

# 5

## TYPES OF ANXIETY: EXAM ANXIETY

# Exam Anxiety

Most people experience some degree of stress or anxiety before writing an exam. Mild nervousness can actually help improve exam performance. However, high levels of anxiety can impede your ability to think clearly and answer questions effectively. Fortunately there are some straightforward strategies that you can use to help reduce anxiety to a manageable level and improve your grades at exam time. This chapter will walk you through those strategies and help you to create your own unique anxiety reduction program before, during, and after the exam period.

## Cal's Story

Cal is a second year Biology student. He became very anxious when writing exams in first year, as exams were much more difficult than they had been in high school. In addition, last year he failed an exam for the first time ever, although he did manage to pass the course. Since then, Cal has been experiencing increasing levels of anxiety prior to each exam, including shortness of breath and tightness in his chest. To make matters worse, Cal's anxiety makes it difficult to fall asleep the night before his exam and so he has to write on only four hours' sleep. During a recent exam, Cal "blacked out" and had great difficulty remembering the answers to exam questions; as a result he ran out of time and wrote incomplete answers, leading him to receive a lower grade than was reflective of his actual knowledge. Cal's housemates are all in the same program as he is; they talk about the exam material at home and on the way to the exam hall, which only increases Cal's anxiety. Cal is gripped by thoughts like "I'm going to fail", "I'll end up on academic probation", "I can't do this" "I'll get kicked out of Queen's", "I'm not as smart as other people", and "I'll never get into medical school".

## Lisa's Story

Lisa is a fourth year Engineering student. She is set to graduate at the end of this year. Lisa is a straight A student. She has always had some exam anxiety but this year her anxiety has become much worse. Lisa now becomes so anxious that it is difficult for her to concentrate while studying. Her anxiety is further elevated as she is conducting a job search in her field for after she graduates. Lisa is plagued by thoughts like "I have to memorize every detail perfectly or I will fail", "If I don't get the highest grades I will never get a job" and "I can never do enough".

# Before Exams Begin:

Believe it or not, reducing your exam anxiety actually begins at the start of the term. It's important to start practicing your Basic Anxiety Management Skills in advance, *before* you are feeling highly anxious. That way you will know how to use the Skills and they'll be more effective when your anxiety is high. In addition, there are other important things that you can do early in the term, both practical and academic, that can greatly reduce your exam anxiety down the road.

Find some quiet time and work through the following Worksheet, also located in Appendix B (Worksheet 5.1 Exam Anxiety: Before Exams). Consider what you could put in place for yourself now that would help reduce your exam anxiety later in the term.

## 1. Reflect on Your Strengths

What kinds of things have you done in the past during the term that have helped to reduce your anxiety at exam time? What do you know already works for you?

***Examples:***

Cal noticed that the more he kept up with course material through the term, the more confident he felt, and the less anxious he was about writing exams.

For Lisa, maintaining her regular yoga practice and exercise routine greatly helped keep her anxiety at a lower baseline level through the term and heading into exams.

On the lines below write down two things that you have done in the past throughout the term that have helped you to reduce your exam anxiety. Commit to resuming or maintaining those things above that you know from past experience work for you. Block them into your daily or weekly schedule. (Need help planning your schedule? See page 30 for techniques to improve Time Management!)

*In the past, these things have helped reduce my exam anxiety...*

1.

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2.

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## 2. Review Your Basic Skills

It is important to begin a regular practice of deep breathing and relaxation, and SPEMS (good Self Care that includes eating healthily, getting enough sleep, and making time to exercise) early on to help calm, strengthen, and ground you and to prepare your body and mind for the demands that will be placed upon you during exams.

How can you begin practicing these skills early in the term? Use the space below to help you plan:

Review the chapter on Basic Anxiety Management Skills (Page 4). On the lines below write down three Basic Skills you will begin to practice regularly in your daily life:

***Examples.***

I will practice breathing twice per day.

I will do one 10-minute relaxation exercise before bed every night.

I will bring healthy snacks with me onto campus to eat between classes during the day.

*The Basic Anxiety Management Skills I will start practicing are...*

1.

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2.

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3.

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Remember, what helps reduce anxiety is the *regular practice* of Basic Anxiety Management Skills. These don't need to take up a lot of time but they do need to be practiced regularly in order to be effective. Block these into your daily and weekly schedule and commit to maintaining them (see page 30 for tips).

### 3. Trying Something New

Ask yourself if there's anything you *haven't* tried before that could help you to reduce your anxiety at exam time.

