Study Tip # 10: Managing & Avoiding Anxiety

Some anxiety before an exam is natural, and often has positive effects due to the increased levels of adrenalin, which serves to increase focus and motivation.

Overanxiety, however, can lead to lower than possible examination marks, and at times, even failure.

To minimise the chances and the impact of overanxiety:

- Learn materials thoroughly so that you feel confident when you walk into the exams. If you know your work well, there'll be little/no reason why you should have to panic or experience a mind blank in the exam. Reassure yourself of this fact on a regular basis throughout the year.

- It's how we perceive a situation and how we react to it that's the basis of our stress. If you focus on the negative or fearful component of a situation, you can expect high stress levels. If you try to see the good or the positive in situations, your stress and anxiety levels will greatly decrease. For example, rather than thinking "I'm really bad at exams", turn exams into a challenge: "let's see if I can beat my previous exam mark!". Or rather than saying "She's so smart. I'll never be able to get the marks she gets" think the following instead: "She's so smart. I'm going to figure out how she does it so I can try it for myself!"

- Create and maintain a positive attitude towards the exam preparation process and the actual exams. Treat the process as a challenge and see how long you can study for, how much you can learn, whether you can get 70% of the questions correct, whether you can fight off anxiety for the next, say, 30 minutes.

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- Trying to accomplish multiple tasks at the same time increases stress. Concentrate on one task at a time, avoid or eliminate any distractions, and do not let outside influences occupy your thoughts. Not only does this approach reduce stress, it also helps you make the most efficient use of your time.

- Students often get anxious when they solely concentrate on 1 subject at a time. Although students who adopt this approach are still learning the same volume of materials as others, many feel that they're not making sufficient progress as they are not attending to other subjects. We therefore recommend that students work on 2 to 3 subjects at a time.

- If you experience anxiety before or during exam prep sessions, set up small rewards for each milestone you reach during each study session. For example, after revising each major section in each chapter, every time you get a question correct or every time you cross off an item from your task list.

- Keep your working area clean and free of clutter. The sight of clutter induces anxiety in most people.

- If you start feeling anxious or overwhelmed, force yourself to stop what you're doing. Clear you mind or let it wander to unrelated matters and let your body relax. Once you feel the tension or anxiety dissipate, return to the task at hand.

- Many worriers lack perspective – other students, including higher achievers, will be feeling stressed and anxious as well. Speak openly with your current and past HSC peers – especially those that received high ATARs. Once you realise that your situation is not unique and that you can still achieve a high ATAR feeling the way you do, your anxiety and stress levels will fall.

- Worriers also tend to over-emphasize the importance of the exams. It's important to do your utmost best in the HSC exams, and realistically, that's where the importance ends. There are many different pathways to getting into your preferred tertiary course, so a lower exam mark will not be a game changer in the long run.

- Go for a brisk walk or do some high intensity exercise for 5 to 20 minutes. Exercise releases endorphins that improve your mood and greatly decrease stress. Other activities that result in the production of endorphins include laughter (even forced laughter) and stretching.

- Visualise confidentially walking into the examination room, sitting down and confidentially answering every question within the desired time. Do this often enough and with sufficient emotional intensity and when the day actually arrives, that's exactly what will happen.

- Form positive associations between the examination experience and successfully completing exams with little or no anxiety. Do this by studying in the room where you'll be sitting your examinations.

- Memory centres in the brain are connected to the primary olfactory cortex where we process smells. Scent-associated recall (The Proust Effect) is therefore very real, offering students an effective way to assist in information recall during their exams. Simply smell a scent that you normally wouldn't wear every time your study sessions are highly productive, you're understanding what you're learning, you're getting questions correct and you feel confident and you'll subconsciously form an association between the scent and high confidence, success and productivity. Wear the same scent when you sit your exams.

- Keep well hydrated whilst learning and sitting exams. Don't guzzle large volumes of water in one go and then drink nothing for long periods of time – instead, take in a small volume every couple of minutes.

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- Studies conducted by the University of Chicago have found that when students spent 10 minutes writing about their test anxiety and fears just before a test, their scores went up by 5%. Those who didn't perform writing exercises "choked under pressure" and their test scores dropped by 12 percent, according to the study. By writing down your worries, you free your working memory and prevent distractions during the test, so give it a try and wave those bad grades goodbye!

- Walking into your exam believing you'll underperform will probably result in that happening. A negative attitude won't get you the positive results you want. It's no use thinking of the revision you didn't do or the things you'd like to change. What's important is the future: the next few hours until the end of your exam. Just do the best you can with what you have.

- The exam should be treated as a normal school day. Follow your normal routine and relax.

- When you're stressed, grab a book and read. Reading reduces stress my about 68% – more than listening to music or taking a walk!

- Crying releases stress-related chemicals from your system, which is why we usually feel so good after a good cry!

- One of the best stress relievers is to play with a puppy or kitten! So pop in for a visit at the local shelter or pet store!

- Massages and stress balls are great stress relievers!

- The smell of fresh oranges can relieve stress by over 70%.

