

## Coping with stress and anxiety during revision

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This paper is aimed to help students understand the psychological processes which operate behind the scenes, causing the anxiety and stress associated with exams – and thereby help students learn useful coping mechanisms.

Equally important, this paper can help parents gain insight into key psychological processes behind such stress, especially as parents often feel helpless when their child is going through stressful times that are associated with exams and academic tasks.

### Stress, anxiety, exams, and the language of analysis

***A note:** while the focus in this resource is on A-level students facing exams, it is relevant to students in GCSE, IB, Foundation Course, and degree level students facing any exams, projects, and assignments.*

1. How do you feel after submitting your UCAS form?
2. Anxiety as a symptom.
3. Stress management.
4. The role of perception.
5. How do you do it, and how do you know that you are doing it well?
6. Structuring your thinking.
7. Your satnav – working with the *SAFE Method*.

Too often students approach us worried, confused, and anxious about preparing for exams. These are intelligent, hardworking, and highly motivated students. Some have worked so ‘well’ that instead of having piles of papers and files on their laptops, they have all or almost all notes and essays, beautifully written, ready to be revised for the exam well ahead of time. Others, who worked less during the year, have piles of papers and folders full of exercises, essays, notes, textbooks, revision guides... you name it, they have it: from teachers, schools, tutors, and from the web – they have multiple sources of information.

In the run up to exams many students are wondering how to catch up on their work and make up for lost time.

Once the UCAS form is sent off, and students have chosen the universities and courses that they are passionate about, they are naturally motivated to achieve the grades necessary to secure a place on one of their chosen courses.

### **1.1: How do you feel after submitting your UCAS form?**

After sending off your UCAS, offers will start to arrive back, especially if your application was carefully planned and in alignment with your predicted grades. When university offers start to arrive, anxiety can increase, because of the pressure to reach the grades required.

The majority of students will receive conditional offers, and while an offer is a rewarding achievement it is, nevertheless, conditional. Offers oblige the student to move towards, and face, the next important challenge: revising and achieving the necessary grades to be formally accepted.

Some schools and teachers may tell the student that they can get the necessary grades, others may say they are not sure the student can get these grades, or others may say bluntly that it is unlikely. The exams become the one and only focal point, the only hurdle between the student and the potential university place. Something rather sad can begin to unfold for many students at this crucial moment in their lives. Regardless of feedback from teachers, students begin feeling a tight knot in their mind, one that brings about immense anxiety, worry, and stress for students and their supportive family.

At this significant moment many students realise that all their previous academic efforts are now channelled to a 'delivery' of the grades that have been predicted. None of it, of course, is breaking news. Students have always known that exams were looming, but it is in this interim period between UCAS and the exams themselves that it becomes salient: because there is nothing but exams on the horizon after UCAS has been sent and the offers have arrived. Thus, attention is clearly focused on what is ahead: exams and achieving the necessary grades.

The experience of stress and anxiety during the final stages of sixth form study is also shared by students facing exams at lower schooling, like GCSEs, or higher, at university.

During GCSEs, students experiencing anxiety and self-doubt often deal with such feelings by working harder, resorting to private tutors, and intensifying revision through making notes and memorising. However, A-level students often begin to feel that the proven ways of meeting academic demands that they used at GCSE level do not seem to work as effectively when confronting the A-level challenge. A-level demands are altogether a different ballgame, one that almost by definition requires a new approach.

The problem is that students have usually not learnt a suitable approach to handle higher academic demands methodically. Many students therefore struggle to transfer their skills and methods from GCSEs onto A-levels, because these methods of study are inappropriate for the challenge – yet they have not acquired a successful alternative.

Students before exams, especially sixth form exams, often feel for the first time in their lives that they need to manage the challenge on their own. It is naturally unnerving to realise that during a few short exams they will be judged only on a fraction of the material they have learned. During the exam, no one can help. Parental support, tutor's opinions, and good wishes cannot offer comfort in the exam room.

No wonder students get scared, especially when one considers that these A-level exams are the passport needed to allow a student to move from being an individual dependent on family and school, towards independent life at university.

