

Good advice for teachers regarding students with exam anxiety

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What is exam anxiety and where does it come from?

In a performance culture, value is often attributed to us as people through our achievements. This is particularly prominent among young people, where it is very much about being 'right' in virtually all parameters. In recent years, the performance culture has also (and perhaps to a great extent) spread to the education system, and involves areas such as increased individualisation, competition, tests and ratings, as well as demands for progress and success – and the responsibility for success (or fiasco) is primarily placed on each individual (Hvass, 2015). Exam anxiety is part of this (performance) culture. However, this is not to say that exam and performance anxiety is a new phenomenon. On the contrary. But the number of young people who experience exam anxiety and stress during their studies is soaring. There can also be other reasons for students being anxious about exams. Perhaps they have had an unpleasant experience in a previous exam or during their school years (such as bullying, criticism, humiliation, etc.), where simply the thought of performing and/or being exposed to the rating of others can bring on (exam) anxiety, nervousness or worry.

Anxiety is a perfectly natural – and for most people a familiar – response to danger. Anxiety helps us to react (e.g. flight or fight) to a perilous situation. Exam anxiety or nervousness is also a normal reaction that most students become acquainted with sooner or later, and which can manifest itself in different (and more or less appropriate) ways. Some students manage to get their nervousness to 'play along' in such a way that it helps them to perform optimally in an exam situation. Other students experience exam anxiety to such a degree that they are completely unable to perform at all.

Achievements, expectations and identity

For many students with exam anxiety, achievements are all about 'I am what I do', whereby identity is equated with behaviour. For some students, this means that if they make a mistake in their studies or an exam, they feel that they have failed as people. For those who think this way, there is understandably much at stake in an exam situation and, in this context, it is natural for most people to react with (exam) anxiety. It is important to create an awareness that there is *no* analogy between what one is and what one does. To *do* something foolish does not mean that one *is* foolish. Unfortunately, many students with exam anxiety get these things mixed up for different reasons. The aim of the exam is to assess whether the examinee meets the academic requirements, and it is *not* an assessment of the examinee as a person.

Exam anxiety can also have much to do with the student's identity. It could be that in the study environment, the student has an identity as the brightest in the class and/or is the one who is always in control of things and gets top marks. Another student can have the perception of him or herself as someone who does things at the last minute, makes minimal efforts, and nevertheless gets through with good marks. Identities such as these can be strongly challenged at university and put to the test in exam situations in particular. There are many bright students attending university, and top marks can be difficult to achieve. It is also rarely possible to pass an exam with little or no preparation.

It can be the students' expectations to themselves and their performance that have an influence on the development of exam anxiety. Some students expect of themselves that they can deliver top performances – every time. There is a difference between expecting that one's performance should be perfect or whether it is acceptable to perform as well as one can. To expect perfection means making high demands on oneself, and it is easy to feel inadequate. This could be academically talented students with such high expectations to their own prowess, possibly in combination with a lack of confidence in their own proficiency, that they overperform and thereby trip themselves up.

Just as exam anxiety can be about too much preparation and too high expectations to oneself, it can also be about insufficient preparation and low expectations to one's own prowess, as well as a lack of practice and familiarity with the subject. For students with challenges in relation to academic and/or study skills, the cause of exam anxiety can generally be underperformance, inefficient study technique, lack of motivation, poor academic self-confidence, and lack of confidence in one's own proficiency.

One thing is what one expects of oneself, but something else is what others expect or what one *thinks* they expect, which can be very different. These supposed expectations are often unspoken and, if the student talks about them – with their sweetheart, parents or fellow students – it often appears that the expectations are possibly not quite as high as the student thought, and that there are other values – such as the individual's well-being – that turn out to be more important for the closest relations than outstanding achievements.

Fear of the reactions, opinions or criticism of others, such as fellow students, and the (experienced) status by the individual in the social and academic community can also be significant components in connection with exam anxiety. In this context, there can be much at stake for the individual. Many students think that all the others are brighter than they are, and that most of them get top marks – and even though this is far from the truth, it is often these stories that are told within and outside the study environment. Stories about failure and poor performance are rarely talked about.

There can thus be many reasons for the way exam anxiety occurs, hangs on, or gets worse, and the good question is how students can learn to deal with exam anxiety, and how teachers and examiners can relate to it.

How is exam anxiety expressed and what can be done about it?

