

# Preparing for Exams

The following information gives practical suggestions on how to manage the time leading up to exams. Many of the suggestions may seem simple or obvious, yet when we are under pressure, we can easily forget these basics.

Always remember it is best to start a study program well in advance of exam day. While you don't want to "peak" too early, leaving studying to right before the test is an excellent recipe for stress.

## *Organizing Your Space*

- It might help to think about where you study (work). Try to separate the places where you work from the places where you relax. Even if this all happens within one small room, find a way to create a "working place" which contains your papers, books and everything else you need for your work.
- Can you identify where you work best? If it helps, change your work space during the day—your room, the college library or working with a friend and then by yourself.
- Experiment with moving all distractions out of your work area and putting these into your "relaxation areas." Similarly, keep work out of the latter so that when you are relaxing or sleeping, your work does not intrude into this space.
- Get accustomed to working when you are in your work area and "switching off" when you get up from there. Creating a physical separation of this kind can help you do the same mentally.

## *Organizing Your Time*

- Create a weekly timetable and put in everything you need to do: meals, sleep, classes, job, exercise, shopping, laundry, etc. Then, allocate time for studying and time for relaxing and enjoying yourself.
- Try to be realistic about what you can achieve and stick to your deadlines. If there's more work than time available, prioritize: Which are the most important subjects? Which subjects do you know best already or are easiest to get "up to speed?" Which subjects are required? Which subjects do you already have the most information/research/material? Being strategic in your studying is important and prioritizing tasks can be helpful in creating your plan.
- Allowing yourself time for relaxation, recreation, socializing and rest is not wasting time. It will help you feel less stressed and work more effectively. Actually, research shows that you need to rest to consolidate your learning.
- Set specific goals for each study period. Make a list of your goals, keep them realistic and tick them off as you achieve them so you can see what you've done. Allow more time for subjects you find difficult.

## *An Approach to Motivation*

- Begin with easier/more interesting subjects.
- You can start by setting a small, manageable goal. When you've achieved this, give yourself a reward. Keep repeating this goal setting and rewarding yourself. Try to establish a work routine—once started, a routine becomes easier to maintain.
- Remind yourself why you have chosen to do these exams.
- Also work to switch you thinking. Instead of saying you NEED to do well on the exam, tell yourself you WANT to do well on the exam.

## *Improving Concentration*

- Taking regular, short breaks when you are working (e.g. 10 minutes out of every hour you work) is likely to help you concentrate for longer.
- Make notes as you read, keep questions in your mind as you work, speak out loud and/or record yourself.
- Have you experimented with mixing topics frequently? Mix easy and difficult topics as well as interesting and dull topics.
- Try to work in a comfortable environment (not too cold, hot or noisy) and remove distractions if possible. Find out where you work best (e.g. in the library, with a friend or alone in your room—see the earlier section on “Organizing your space.”)

## *Active Learning*

- Don't just read notes through –make a list of key points.
- Test your memory as you go along and try to devise questions/answers about the information you're learning.
- Some people find it helpful to use memory aids such as memorizing a trigger word which is associated with a “chunk” of information—make a trigger word out of the initial letters of key points or names or find a way of visualizing information.

## *Practicing*

- Spend some time going through past exam papers, and practice answering questions within the allotted time.
- Practicing will give you a good idea of the format of the exam, the types of questions you may be asked and experience in planning and structuring answers under time pressure.
- Remember that under exam conditions, you're not expected to produce an essay which looks like it took a week to carefully polish. Try to keep focusing your attention on the task at hand (i.e. answering the question rather than being distracted by your worries).
- Some people find it helpful to work in groups—perhaps arranging to meet a few friends to discuss particular topics. You can use this to test each other's memory or talk through aspects you haven't understood.

## *Sleeping Better*

- Try not to work in or on your bed—keep your bed for relaxation and sleep.
- Learn to “switch off” before going to bed. Stop working at least an hour before you intend to sleep and spend the time doing something more relaxing (e.g. listening to music, talking to a friend, doing relaxation exercises, taking a walk).
- If you have difficulty sleeping, see if staying away from electronic devices an hour before going to sleep makes a difference.
- If you stick to a regular bedtime and getting up time, it might make it easier to maintain good sleeping patterns.
- Too much alcohol can prevent you from sleeping properly and tends to make you tired the next day.
- Try not to “catastrophize” about not being able to sleep well (i.e. stop telling yourself that you'll not be able to do anything the next day if you can't get to sleep). Even when you're not sleeping much, you are still likely to be able to function well, think logically and do difficult mental tasks.