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## Staying calm and confident in oral exams

Tips and "quick helpers" for coping with exam anxiety.



## Staying calm and confident in oral exams

Mild exam anxiety is widespread and completely normal. It manifests itself as worrying about the upcoming event and several mental and physical reactions to this pressure. Thus, regular exam anxiety becomes noticeable as excitement, tingling in the stomach, sweaty hands or stage fright. It induces the person to deal with the upcoming challenge, and in the exam situation itself, the anxiety even has a performance-enhancing effect. However, exam anxiety becomes problematic when it has a significant impact on learning and performance. Negative experiences in an examination situation or experiences of frustration in comparison with others can also intensify examination anxiety. Massive test anxiety can cause intense restlessness, nausea or insomnia. It blocks concentration and memory in the learning process and especially in the exam situation. In severe cases, there is a feeling of helplessness and loss of control (blackout). Exam anxiety is also a frequent reason for failing an exam or dropping out of a study program.

Most people who suffer from exam anxiety fear oral exams more than written exams - not least because several uncertainty factors come into play during an oral exam. The key to positively influencing the fear of oral exams lies in one's own attitudes towards the exam situation, the ability to relax, and ultimately in optimal preparation for the upcoming exam. Always keep in mind: Exam situations cannot be completely controlled. The trick is to realize and accept this fact. Fear and inner excitement in performance situations are not as obvious to the other person as one might think.

This brochure introduces different tips and methods for reducing exam anxiety and addresses questions such as What can I do before the exam? What is the best way to get through the exam? What are quick-relaxation methods for anxiety and nervousness? What to do when I am experiencing a blackout? How can I get my anxiety-producing thoughts under control?

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## Before the exam

### 1. **Specialist knowledge gives confidence.**

The key to success in an oral exam lies in systematically working through all relevant subject areas. The better you have understood and learned the subject matter, the more confident you will be going to the exam.

### 2. **Consider your time management.**

You should plan enough time for the preparation of the learning material. The closer you get to the date of the exam, the more nervous you will be, and greater tension will prevent you from preparing effectively.

### 3. **Define key terms and use index cards.**

Define the most important key terms in each subject area and try to anticipate what kind of questions about the key terms could be asked in the exam. Don't forget to write down your answers clearly and in a structured manner. Index cards can be very helpful for this. The limited space requires you to set priorities. Learning with index cards also promotes learning by keywords and allows you to easily revise the subject matter.

### 4. **Find out about your examiners.**

It can be useful for the exam to know the subject areas of the examiners and their current publications. Also talk to fellow students who have already taken an exam with these examiners.

### 5. **Practice presenting the subject matter.**

Think of questions and answer them aloud in short sentences. If possible, have friends or fellow students quiz you.

### 6. **Work on your motivation.**

Give yourself credit for success and set realistic goals. In doing so, accept your level of performance. Show fighting spirit before and during the exam.

### 7. **Examiners are people too.**

Realize that a nervous student is not unusual for an examiner. See the examiner as a friendly person with whom you can discuss what you have learned. Try to look forward to the exam, as you will finally have the opportunity to apply your knowledge.

### 8. **Reduce your anxiety-producing thoughts: confront rather than avoid!**

- ▶ Keep picturing your way to the exam and imagine yourself waiting outside the door of the exam room. If possible, look at the exam room beforehand.
- ▶ Talk to the examiners in advance.
- ▶ Create a positive mental image of the whole exam situation (see page 6) and think the exam situation through to the end.

## During the exam

### 1. Pay attention to your personal appearance.

Your personal appearance can grant you a bonus. Dress appropriately but do not "dress up", be punctual and polite. When greeting the examiner, make eye contact and make sure you have a firm handshake.

### 2. Think about the question before you answer.

- ▶ Speak slowly and clearly.
- ▶ Make eye contact with the examiner.
- ▶ Be concise in your answer.
- ▶ If possible, support your statements with examples, quotations, comparisons.
- ▶ If allowed, take notes (remember pen and paper).

### 3. The examiners want their questions answered in a clear and structured way.

Address the gist of a question first, then you can explain details or any problems. Do not elaborate on your own thoughts or possible interpretations until after you have answered the question concisely and clearly. In this way, you show that you have really dealt with the subject matter.

### 4. You are not sure whether you have understood a question correctly.

In this case, check and ask for a different formulation. Alternatively, you can repeat the question in your own words first.

