in the exam, what course materials should be emphasised, how to prioritise study time for the course.

Plan. Rest well the night before the exam. If you can pick your seat, choose one away from the doors, windows or other distractions. Plan to monitor the time during the exam so wear a watch or sit where you can see the clock. Plan to wear layers of clothing so you can adjust your need for more warmth or coolness.

Avoid bad things. Give coffee and other stimulants a miss the night before the exam or on the day of the exam. Avoid anxious or talkative students. Avoid other people or things that may disturb your self-confidence, focus and level of relaxation. Definitely avoid arriving late.

**Tips for the Exam itself**

Avoid panic. It's natural to feel some exam nerves prior to starting the exam, but getting excessively nervous is counterproductive as you will not be able to think as clearly.

The quickest and most effective way to eliminate feelings of stress and panic is to close your eyes and take several long, slow deep breaths. Breathing in this way calms your whole nervous system. Simultaneously you could give yourself some mental pep-talk by mentally repeating "I am calm and relaxed" or "I know I will do fine".
If your mind goes blank, don’t panic! It will just make it harder to recall information. Instead, focus on slow, deep breathing for about one minute. If you still can’t remember the information, then move on to another question and return to this question later.

**Survey what’s in front of you**

- Read the instructions carefully
- Quickly survey every page of the exam paper
- See what will be expected of you
- Re-read the instructions a second time (are you really being asked to answer either one or three of the questions?)

**Prioritise what needs to be done**

- When surveying the exam paper, place a mark beside all questions you know you can answer
- Divide up your time according to the importance of the questions
- Answer the easiest questions first to guarantee marks in the least amount of time

**Pace yourself**

- Do not rush through the exam
- Regularly check time left for the rest of the questions
  
  *Give yourself time to proofread; you should not still be writing at the supervisor’s “5 minutes remaining” announcement*

**Some Anxiety Reduction Techniques during the exam**

**Take a deep breath:**

- hold it for three seconds
- exhale audibly all at once and let your head, jaw and shoulders drop
- breathe easy ‘into’ your neck, jaw and shoulders and breathe again into the relaxed state
- repeat cycle once or twice
- if you try this in an exam, you will likely want to exhale more quietly so that you don’t disturb the other students

**Total tension release (can be done sitting):**

- tense your whole body one part at a time
- lift your toes and tense both calves
- tense your thighs and buttocks
- tense your abdomen
- tense your chest and back
- tighten your arms and clench your fists
- tense your neck and clench your jaw
- tightly close your eyes
- take a deep breath and hold it for five seconds
- let your breath and the tension in your body go all at once
- feel the tension leave your body
Relaxation sanctuary (useful in the exam):

• focus on the inner screen of your mind’s eye
• imagine your ideal, safe, relaxing place
• close your eyes
• in your mind, send yourself there for 15 to 30 seconds
• breathe easily and enjoy the relaxation
• go there whenever you need a quick relaxing break (make sure you don’t fall asleep if you are in the middle of your exam, though!)

After the exam

• The day before the exam, you might want to decide what you are going to do immediately after the exam ends. Standing around and joining in with others’ delight or dismay is almost always discouraging. If you have something already planned you can simply leave others to do the post-mortem, while you go and do something more enjoyable. Whatever you do, don’t spend endless time criticising yourself for where you think you went wrong. Often our own self-assessment is far too harsh. Congratulate yourself for the things you did right, learn from the bits where you know you could have done better, and then move on.

• Plan to reward yourself for your hard work. After the exam, do something you enjoy that makes you feel special: take a relaxing walk, have coffee with a friend, buy yourself a present, exercise, have dinner at a favourite restaurant, take a luxurious bath with candles, soft music and a good book (not a textbook). If you are going to meet up with someone, you could agree with them that you will only talk about the exam for 5 minutes - or even not at all. It’s important that you let the stress of the exam go if you have more exams to sit over the next few days or weeks..

Smile!

really feel that smile spread throughout your body and breathe!
E-Books You might find these e-books helpful:

- 50 ways to prevent and manage stress
- End procrastination now!
- Overcoming anxiety, stress and panic
- The complete anxiety treatment and homework planner

Useful services:

Kidshelpline; 1800 55 1800  www.kidshelpl.com.au

Headspace:  www.headspace.org.au

Lifeline: 13 11 14  www.lifeline.org.au