**Examples.**

Cal realized that he had a strong tendency to procrastinate. He decided to challenge himself to be consistently proactive by speaking to his professor or TA if there was material he didn't understand during the term rather than waiting until he was studying for finals to understand the material. He also decided to put a study schedule in place for himself prior to the exam period; this would help him to minimize procrastination and reduce anxiety by having a plan for how to get through his heavy workload.

Lisa decided to backburner her job search until after the final exam period. She gave herself permission to relax her expectations on herself and to move back home before pursuing her job search during the summer months. This helped to lower Lisa's general anxiety level and therefore reduced her exam anxiety as well.

On the lines below write down two things you haven't tried before that you could begin doing early on in the term to help reduce your exam anxiety later on:

*Early in the exam, I can try the following...*

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Experiment with these ideas. Try them for one term and see if they do in fact reduce your exam anxiety. If they do, keep them. If they don't, you can always tweak or change them next term, or try something else entirely.

Good work! You've now set the stage for an easier and less anxious exam period.

## During Exams:

During the exam period it is very important that you make working on your anxiety a priority. What does this mean? It means a regular practice with your Basic Anxiety Management Skills: practice abdominal breathing at least twice a day and whenever anxious, and relaxation at least once a day. It also means practicing the basics of good Self Care (SPEMS) as much as you can make time for. It's very easy to neglect these when the academic demands on you are high. However, now is the time when you need to be practicing these more than ever. Doing so will help keep your anxiety at a lower level, which will help you to feel better, study more productively, and, ultimately, perform better on your exams.

At this time, it's also important that you deal with your anxious thoughts, which are likely to increase during this period.

### *Exam Anxiety Thought Record*

Review the section on Introducing the Thought Record in the Basic Anxiety Management Skills chapter (page 4). Recall that the Thought Record is the tool that we use to neutralize anxious thoughts by critically questioning those thoughts. It's very important to directly address anxious thoughts because they tend to quickly take on a life of their own and can significantly increase the unpleasant emotional and physical symptoms of anxiety, especially at exam time.

Let's look at Cal and Lisa's Exam Anxiety Thought Records. Then, you can complete your own Exam Anxiety Thought Record, found in Appendix B (Worksheet 2.5 ab Thought Record).

## WORKSHEET 2.5 Thought Record

# Anxiety Thought Record: Cal

1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions: <i>(Select from list in box below)</i>	3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: <i>(Use the questions below)</i>
<p>1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:</p> <p>1. I'll blank out again when writing an exam.</p> <p>2. I'll forget everything that I studied.</p> <p>3. I don't know anything.</p> <p>4. I can't do this.</p> <p>5. I'm going to fail.</p> <p>6. I'll end up on academic probation.</p> <p>7. I'm not as smart as other people.</p>	<p>2. Identify Thought Distortions:</p> <p>1. Generalizing, Predicting the future, Catastrophizing</p> <p>7. Focusing only on the negatives, Underestimating my ability to cope</p>	<p>3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: <i>(Ask Yourself...)</i></p> <p>1. I am working on calming myself, which will help me to concentrate. Just because I blanked out once doesn't mean it will happen again. I now choose to breathe and bring my present focus to each exam.</p> <p>7. I am smart enough to have gotten here. I have been successful in many areas of my life. I now choose to value my strengths. I can't control whether I am accepted or not. All I can do is my best.</p>
<p>1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:</p> <p>• Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts</p> <p>• Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts</p>	<p>2. Identify Thought Distortions:</p> <p><i>Catastrophizing – focusing on the worst possible outcome</i></p> <p><i>Overestimating probability – of bad things happening</i></p> <p><i>Perfectionism – pressuring the self to be perfect: "I should..."</i></p> <p><i>Focusing on only the negatives – ignoring positives</i></p> <p><i>Predicting the future – how can you know what will happen?</i></p> <p><i>Generalizing – ignoring differences in circumstances</i></p> <p><i>Underestimating your ability to cope – if something bad does happen</i></p>	<p>3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: <i>(Ask Yourself...)</i></p> <p>• Is the Hot Thought true? Is it always true? Is it partially true? Are there ways in which it is not true? Are there times when it is not true?</p> <p>• What is the evidence to support the Hot Thought? What is the evidence against it?</p> <p>• If you had to debate this thought or make a counterargument against it, what would you say?</p> <p>• Is there another way of looking at this?</p> <p>• If you are catastrophizing, what is the probability of this thought actually happening? If your feared outcome does happen, how terrible would it be?</p>