Students also begin developing an awareness that the A-level demands are only a preparation for what will be required of them at university. Their anxiety, while they are already vulnerable to its effects, is exacerbated by the doubt that even if they are accepted into the university course they have chosen, they may not be able to cope with the wide array of academic demands. A-level exams are a necessary vehicle for university entrance, and this naturally intensifies the stress and anxiety felt by students, together with wishing to fulfil well-intentioned expectations.

This self-doubt, confusion, and fear are understandable. Addressing these emotions by increasing revision, going on holiday, or just relaxing and taking it easy is not the solution. Although these activities can ameliorate anxiety, none of them really tap into the root source of the anxiety. It can only postpone the paralyzing effects of nervousness that is based on students' awareness that they are not in command of the material. If anything, these activities cement the negative cycle further by repeatedly failing to address the true cause. Students continue revising, while knowing their revision is ineffective. This can be an intensely demoralising circular process. The more students revise, the more anxious and stressed they feel.

Some anxiety, up to a point, is natural and even constructive. A moderate amount of anxiety can keep you on your toes: sharp, efficient, and focused on the challenge ahead. A certain amount of stress is necessary for optimal functioning. The appropriate balance for this optimal level is determined by personal experiences, the nature of current demands, resources and circumstances, and personality characteristics. Alternatively, an excessive amount of stress can be damaging and it can greatly reduce optimal functioning.

## 1.2: Anxiety as a symptom

The anxiety experienced is almost always a symptom, a manifestation of something else. Consequently, no amount of revision, holidaying, relaxing, or motivational conversations can neutralise students' unease if it stems from their own awareness that they are not in control of the material. If anything, this anxiety will tend to progressively worsen as the exams approach. Students can begin crying nonstop, not knowing why they are crying when everything seems to be okay, everyone is telling them not to worry, folders, books and essays are there, parents and teachers reassure them that they will be fine. For those who do not work hard enough, or the predictions are not so 'good', the situation can be worse still – unless of course they are in denial and are not scared at all. That is another dimension of the same root issue: distorted perception.

Many hardworking students resort to putting as many hours as possible into their revision. Others, sadly, become too overwhelmed when the anxiety damages their ability to dedicate the necessary time for effective revision.

## 1.3: Stress management

A useful definition of stress is, as A-level psychology students know, the gap between perceived demands and perceived abilities to cope and deal with these demands.

*Stress and anxiety come about not necessarily when we feel overwhelmed by the scope of demands or tasks we are facing, but when we feel we cannot quite control, successfully address, and deliver on what is required by these demands – that we might not have the abilities and resources to successfully meet these demands.*

Anxiety and stress do not necessarily emanate from the demands, challenges, or tasks, but from the **gap** between these demands and the ability to cope with them. This ability is predicated upon many factors, particularly the following.

### 1) Demands

Some demands are more taxing than others, and they can multiply in conjunction with each other. However, the burden of the demands differs between individuals, and for the same person it may differ at various points in time. The demands of cleaning the house or writing an essay, for me, might not be the same as for someone else. People have different resources, abilities, and priorities, which partly explains how they can cope with specific demands. Hence the distinction between stress levels that support optimal functioning versus stress levels that undermine functioning. For one person a specific demand can be easy and 'undemanding', whereas for another the same task can feel extremely threatening.

## 2) Abilities

Secondly, it is also self-evident that for any one person, not only do demands keep changing, but the abilities to cope with these demands are changing too – even while dealing with the same demands. Therefore, the prospects of stress and anxiety generated by juggling demands can vary considerably from one person to another, and for the same person, depending on the abilities to cope with the demands at any given time.

### 1.4: The role of perception

*“If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”* (Thomas theorem)

A crucial element in the definition of stress is ‘perceived’ demands, and how individuals ‘perceive’ their ability to deal with these perceived demands. These perceptions can be entirely subjective. Nevertheless, the mechanism of stress works precisely the same way:

I perceive the demand and I perceive the ability. I perceive and feel the gap, therefore I experience the resulting stress. Whether I am ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ about any of this is irrelevant in practice. The effects are overwhelmingly generated by the perception, not by the ‘reality’ of the matrix regarding demands versus abilities. Paraphrasing on Descartes’s *Cogito Ergo Sum - I think therefore I am*, we can say, *I perceive a gap, therefore I am stressed...* the gap can be imaginary or genuine, but if it is perceived as genuine it will almost inevitably generate stress and anxiety.