Exam anxiety can be experienced differently and with varying intensity before, during and after an exam, and can be expressed via:

- Cognitive symptoms: worry, poor concentration, negative thoughts about one's own prowess, etc.
- Emotional symptoms: anxiety, hopelessness, frustration, self-pity, anger, etc.
- Physical symptoms: sleep disorders, stomach problems, headache, lack of energy, etc.
- Behavioural symptoms: procrastination, avoidance, overpreparation, etc.

One way that students can work with exam anxiety is by focusing on what happens (physically, in their minds, emotionally and behaviourally) when they experience anxiety or nervousness in relation to an exam. With increased awareness of this, it is possible to do something about it, and it is likely that the anxiety symptoms can thereby be reduced. One can, for example, ask oneself the extent to which the thought 'I'll definitely fail' is realistic, and whether it is possible to find another (and possibly more rational) thought that can help interrupt the anxiety response. It is also possible to ask oneself whether this thought is beneficial. A thought such as 'I work seriously and do my best', for example, will probably trigger another and possibly more reassuring experience than the thought of failing. In terms of behaviour, it is possible that one has to work to become better at breaking the pattern and doing something else (e.g. going for a walk) when one feels the pressure of anxiety or nervousness being exerted.

It is possible for students – gradually during the teaching period – to prevent exam anxiety by training themselves in skills and competences that are valuable and identifiable in the exam situation. One can, for example, decide to practise presenting one's subject and become familiar with it both orally and in writing. As a teacher, you can contribute to this in ways such as encouraging or demanding study groups, teamwork or group assignments. As a student, one can also decide to give a particular number of presentations

and/or go up to the board during the teaching period, etc. Many students suffering from exam anxiety often avoid such activities.

As far as the exam period is concerned – which is a stressful time for most students – good advice can be about the importance of continuing to do something that promotes individual satisfaction and well-being. Nobody can study round the clock and, even if one could, the quality of the reading would be poor in relation to the time spent. There is a tendency among students to focus exclusively on the exam during the exam period, and to give low priority to what normally contributes positively to their well-being (e.g. sport, friends, family, etc.). It is important to make a good and realistic plan for exam reading, which also allows for leisure time (even though it is limited), and to ensure a stable circadian rhythm, as well as getting decent food, exercise, daylight and fresh air.

Exam anxiety is something that can be worked with, and there are many tools and methods whereby exam anxiety can be prevented and reduced. More familiarity with anxiety and its components can particularly make a difference, as well as learning about how to work with things.

The following good advice for teachers in both teaching and exam contexts is partly inspired by the book *Eksamensangst. Et problem vi skal løse i fællesskab* (Exam anxiety. A problem we must solve together), Hvass, 2015.

How can you as a teacher help students with exam anxiety?

During the course of the teaching period, you can:

Provide information about requirements and expectations in such a way that you:

- allocate time to clarify mutual expectations about the exam. For many students, exam anxiety is reduced when they are clear about what is expected of them in the exam.
- are clear about the requirements the students must meet. What is important for the students to be able to do in the exam?
- provide information about the exam process – what happens from the moment the examinee is called in until the marks are given?
- refer to relevant academic regulations, rules, and executive orders.
- tell the students about the learning goals and how these relate to the teaching and the criteria that are assessed in the exam, and ensure that there is clear coherence (also for the students) between the teaching programme and the exam.
- ask about the students' expectations and thoughts about the teaching and the exam.
- regularly tell the students how to work with the material, how much work they should do and for what purpose.
- guide the students about appropriate assignment work and possibly give good advice about study technique.

Talk to the students about any concerns in connection with the exam

The way you as a teacher talk to your students about the exam and their exam performance is important, and it can be appropriate to say something about nervousness and anxiety being a normal and innate reaction that all people are familiar with and experience at some time or another in connection with a performance or exam. It can be crucial to tell them that it is in the interest of both the examiner and the co-examiner that the students do well, and they will therefore do all they can to help and support the individual student in an exam. It can also be

relevant to point out that it is the academic performance and *not* the student being assessed in the exam. Even though this seems obvious, it is unfortunately not always the way the students perceive it.

