

Fear of exams can be overcome, psychologist says

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What lies at the origin of the fear of examinations, and what can students and lecturers do to allay it? In the following interview, LMU Professor Anne Frenzel (Chair of Psychology in the Learning Sciences) answers both questions.

How does real fear of exams differ from the normal

sense of anxiety that afflicts most people prior to any test?

Professor Anne Frenzel: The distinction is an entirely subjective one. Some students may sweat profusely and still say with a shrug: "I'm always like this before an [exam](#)." Others may have fewer doubts and will nevertheless say: "I just can't cope with this." When the looming prospect of an exam induces so much stress that the individual's wellbeing and achievement potential are seriously compromised, then one can speak of real fear. In that case, one should seek the help of a therapist by consulting, for example, the Munich Student Union's Psychochosocial and Psychotherapeutic Advice Service or the AVM's Psychotherapeutic Outpatient Service.

How widespread is the condition?

One comes across it very often. Even Einstein was severely affected. Data from the USA indicate that the incidence of [test](#) anxiety has increased in recent years, simply because exams have become more frequent. That does not mean that students now tend to fear each and every exam more than they used to.

What accounts for such rank anxiety in the run-up to exams?

The fear originates in the conviction that failure will have enormously significant consequences, and in the feeling that one has no control over the outcome and that there is therefore no way to avoid failing. Usually, this fear develops while one is actually engaged in learning for the exam. Anxiety clearly was of use over the course of evolution, but when it comes to tests, it actually became an unfortunate feature of the human psyche. Whenever one stumbled on a snake in the savannah, it was a

good idea to run away. And that the very thought of the encounter made one anxious all over again – and led one subsequently to avoid the site – was also advantageous. It is a very useful survival skill, and not all organisms have it. Ants, for instance, always return to the anteater's den. They are unable to modify their behavior in a preventative sense, because they do not remember – so they are not troubled by anxious recollection of stressful situations. An examination in the offing can have the same effect as the snake in the grass. But because an exam does not actually constitute a real physical threat, the anxiety it provokes is no longer functional.

In most cases, what lies behind [test anxiety](#) is the repeated experience of failure. In fact, researchers no longer use that term in a general sense, but talk of specific fears of failure in defined contexts. As a rule, its victims have little confidence in their ability in a particular subject, and have already failed to make the grade on previous occasions. The classical example is the kid in first class who makes 30 spelling mistakes in his first dictation test. But the real damage is actually done later – when parents react with shock, for instance – a situation which for many children feels like a withdrawal of affection. The result is that "exam" is filed under "dangerous," and this then gives rise to cascades of anxiety whenever one recalls the original experience. There is another reflex that we share with our ancestors in the savannah: We run away or seek to avoid similar experiences. In the context of exams, that often means that a student will defer revision of the course material until the very last minute – the typical case of procrastination – which is, of course, not a very good idea.

Simply putting off the task of learning for a test is unlikely to be of much help. But how can one effectively allay a fear of exams?

There are lots of things one can do to reduce one's anxiety prior to an exam. Of all psychological deficits it is the one with the best prognosis!

So-called cognitive strategies have been shown to be very effective. These involve actively restructuring one's conceptions of the awful consequences of failure by considering that the repercussions might not be as disastrous as one imagines. That realization is an enormous help. Another way to do this is to redirect one's thoughts. Instead of concentrating on one's deficiencies, one can focus on one's strengths. – Trying not to think of the little white mice automatically conjures them up. But if one thinks of a big gray elephant, one pictures the elephant – and the mouse is nowhere to be seen. It is possible to overcome depressing thoughts of an upcoming exam in a similar way. When one is trapped in anxiety, all one's thoughts are taken up with things to be avoided at all costs. Unfortunately, this attitude increases the chance that precisely what one fears will happen. Someone who constantly tells herself "I'm sure I'll clam up when I go in," will probably have difficulty expressing herself. But positive thinking, focusing on what one wants to happen – saying "When I go in, I will greet the examiner and shake his hand" – is much more likely to be successful. It is also a good idea to attack the problem directly and make arrangements for private lessons in the subject one is afraid of. Then one really has no reason to be fearful of the ensuing test.

And how does one go about learning more effectively?

First of all, I would like to give a few examples of popular strategies that are of little or no use – such as repeated readings of the same passages or excessive highlighting or underlining of texts. It makes much more sense to make better use of one's time. Of course, that contradicts the initial impulse to toss one's books aside and ignore the whole bothering subject for a while. But what is called distributed practice has in fact proven to be particularly effective: Learning for one hour every day over the

course of several weeks is far more beneficial than revising for 10 hours daily over a long weekend. Putting one's knowledge to the test is also a very useful tactic. One can formulate one's own questions or use old exam papers, or ask one another questions. Cards bearing the question on one side and the answer on the other are quite helpful. Teachers tend to frown on the idea of "teaching for the test," but I believe that students have every right to "study for the test", and to prepare in a targeted fashion for exams. Nevertheless, I would still like to emphasize that striving to really grasp and understand the learning material is the best long-term strategy to pursue, which could involve engaging in absorbing and stimulating discussions about the content – an approach that is also much more fun than learning the course material by heart.

Can lecturers do anything to ensure that the form of examinations does not exacerbate anxieties?

The notion that anxiety can improve one's performance is fallacious. In schools – but also in universities – one still finds teachers who believe that fear spurs students to make a greater effort. They will even tell the class that the upcoming test will be really hard, in order to "motivate" their students. Instead, lecturers should do what they can to ensure that students feel maximally in control while preparing for and writing exams, and that exams are not perceived as being more crucial than they actually are. For instance, examiners can phrase their questions precisely. If students are asked to "define A, discuss B, summarize C or give an example", they know what they have to do. Asking them to "comment on A, B and C" is far leaves them with insecurity and invites worries that they fail at answering the task correctly. Moreover, teachers often overemphasize the significance of failure by saying things like "If you don't study hard, you won't pass the test, and you won't get your certificate, you will have no chance of getting a job." That intensifies [anxiety](#) and does nothing positive for the motivation of students or their

willingness to work. So lecturers can do a great deal to reduce fear of exams – and many of them are already aware of the problem and determined to take steps to alleviate it.

Provided by Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

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