### 5. You do not have an immediate answer to a question.

Ask for a short time to think about it. Organize your thoughts and think of a clever way to structure the answer. If you can't think of anything, ask for a keyword or play back the question by saying, "I'm not exactly sure what the question is about." If you are not entirely clear on what aspect a question refers to, let the examiners share your thoughts.

### 6. You cannot answer a question.

Admit it openly and ask for a substitute question. You could cleverly phrase it like this: "I didn't deal with this problem because I focused on aspects X and Y in particular."

### 7. Pay attention to the reaction of your counterpart.

A slight nod or smile shows that you are on the right track.

### 8. Pay attention to your own body language.

Make an effort to sit up straight and without tension. The more upright your posture, the better your breathing can flow; and the better your breathing flows, the calmer your voice and your entire organism will be. Even a small smile in between has a relaxing effect on both sides.

## Creating a positive mental image of the exam situation

Our attitudes and images influence our emotional reactions. If you imagine your exam situation in the darkest colors, if you see yourself stuttering helplessly in the exam situation, then you will feel fear. However, you can consciously counter this with an alternative image and practice dealing with anxiety in the exam situation:

- ▶ Imagine yourself countering the fear that arises with positive, encouraging thoughts. To do this, imagine as vividly as possible the exam situation, the room, the seating arrangement, the people present....
- ▶ Imagine how your feelings of anxiety will arise and how you can deal with them. Say to yourself, "Stay calm! I am well prepared. No one wants to harm me. The anxiety will pass, I am in no danger. I'll focus on the questions alone. If I can't answer a question, it's not a disaster. I will stay calm and breathe deeply. I will handle the situation confidently."
- ▶ Accept the anxiety symptoms and avoid catastrophizing. It is important to visualize in detail how you will calm your body and keep your composure even when anxiety arises. Think of these positive images whenever your "disaster fantasies" arise.

## First helpers for a blackout

### 1. Accept the blackout.

Memory block can affect all of us, but it doesn't need to end in a disaster. Realize that you are not simply ambushed by a blackout, but that you yourself let the blackout control you. Try to regain the control. This way you have a good chance to actively defeat the Blackout.

### 2. Strategies when a blackout has overtaken you.

- ▶ Be proactive. Tell the examiner that you have just lost your train of thought and ask them to repeat their question again: "One moment please, I am blacking out right now. Would you please repeat the question?" You can also ask for a short time-out or ask if you could open the window for a moment.
- ▶ If you put pressure on yourself, you will only make it worse. Tell yourself silently, "Stay calm and take a deep breath. There is no reason to panic. I don't need to know everything and nothing will happen to me."
- ▶ Try to find your train of thought again. Remember what you said last and follow up on it. If a question you can't answer was the trigger for the blackout, tell the examiners honestly and ask for a new question.
- ▶ A deep breath or two will help you calm down. This is exactly the kind of situation for which you can apply slow belly breathing (see below). Just breathing calmly and consciously will reduce your nervousness.

## Quick "little helpers" against nervousness and anxiety

### 1. Take a deep breath.

Inhale slowly through your nose, hold your breath for a moment, and then exhale slowly through your nose. Then take a short breath break and start again. Count to five in each phase (inhale - hold - exhale - pause for breath) before moving to the next.

### 2. Fingertip pressure.

Pressure on the fingertips changes shallow stress breathing to calm abdominal breathing. This effect can be used to relax in a very short time. Here's how: Place the tips of your fingers against each other in pairs and apply medium pressure. You can also press only the tips of your thumbs, index and middle fingers against each other while interlocking the rest of your fingers. You can do this exercise quite inconspicuously while placing your hands in your lap. Keep your attention focused on the situation you are in.

### 3. Acupressure for anxiety and nervousness.

Search for the point behind the earlobe where the edge of the jawbone can be felt. You will feel a small inward bulge here. Press this point for about half a minute, then pause for a few seconds to stimulate it again. Keep pressing until tension and restlessness have decreased significantly.

### 4. Drink water.

Drink a glass of cold water. By sipping, the tension subsides, and at the same time you are briefly distracted from the current stressful situation.

### 5. Secret muscle relaxation.

While not visibly changing your body position to the outside, try to tense (not tense up) as many muscles as possible for about 20 to 30 seconds. Then release the muscles again and consciously notice the relaxation of the muscles. Breathe out deeply as you relax. Pay particular attention to relaxed facial muscles as you exhale.

### 6. "Thought stop technique".

When you notice negative thoughts spreading in your mind, say to yourself clear and distinctly "Stop!". Consciously breathe in and out slowly. As you do so, let your shoulders sink back down and relax your hands. Take another deep breath in and out, making sure your jaw and forehead feel relaxed.