Right from the start of the teaching period, you can choose to enter into dialogue with the students about how the upcoming exam affects them and how you can jointly deal with worry, nervousness and anxiety in this connection. Another possibility is also to ask the students who are particularly prone to exam anxiety to tell you about it during the course of the teaching period or prior to the exam. In this way, you are prepared and the individual student does not need to wonder whether or not to draw attention to this in the exam situation itself and how to do so, but can instead concentrate on the academic content and the exam performance.

Focus on the learning environment in such a way that you:

- create a learning environment with a focus on dialogue, where it is acceptable for students to make a mistake, practise, and ask about anything they do not understand.
- create an opportunity for ongoing feedback throughout the course programme by means of resources such as assignments, tests and clickers (<http://stll.au.dk/en/resources/active-learning-and-clickers/>), etc.
- encourage or demand study groups, teamwork or group assignments because collaborating with others on a subject and becoming familiar with the subject both orally and in writing has an influence on one's sense of security and proficiency in relation to the subject.

In the exam situation, you can:

Meta-communicate in such a way that you:

- begin by setting the scene for the exam by briefly explaining the exam process – including your role and that of the co-examiner.
- provide information about the time available and make sure to keep to time.
- ask if there is anything the examinee needs or would like to enquire about before the exam starts.
- give the examinee time and leave room for a break (to pause for thought). (Hvass, 2015)

Be aware of your presence as an examiner in the exam room in such a way that you:

- create a calm and reassuring atmosphere in the exam room.
- think about the layout of the exam room so that you and the co-examiner do not sit on the same side of the table, for example, which can have a negative effect on someone who is already nervous.
- help the examinee to get started if he or she does not manage to make a start him or herself.
- speak calmly and allow time – your composure as an examiner is likely to influence the examinee in a positive direction.
- wait (as far as possible) before asking questions until the examinee has said what he or she can, has prepared, or just 'warmed up to the subject'. Some students get very nervous if they are interrupted. There is a very fine balance between the academic exam and taking the student's nervousness/anxiety into consideration.
- rephrase the questions if necessary.
- make sure (as far as possible) to be attentive and keep calm in spite of the examinee's possible nervousness, anxiety or tears.

- be aware of maintaining open and calm body language that is friendly and accommodating.

In severe cases of exam anxiety/anxiety attacks:

- give the examinee an opportunity to collect his or her thoughts if he or she reacts strongly to the exam situation. You can encourage the examinee to take deep breaths, for example, go to the window for some fresh air, have a drink of water, or sit down and relax for a moment.
- once the exam is completed or interrupted, ask if there is someone the student can spend time with or call immediately afterwards. Contact the Student Counselling Office or others who can take over if you are insecure about sending the student away.
- encourage the student to contact a doctor if he or she is not already being treated for anxiety.

As a teacher and examiner, you have an opportunity to set the scene to make the exam a good experience, and much can be done to prevent the student from experiencing exam anxiety, which can be crucially important for the individual examinee's completion of the degree programme.

Relevant literature for teachers

- Hvass, H. (ed.) 2015. *Eksamensangst. Et problem vi skal løse i fællesskab* (Exam anxiety. A problem we must solve together). Societal literature.
A number of chapters in the book have been used as inspiration in this text.
- <http://censorerne.dk/god-censorskik/> (in Danish only)

Relevant for students

- The Student Counselling Service has an app called Exam Stress, which is available in both Danish and English. You can download it free in the App Store and at Google Play. Read more at www.srg.dk/en-GB
- The Student Counselling Service has a leaflet called *Exam. Take control of exam anxiety – learn how to beat exams and expectations in a new way* (available in Danish only). Read more at www.srg.dk/en-GB
- The Student Counselling Service offers individual interviews, group sessions, and events for students taking higher education programmes. Contact the Aarhus department at arh@srg.dk or call +45 7026

Guidance and study information at Science and Technology

Students acting as student counsellors each cover several subjects and can help if the student:

- has problems completing the degree programme or would like to organise the course of studies another way.
- would like to change to another degree programme, deregister, or apply for leave from studies.
- becomes ill in connection with the exam.
- has questions regarding the academic regulations, Study Progress Reform, etc.

Student and welfare counsellors (full-time counsellors) can help in connection with:

- study technique, structure, planning, and coping with everyday life.
- study doubts, delay, requests to resume studies.
- stress – prevention and management.
- exam anxiety.

- other problems of a personal nature that affect the studies.

<http://studerende.au.dk/en/studies/subject-portals/student-guidance/>