*A perception, even if ‘unreal’ or ‘unjustified’, can generate ‘real’ consequences that are based on the skewed perception itself. It is a deeply rooted psychological process.*

Two lessons students can learn from this understanding of stress are:

- 1) They should seek to know both the potential demands and their own abilities as accurately, objectively, and realistically as possible. The ‘perceived’ part of the situation can be managed by the student. Stress is not an experience reserved to those who ‘suddenly woke up’ to realise they haven’t worked enough and panic about filling in the gap to align the demands with their abilities. If anything, high achievers can suffer even more from self-doubt, partly because the threshold of their ambition is far higher, and partly because the cost of failure appears much greater if they fall below the high standard expected of them.
- 2) Once you eliminate, or more accurately, minimise as many ‘faulty’ elements as possible from the equation of ‘demands versus the abilities to cope with these demands’, students can begin to genuinely address the problem. The next challenge is how to close this gap (which we are identifying as accurately as possible), using methods that effectively ‘close’ or ‘minimise’ the gap, rather than perpetuate it.

This is where the *Language of Analysis* comes into play.

The methods that students may have employed during GCSEs are not going to be effective at closing the gap they are facing at A-levels. They do not work because the demands of GCSEs are substantially different from those of A-levels.

### **1.5: How do you do it, and how do you know that you are doing it well?**

I began by talking about students who are uneasy because they are vaguely aware that their study methods are not effective. They are usually completely accurate about this. They might not be able to put their finger on the reason for their unease, but they do understand that they are not in control of the process they are engaged in.

They are right to be scared and anxious because they begin realising that there is a real challenge that is threatening their wellbeing, their achievements, and their future.

Students can anxiously begin to question their ability to deliver, to perform to their highest potential, when they envisage sitting in front of the blank exam paper, alone. It is easy to dismiss this anxiety as just a 'perception' of a threat, that it is not as serious as we imagine it to be. But I believe it is in fact even more serious than we usually perceive it to be, because it is a true reflection of the faulty thinking behind a lot of educational practices.

Traditional styles of teaching require the student to become a slave to the material rather than a master of the content learnt. They teach the student to be led by the question and answer, rather than leading and directing the process themselves. They do not teach you to be your own teacher. That is the root cause of the doubts so many students experience in this interim period between submitting the UCAS form and actual exams.

Obviously, students cannot change the nature of exams, they are a given, but they can control the revision process. **The question therefore becomes: how best to study and revise in ways that match the challenge?**

Unfortunately, study and revision often turn the student into an anxious slave of the material, rather than make them excited and empowered by how they are structuring every aspect of the content in a way that equips them with control over this structure. This anxiety is not perceived or imagined, it is a genuine threat to the student's well-being and goals. While some students manage to apply analytical methods to their revision, others might merely get by. They cope with the deficit in analysis by doing endless circular revision that is mostly reliant on memory. Such pseudo solutions will inevitably fail at some point when they cannot apply these tactics to increasingly complex areas of study, as required at university level.

Non-analytical methods will not allow any student to even achieve a pass at university level, let alone excel. At university, students are 'left to their own devices'. This can come

as a shock to many students, even the brightest of minds can become confused by being unable to rely on methods of study that do not incorporate analytical thinking. For many, A-level exams are the first point when they realise that simply memorising subject material, however good they may be at that, will not provide the top grades they require.

Reliance on memorisation alone is very limiting. Some students may be able to memorise a large amount of material, but there is an inevitable limit to the number and variety of essays and answers that can be memorised word by word. Furthermore, students who do not approach questions with an analytical framework are justifiably anxious about experiencing a 'mental block' (or a 'brain freeze'), because if their memory fails, they have no system to fall back on.

Revision that is based on memory provides a manufactured sense of ability that has little bearing on the real demands students face before final exams. Students hope that if they work further on memorising the material, they will shrink the gap between demands and their ability to cope with these demands. However, how much memorising can one person do? 10 essays? 15 essays? The whole textbook? And when it is 10 textbooks at university, then what?