# Anxiety Thought Record: Lisa

## WORKSHEET 2.5 Thought Record

<p><b>1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:</b></p>	<p><b>2. Identify Thought Distortions:</b> (Select from list in box below)</p>	<p><b>3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk:</b> (Use the questions below)</p>
<p>1. I have to memorize every detail <del>perfectly</del> or I will fail.          2. I don't have enough time to study.          3. I'm going to do badly.          4. I'm going to fail.          5. If I don't get the highest grades I will never get a job.</p>	<p>2. Focusing only on the negatives, Catastrophizing          4. Catastrophizing, Predicting the future</p>	<p>2. I have two full days to study and I will use that time as productively as I can.          4. I have never failed an exam before so it is unlikely that I would do so now. I may do less well but it is unlikely that I would fail. If I do fail, I will handle it.</p>
<p><b>1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts</li> <li>• Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts</li> </ul>	<p><b>2. Identify Thought Distortions:</b></p> <p><u>Catastrophizing</u> – focusing on the worst possible outcome  <u>Overestimating probability</u> – of bad things happening  <u>Perfectionism</u> – pressuring the self to be perfect: “I should..”  <u>Focusing on only the negatives</u> – ignoring positives  <u>Predicting the future</u> – how can you know what will happen?  <u>Generalizing</u> – ignoring differences in circumstances  <u>Underestimating your ability to cope</u> – if something bad does happen  <u>Mind Reading</u> – imagining you know what another is thinking</p>	<p><b>3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk:</b> (Ask Yourself...)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the Hot Thought true? Is it always true? Is it partially true? Are there ways in which it is not true? Are there times when it is not true?</li> <li>• What is the evidence to support the Hot Thought? What is the evidence against it?</li> <li>• If you had to debate this thought or make a counterargument against it, what would you say?</li> <li>• Is there another way of looking at this?</li> <li>• If you are catastrophizing, what is the probability of this thought actually happening? If your feared outcome does happen, how terrible would it be?</li> </ul>

Now, it's your turn to complete your own Thought Record, which can be found in Appendix B. Make some quiet time to do this exercise when you won't be interrupted. First, list your anxious thoughts in the left hand column, circle the Hot Thought(s) that you wish to work on, then use the prompts at the bottom of the form to question those thoughts. List your Balanced/Realistic thoughts in the right hand column. You can complete a Thought Record for any anxious thought that arises about your exam anxiety; you can complete as many as you need to in order to get relief.

## *After Your Thought Record is Complete:*

Once you have completed a Thought Record, fold or detach the third column (Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk). Keep the column somewhere you can easily refer to it. Tape it on your bathroom mirror or carry it around in your bag with you for easy reference.

Then, use your Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk in one of two ways:

1. Read through the list repeatedly throughout the day to remind yourself of your balanced perspective. If you are permitted to bring allowed materials into the exam room, you may wish to bring your list or lists into the exam with you.

And/Or

2. Pick one statement from the list and repeat it over and over to yourself in your own mind. This is especially important when you are walking to your exam, sitting down preparing to write your exam, and anytime you become anxious during the exam. By doing this, you are effectively interrupting and distracting your mind from thinking about and dwelling on anxious thoughts that ramp up your anxiety levels. Instead, you are consciously focusing your mind on more realistic, calming thoughts.

## *Mindful Awareness*

Remember that you can also practice **Mindful Awareness** in regards to your anxious thoughts about exams. Review the section on Mindfulness in the chapter on Basic Anxiety Management Skills (page 4). If a new anxious thought appears, just notice, take a step back from the thought, and say "That's just an anxious thought." Let the thought float through your mind like a cloud blowing across the sky. Remember that just because you have an anxious thought doesn't mean you have to believe it, engage with it, start working on it or worry about what it says. You just name it as an anxious thought and practice **mindfulness** by allowing it to pass on through.

# Additional Behavioural Strategies to Use During Exams:

The following strategies can also be found in Appendix B (Worksheet 5.1 Exam Anxiety: Additional Behavioural Strategies to Use During Exams).

## *1. Backburner Other Life Concerns.*

Life happens, even during exams. In Lisa's case, she needed to suspend her job search during her upcoming exam period and prioritize focusing only on her exams. Lisa decided she would resume her job search once her exams were over. Similarly, if you are dealing with a significant stressor in your personal life, such as a relationship conflict or difficulty, try to postpone addressing those difficulties until after your exams are finished. Why? Other life stressors can have the effect of increasing your overall anxiety, and therefore ramp up your exam anxiety too. Conversely, exam stress can make other life stressors feel very big, and limit your ability to deal with them effectively. Life challenges will almost always wait for you until you're ready to deal with them. Doing so will reduce your overall anxiety level and create space both to study and to use your strategies to reduce your anxiety.