- Passionflower has been shown to decrease anxiety and insomnia.

- Lemon balm is a calming herb that is **very effective** at reducing stress and anxiety.

- Mint not only decreases stress and anxiety, it also increases concentration, alertness and the retention of information.

- If possible, sit down and close your eyes. Inhale through the nose for 4 counts then hold your breath for 7 counts. Exhale through the mouth for 8 counts and repeat until you feel calm. Make sure that you're not chest breathing, but expanding and contracting your abdomen. Known as the 4-7-8 technique, you can use this breathing regime to reduce stress and anxiety, and to help you fall asleep.

- Spend 15 to 30 minutes each morning on silent meditation, yoga or breathing exercises.

- Practice reflexology by rolling your foot over a golf ball or foot roller. In addition, apply firm pressure for 30 seconds to the fleshy part between your index finger and your thumb and repeat as required. Known as the hoku spot in Chinese medicine, massaging or pressing on this point can reduce stress and tension in the upper body. Other stress relieving points are shown below.

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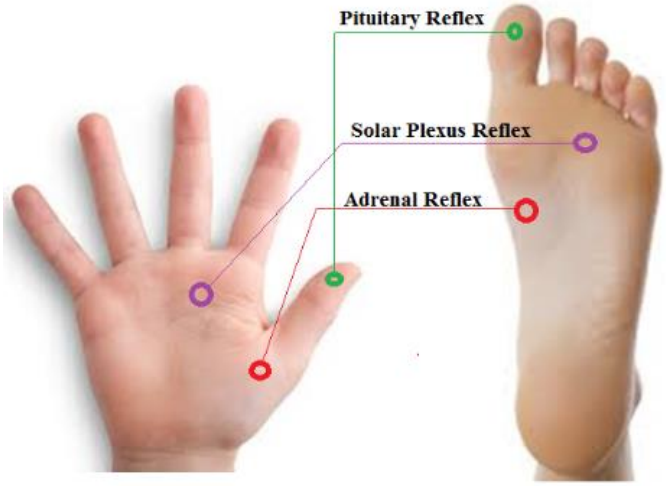
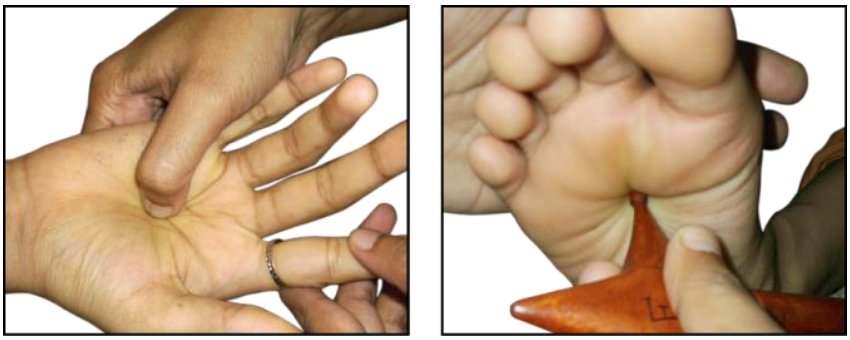
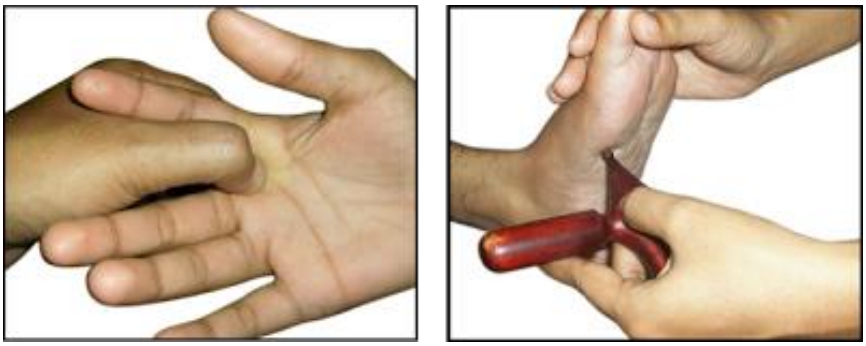




Solar Plexus



Adrenal Reflex

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- Get sufficient sleep before each exam (9 hours).
- Eliminate stimulant drinks from your diet. For example: Coffee, tea (including green tea) and energy drinks. Caffeine directly stimulates the adrenal glands to produce cortisol, which increases stress levels, and also interferes with sleep.
- Take a quality vitamin supplement each morning, and a mineral supplement each evening. Important minerals to be aware of:

  Magnesium: Essential for energy, reduces muscle cramps and strengthens the adrenal system; reducing the impact of stress. Taken a night, it can help you to relax and have a sound sleep.

  Calcium: Acts as a shock absorber for the body when stress hits. Absorbed best after 8pm – but do not take at the same time as magnesium.

  Micro minerals such as copper, manganese, selenium, zinc, sulfur and chromium have a calming effect on the body.
- Take essential amino acid supplements.
- Use Rescue Remedy (Bach flowers).
- In severe cases, see your family doctor.

Regards,
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