This is where the *Language of Analysis* and its *SAFE Method (Structural Analytical Framework for Excellence)* offer an alternative approach to organising academic content.

The challenge posed by A-level demands is an opportunity for the student to learn a constructive and versatile way to tackle these demands positively, and to excel. By learning this logical structure of addressing academic material while doing A-levels, students are also preparing themselves for the much wider scope and depth of degree level studies.

## **1.6: Structuring your thinking**

Students can be confident about addressing any subject when they are able to structure their thoughts efficiently within an analytical framework, using proven analytical principles and tools.

This means that they have cognitively mastered the material which is organised in their own mind, and they are not dependent on textbooks, teachers' words, essays from the web, or private tutors. The aim of the *SAFE Method* is to enable students to function independently of teachers and books, which frees them to enjoy the process of studying – being inspired by the opportunity to think originally rather than simply recycling other people's ideas. These sources of information can be built on by the individual when they have learnt to integrate and master the material, because the student now understands how to optimally use these as sources to provide a platform for their own intellectual abilities to thrive.

Studying with an analytical framework puts the control into the hands of the student by removing dependence on teachers, essays, source materials, etc. Once this logical approach has been learnt, it can be universally applied to all subjects and situations, to provide a clear path through the process of gathering relevant information and using appropriate concepts to analyse it, whatever the level of study.

### **1.7: Your satnav – working with the SAFE Method**

Working with *SAFE Method* provides students with two essential tools:

- 1) A structured, generic template that can be applied to any question in any subject, to meet the demands of any given situation.
- 2) As a result of learning to systematically apply this analytical framework, students continuously grow and develop the necessary skills that are needed to work on any subject matter.

You cannot control the demands, but you can control your abilities in how you approach such demands. Moreover, when you learn the analytical ability to cope with any academic demand, your ability becomes a master key, no matter what the assignment. There should be no stress and anxiety, except the natural constructive ‘stress’, the one that keeps you on your toes, the one that makes you aware of the demands and the need to tackle these demands.

The book *The Language of Analysis* is the synthesis of teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students at university, and many years of tutoring amazing students in different subjects, ranging from primary schools to postgraduate degrees.

The *SAFE Method* has one purpose – to convey a structural analytical framework that safely puts the student in control by implanting a satnav in their thinking processes, a tool which can be used by them to find their way in any situation. From that point on the student can think independently, relying only on their own powers of analysis. In essence, the academic challenge is a simple one: how to explain something, anything. An explanation requires linking a minimum of two concepts together: at least one concept is explaining a minimum of one other concept.

This linking has a structure, and it employs principles that are your satnav within the framework. It provides students with freedom and the peace of mind that comes from confidence in their academic abilities and, ultimately, it offers students a future of achievements and fulfilled dreams. This is what drives the *SAFE Method*.

It can be difficult to relinquish study habits and mindsets that are familiar and provide some comfort. It is often unsettling for students to alter an approach that they are familiar with, and one that they feel has brought them success in the past. However, students recognise that academic demands change as they progress, and they need new techniques

to cope with them. Learning new approaches to study is a form of rewiring the brain, which requires changing the focal point. While most students approach each essay topic as an independent entity that needs to be managed, memorised, and recalled, the analytical framework offered in the *SAFE Method* will rewire the thinking process by guiding the student to treat all tasks consistently. This is your analytical skeleton, these are the principles that you can and need to employ, now take these new techniques and fit every single question, essay, or requirement into this format, in distinct controlled stages.

Using this system, all assignments are based on a single given structure of thinking that continues to evolve, depending on the task.

The satnav is an accurate metaphor because, like a satnav, the roadmap does not need to be re-drawn every time a new destination is entered. It can cope with changes of destinations. Even if the student changes their mind about the destination-journey, such as when a teacher changes the question, the satnav will quickly recommend alternative routes.

That satnav is the *Language of Analysis*.

Using the *SAFE Method* also means that there is no such thing as '*I don't know*', because there is no such thing as '*I cannot think*'. Students will grow in confidence when they know that they can always rely on their ability to think analytically.

You are in control.