Write down one major personal concern or stressor that you could postpone dealing with until after exams:

*I can postpone this personal concern...*

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What action would you need to take in order to effectively postpone dealing with the stressor? For example, do you need to let someone know you'll get back to them after exams? Or that they won't be hearing from you for the next few weeks? Do you need to put the issue out of your own mind using self-talk or mindfulness techniques? Would making a To-do list or a list of your concerns and then putting the list away somewhere help get the issue off your mind?

*My plan for postponing my personal concern is...*

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## 2. Take Some Alone Time.

Like Cal in our case example, many people find that talking with other students who will be writing the same exam actually escalates their anxiety. Doing so can lead you to compare yourself to others and trigger anxious thoughts about not adequately knowing the material. If this is true for you, seriously consider *not* talking to friends about your upcoming exam. You can let trusted friends know that you are dealing with exam anxiety and you just need to be by yourself prior to your exams. Or just quietly take space for yourself. You might find, for example, that walking to your exam alone rather than with others is helpful. During that time you can also be practicing your Basic Anxiety Management Skills (breathing, self-talk).

When could you carve out some alone time in the days and hours leading up to an exam? What alone time would be most impactful in reducing your exam anxiety? Walking to your exam alone? Not hanging out with others the night before who are writing the same exam as you?

*I can take the following times for alone time...*

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How can you handle this in your relationships? Let others know that you need time to study? Or that you need to take a little alone time to get in the zone?

*My plan for taking alone time is...*

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## 3. Bring a Present-Minded Focus While Writing Your Exams

While you are writing an exam it is not the time to be calculating your course grade or your GPA, or to be thinking about how this exam will affect your grades, program, or the rest of your life. If you find your mind wandering, breathe, then gently and kindly remind yourself to bring your focus and attention to the exam question in front of you.

While writing the exam, slow yourself down. Often when people are anxious they tend to rush and then either make mistakes or forget to include things in their answers that would get additional marks. Tell yourself that you can take the time you need to answer each question. Breathe. Sit with each question for a minute until you can start to think through each answer. Don't let your mind rush ahead and start worrying about future questions. Remember, a present-minded focus means focusing on just one thing at a time.

On the lines below write down three things that you can do during your exams to maintain a present-minded focus:

Here is a sample list:

Breathe

Use the self-statement "I now choose to focus on one question at a time"

If my mind wanders and starts worrying about my grades, I'll interrupt my thoughts and gently bring my focus back to my exam

*During my exam, I can maintain a present-minded focus by...*

1.

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2.

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3.

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## *4. Have a Plan in Place That You Follow Prior to Writing Each Exam*

This includes the night before and the day of your exam. Choose what you are going to wear the night before. Reduce as much stress or decision-making on the day of the exam as possible. It is also very important to incorporate your Basic Anxiety Management Skills into your planned schedule heading into your exam. Ask yourself what would help you to feel as calm and prepared as possible?

**Example:**

For Cal, it was important to put a relaxing bedtime routine in place to help him to fall asleep earlier. He decided what time he would get up, what he was going to have for breakfast, and what time he was going to leave for the exam hall.

What three things will you do the night before you write your exam?

Here is a sample list:

I will put away all exam materials by 9:30 pm.

Between 9:30 and 10:00 pm I will do my Basic Anxiety Management Skills (breathing and relaxation)

I will be in bed by 10:00 pm

Write your three strategies below:

*To manage my anxiety, I can do the following the night before my exam...*

1.

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2.

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3.

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## *5. Practice Radical Acceptance of Your Anxiety.*

Your anxiety will likely be elevated during this period. That's okay. Say "My anxiety is a little high right now; I will use my Basic Skills and focus on my exams."

Know that you are in survival mode. This is as tough as it gets. Remind yourself that you can do it, even if you are feeling anxious. Say "I can feel anxious and write my exam anyway". Acknowledge that you are not only experiencing the pressure that writing exams brings; on top of it you are also doing work on

your anxiety. You are doing double the work compared with students who aren't also coping with exam anxiety. Be gentle, caring and compassionate with yourself during this period. If your anxiety spikes during this period, simply re-start your Basic Skills and go to your Thought Record for relief.