### 7. Positive self-instruction.

Think of short positive phrases to counter your self-deprecating and stress-producing thoughts. Formulate empowering phrases such as "I've handled more difficult situations before." or "I'll succeed in my own unique way." or "Now I can finally show what I've got."

## Recognize and correct destructive thoughts

Every single thought you have automatically causes a change in your feelings. Since our brain cannot distinguish whether a thought describes a situation appropriately or inappropriately, it is all the more important to consciously perceive your own thoughts and also to check to what extent they correspond to reality. Try to contrast your negative thoughts with positive counterarguments.

In the following, you will find typical destructive attitudes in relation to exam situations, supplemented by possible suggestions for correcting them. Should you discover one or the other anxiety-provoking thought in yourself, critically question it and replace it with corrected attitudes. Above all, stand up to persistent dysfunctional thoughts!

| Anxiety-inducing thoughts  | Possible correction  |
|--|--|
| "I will definitely be mute with anxiety in the exam. I won't be able to remember anything I've studied." | "I don't know if I will be mute in the exam. Even if I'm blocked for a moment, it wouldn't be a disaster. I will prepare well and practice a relaxation procedure, then I will be able to recall my knowledge better. It's unlikely that I won't think of anything at all when I'm prepared."  |
| "I must not make a mistake."   | "I demand superhuman abilities from myself when I demand that I not make a single mistake. Besides, I put myself under so much pressure that I make all the more mistakes out of sheer agitation and fear. Making mistakes is not a serious matter. I won't immediately fail an exam just because of that."  |
| "I am completely in the hands of the examiners."   | "I am not completely at the mercy of the examiners. They determine my grade - and I have a say in that, too - but not my life. They are only human like me. I have an influence on their evaluation through my performance."   |
| "If I don't pass the exam, I can't achieve my career goal. Then it's all over."                          | "If I don't pass the exam the first time, I have the option of taking a second attempt. If I still don't pass the exam, my life still goes on. I can make a different career choice. It's inconvenient, but I can live with it. Since I have made it this far in my studies, it is rather unlikely that I will never pass the exam. That's why I'm now focusing on preparing myself in the best possible way." |
| "Everyone will think I'm a loser if I fail."   | "I don't know what the others will think about me and how they will react. It is possible that one or the other will think I am a loser. That would be unpleasant, but I could bear it. I know that failing an exam does not make someone a loser. All that could be said objectively would be that I failed an exam."   |

Quelle: Doris Wolf (2001): So überwinden Sie Prüfungssängste.

## Visualize your past achievements and successes

- ▶ Visualize your past achievements and strengths and realize that they will stay regardless of the exam result.
- ▶ Imagining the "worst case" sometimes also helps to see the significance of a single exam in the context of your entire biography.

## Staying in your real age

Exam situations often activate (childhood) memories of feeling overwhelmed or inferior. The brain flings the current self-consciousness into the past in terms of age and does not remain in an age-appropriate state. We also refer to this as "age regression." It is extremely helpful in this context to be aware of how old one actually is. Sentences such as "I am an adult and no longer a child." or "I am now 24 years old." or "I can look back on almost 20 years of learning and exam experience." strengthen self-esteem and make it easier to access existing strengths (Bohne 2008).

## Bringing the body into a relaxed state through abdominal breathing

Anxiety manifests itself as a tension of the autonomic nervous system and as a change in muscle tension. In addition, there is an accelerated breathing rhythm and shallow breathing in the upper chest area. This in turn can lead to symptoms such as drowsiness, dizziness, palpitations, and concentration problems. Again, you can use effective strategies. Unless you have previously learned a relaxation technique such as autogenic training or progressive muscle relaxation, you can use the following effective method:

### **Slow abdominal breathing**

- ▶ Place your hands flat on the abdominal wall about 2 cm below the navel. Inhale deeply through your nose and feel the breath flow slowly down to your abdomen. As you do this, the abdominal wall will bulge outward and your hands will be lifted slightly upward.
- ▶ Then imagine the breath slowly escaping through the chest cavity back through the nose. Concentrate on how your abdominal wall lowers and your hands lower back down. Breathe out for about twice as long as you breathe in. The exercise is based on the principle of reducing the oxygen supply, thus lowering the energy to tense.
- ▶ Repeat this technique for several minutes or until you are significantly more relaxed and calmer. You can do this exercise while lying down or sitting. It is suitable before going to sleep in the evening, while waiting outside the examination room or during breaks in the exam.



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