Exam stress is a feeling of pressure in the lead up to exam time. A small amount of stress can be useful to keep you focused during the exam period however too much pressure for a long period can stop you from performing your best. Some symptoms of exam stress include: isolating yourself from friends and family, feeling low, trouble sleeping, minimal or no motivation to start the day, feeling confused or having your mind go blank during the tests, the fear of failing. Stress may also have physical symptoms such as; rapid heart rate, shortness of breath, dizziness, blurred vision and sweating. It is important to identify signs that may cause stress and implement strategies to manage stress associated with exams.

How to manage your exam stress:

Prior to exams

- Plan your time. Too much course material + Too little time = Exam Stress.
- Managing your time is important. Be realistic when planning your study timetable. Study in blocks of 50 minutes (include 5-10 minute breaks). Track and monitor your progress. If you notice you are losing concentration take a short break (get a glass of water or go for a quick walk around the block). Be mindful that a few minutes does not turn into a few hours. Managing your time should reduce pre-exam stress as you know you have prepared for the test. It is important to avoid last minute cramming, especially the night before the exam. Having a good sleep the night before will have a positive impact on your performance.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle. Stress increases when you feel tired, run down and overwhelmed. Avoid drinking excessive amounts caffeine and sugary drinks. Avoid excessive amounts of alcohol. Remember to 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. In turn, exercise will help to keep you calm and balanced, improve your concentration levels and help you to sleep better. It is important to rest well the night before the exam.
- Experiment with your learning style. To ensure that your motivation to study is high try a variety of revision styles (e.g., mind-mapping, multi-coloured index cards, get yourself an assortment of highlighter pens etc.).
- Revise past exams. Practise sample papers/past exams (https://student.unsw.edu.au/past-exam-papers). Ask your Lecturer/Tutor what style of questions you should expect in the exam e.g., multiple choice, short response, extended response. Allocate your time according to the weight of the question.
- Ask for help. If you find you don’t understand some of your course material, getting stressed out won’t help. Instead, be active and seek help. Talk to your Lecturer/Tutor (note: remember to allocate enough time for their response)
- Seek advice. Confiding in an Educational Support...
Advisor is a great way to reduce exam stress. Educational Support Advisors at UNSW work with all students to promote the development of skills needed to succeed at university, whilst also providing personal support throughout the process. You can request an appointment with an Educational Support Advisors (https://student.unsw.edu.au/advisors) or phone (02) 9385 4734.

On the day of the exam

- Be prepared. Give yourself extra travel time and plan to arrive early. If you can pick your seat, choose one away from distractions (e.g., from the door). Plan to monitor the time during the exam so wear a watch or sit where you can see the clock.

- Avoid stressors. 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. Avoid people or things that may disturb your self-confidence, focus and level of relaxation.

- Slow deep breaths. If you feel that you are starting to stress the most effective way to eliminate this feeling is to; close your eyes and take several long, slow deep breaths – 1 to 5 minutes.

- Positive mind. Self-efficacy is a person’s belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation. Such beliefs determine how people respond to a situation – mentally repeating "I am calm and relaxed" or "I have studied, it’s just an exam" will have a positive impact on performance.

- Take a break. If your mind goes blank during the exam…. do not panic! This will only make it harder to recall the information. Take a deep breath, read the question (again) and if you still can’t remember the information, then move on to another question and return to it later.

After the exam

- Exam ‘post-mortem’. It’s too late to go back and change your answers! Forget what you wrote for Question 21 and move on. Avoid standing around and joining in with others’ dismay (it is always discouraging). Often self-assessment after an exam is harsh so don’t do it.

- Reward yourself. After the exam you should do something you enjoy. Reward yourself because you deserve it. It is especially important to let the stress of the exam go if you have more exams to sit over the next few days or weeks.