

OPINION

Mastering exams: UP academic advising expert on managing exam stress and how students can take control of their success

By Dr Hestie Byles, Manager: Academic Advising at the University of Pretoria. Dr Byles is an educational psychologist with over 15 years of experience in academic development and advising, particularly in tertiary environments. She is available for interviews on exam preparation and success strategies.

Exams can be daunting, stress-inducing, and downright nerve-wracking. The mere thought of those looming exam papers can send shivers down the spines of even the most confident students. However, amidst the anxiety, it's crucial for students under pressure to remember that success in exams is not solely determined by innate abilities ("I have good study techniques") or external factors ("This is a difficult module" or "This lecturer's standards are too high"). It's about approach, mindset, and ability to focus on what you can control.

In today's fast-paced academic world, the pressure to excel can be paralyzing, and many students become fixated on the uncontrollable elements of exams, such as the difficulty of the questions or the expectations of teachers and parents. This fixation on external factors can lead to feelings of helplessness and despair. However, there is a better way to approach exams—one that empowers students to take control of their own success.

The key to coping with exams is to shift the focus away from what you cannot control and redirect it towards what you can. Here are some strategies to help students do just that:

Preparation:

It all begins with how you prepare for your exams. You can control your study habits, the resources you use, and the time you allocate for studying. Create a study schedule that suits your learning style and stick to it. Organise your study materials and your study space, seek help from lecturers, advisors, tutors, or peers if needed, and actively engage in the learning process. Remember, preparation is the foundation of success.

Mindset:

Your mindset plays a significant role in how you cope with exams. Cultivate a growth mindset, which believes in the power of effort and resilience. Understand that setbacks and failures are opportunities for growth and improvement. Anyone can get better at anything if they are willing to put in the work. By focusing on your ability to learn and adapt, you can approach exams with a sense of confidence and determination.

Stress Management:

Stress is a natural response to exams. It's part of what makes us human, but how you manage it is within your control. Practice stress-reduction techniques such as deep breathing, meditation or exercise. Create a conducive study environment that minimises distractions. Switch *OFF* your cell phone while studying; I have proven to myself (many times over) that multi-tasking, especially if a phone is involved, does not work! Taking breaks and getting enough sleep are also crucial for managing stress and maintaining focus, and both are within your control too.

Perspective:

Shift your perspective from a narrow focus on grades to a broader view of education as a journey of personal growth and knowledge-acquisition to empower yourself to be the best version of whatever career-person it is that you see yourself as. While grades are important, they do not define your worth or your potential. If they did, many of our great heroes of the past would have been deemed pretty worthless (case in point, Einstein and more). By valuing the learning process itself, you can reduce the anxiety associated with exams.

Adaptability:

Exams can be unpredictable, but your ability to adapt to changing circumstances is within your control. I remember coming to university as a first-year student, thinking I had it all figured out, only to realise that we cover a term's worth of schoolwork in one week! The only way I survived was by being open to different methods of learning and problem-solving. I often found that you have to use different study methods for different subjects. If you encounter a challenging question or unexpected format, stay calm, breathe, and then apply the knowledge and skills you have developed throughout your studies and by incorporating different study methods.

In the grand scheme of the educational journey, exams are just one part of the process. Focusing on what can be controlled – preparation, mindset, stress management, perspective and adaptability – will not only help students cope with exams, but also empower you to thrive in your academic career and reach your finish line.

Above all, students must remember: you have the power to shape your exam experience, and ultimately your success. By taking charge of what you can control, you can approach exams with confidence, resilience and the certainty that you are capable of achieving your goals and mastering your exams and your academic life.

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Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

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