## When Exams Are Over:

Following the exam period, consider doing the following three things:

1. **De-stress.** Take a break. Relax. Use your Basic Skills. Allow your body and mind to go back to a lower baseline level of anxiety.
2. **Reward yourself.** Take the opportunity to recognize and reward all of your hard work throughout the term and the exam period. Acknowledge your successes. Give yourself a pat on the back. Reward yourself by splurging on a special treat or do something that you really enjoy.

### ***Examples:***

Cal rewarded himself by taking a trip to Montreal for two days with friends.

Lisa celebrated the end of exams by taking a week off to pack up, hang out, and say goodbye to people before heading home to look for work.

What can you do to de-stress and reward yourself now that exams are over?

Write down two things you could do that would help bring your stress levels down and enable you to relax:

*Now that exams are over, I can bring my stress down in the following ways...*

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What reward could you give yourself for the hard academic and personal work you've done?

*I could give myself the following reward after exams...*

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3. **Take stock.** Now that you are calmer and on the other side of the exam period, take the opportunity to do a review or “autopsy” of what worked and what didn’t work for you to reduce your exam anxiety. Take as objective a perspective as you can—no judging or blaming—just look for ways to strengthen and help yourself further going forward. Recommit to doing what worked at the start of next term and the next exam period. Remind yourself what a difference it made.

Next, take a step back and look at the bigger picture. Are there any larger issues that need to get addressed? Be totally honest with yourself. Note that the following strategies for assessing yourself can also be found in Appendix B (Worksheet 5.3 Exam Anxiety: Assessing Yourself).

Assess yourself academically:

- Are your study habits as strong as they could be? Could you be studying ‘smarter’ not ‘harder’? Are you trying to memorize every detail or is there a more efficient way for you to study? Are you keeping up with material during the term or cramming at the last minute? Do you get tripped up on multiple-choice exams? Are you taking needed breaks when you study to boost your productivity? Do you have a working study schedule that you follow? Maybe a trip to Learning Strategies is in order to maximize your study capabilities and reduce your anxiety (see the Resources section in the Appendix for Learning Strategies contact information).
- How are your essay writing skills? Do you struggle to answer essay questions on exams? An appointment at The Writing Centre could help you get better at structuring your exam essay questions (see the Resources section in the Appendix for The Writing Centre contact information).
- Are you engaging enough help? Would it be useful to join a study group or get a study partner? Ask questions of your professor or your TA when you don’t understand something? Hire a tutor?
- Are you happy with your program? Is the program you are in aligned with your strengths and interests? If not, consider speaking with an Academic Advisor to explore your options (see the Appendix Resources section to find your program’s Academic Advisor).
- Are you overstretched, not giving yourself enough time to study? Are you working too many hours in a part-time job? Consider cutting back your hours, especially at exam time. Are you taking more courses than is manageable? Reducing your course load might be something for you to consider. Do you have too many extracurricular activities or volunteer commitments? Take a hard look at how much you are loading on your plate. For more on this, see the chapter on Overwhelm. What would you need to change, remove from your schedule, or cut back on in order to feel calmer and more confident when writing your exams?

Sit quietly and reflect on the previous term and exam period. As truthfully as you can, identify what academic area(s) could use improvement. On the lines below write down two areas in which you could improve:

*I could improve the following academic areas...*

1.

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2.

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Next, write down what action you will take in order to improve in these areas. Is there something you can do on your own? Or will you reach out for some on-campus help for new ideas about how to manage your academics?

*My plan to improve my academics is...*

1.

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2.

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*Assess yourself personally:*

- Are there any personal life stressors that may be contributing to your exam anxiety? Are you experiencing conflict or difficulties in an important relationship? A difficult situation in your family? Other practical stressors? Get support from trusted friends or family members. See if you can figure out a way to resolve, backburner or minimize the effects the issues at hand has on you. If you feel stuck or have continuing difficulty, make an appointment to see a Personal Counsellor in Counselling Services to explore new perspectives or options (See the Resources section in Appendix A for Counselling Services contact information).

Make some quiet time and reflect on your personal life. Are you experiencing any personal issues or close relationships that are increasing your anxiety or stress levels? Write these down on the lines below:

*I could improve the following personal areas...*

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Next, write down any steps you could take to reduce stress in these areas. Set new boundaries in relationships? Seek Personal Counselling for a difficult issue?

*My plan to improve my personal life is...*

1.

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2.

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## *Conclusion*

Good for you for doing this work on yourself. Know that you are not alone—many students experience exam anxiety. Take good care of yourself, breathe, challenge your thoughts, and be caring and supportive of yourself as you write your exams. If you need additional support or resources, help is just a phone call away. Don't hesitate to reach out for the support that you need.