

Fear, Anxiety and the Self Fulfilling Prophecy: Are you setting yourself up to fail your exams?

By Jo Ringrose

Millions of young people will be facing exam pressures over the next few weeks with this years round of GCSE's and A' levels starting imminently. Applying strategies based on psychological research to the subject of exam sitting, may make the difference between passing and failing.

The theory of the self-fulfilling prophecy, the notion that what we believe influences our likelihood of succeeding is such an example. The theory suggests that thinking and believing that you are going to fail, increases the likelihood that you will, the thinking becomes self-fulfilling. For example, the theory suggests, all other things being equal, that students who tackle exam questions in which they feel most competent first, would be more likely to do better than those who don't. This is because these students are setting up a more positive mindset where thought processes are more likely to include statements such as, "this is okay", "I have one okay exam question under my belt". Those who tackle difficult questions first, may have negative thoughts such as "I'm going to fail" or "this is too difficult", which carry the potential to adversely influence their performance in the rest of the exam.

Further unhelpful distractions may occur when:

1. You find yourself with a negative running commentary before or during the exam. Remind yourself of the harm this type of self talk can do. If necessary tell yourself you can think about this later but it is not helpful now.
2. Remind yourself of the achievements you have made in other areas of the paper, "I may be finding this question hard but I have completed another question okay".
3. If you feel yourself flagging with a "mashed" mind or "limp arm", tell yourself how long you have to go, encourage yourself to carry on for the remainder and then remind yourself that you can then sit back and do nothing or have fun later.
4. Everyone else is writing and my mind's blank? They may be writing loads but you don't know what they are writing. A letter to the examiner because they have given up? A load of drivel because they feel they must write something? The answer to a question that they learnt rather than the one posed? If necessary remind yourself of these and then shut them out. Cup your hands around your eyes and refocus your attention on your paper.

5. If noise distracts you easily, consider wearing earplugs, most people would still hear the adjudicator end the exam but if you are worried, mention this to an adjudicator and they will come and tell you to stop.

Self fulfilling prophecy may also be important in relation to anxiety states. If you are prone to anxiety then applying the self-fulfilling prophecy theory here, thinking "I'm too stressed out to think straight" may lead to you believing this and as a consequence you may be more likely to "not think" or "go blank".

If you are prone to heightened anxiety,

1. Practice relaxation beforehand. There are numerous self help books, tapes and CD's which contain relaxation techniques you can practice and bring to mind if necessary when you are sat in the exam room.
2. For some people, it may help to visit the exam room before the first exam. If it is not set up for the exam, imagine it laid out with the desks in rows. If you can see the desk plan and where you will sit beforehand check this out. Sit in your precise spot. All these strategies are aimed to desensitise your response on the day. If you feel anxious during this rehearsal don't panic, the first time tends to be the worst. Be pleased that you have got this worst stage out the way before the day and remember you may be better able to concentrate on the day as a result.
3. Do everything you can to take the pressure off yourself on the day. Find the least stressful way to get to the exam. If sitting on a bus with your friends all talking about their worries will heighten yours, walk instead, or persuade someone to drive you to the first exam or the exams which are most troubling you.
4. Give yourself something nice as a reward to look forward to once the exam is over. Give yourself wind down time, even if you have an exam in the afternoon, or the next day. It is important to let your mind switch off, you will be better able to concentrate after a break. Trust your own judgements about how best to do this. Some prefer chatting with friends but some hate the after exam chat which often includes who did what question and how they answered it, which can heighten your anxiety if you answered it differently. If you prefer to spend some time alone, do it, this is okay too.

On a final note, if the whole process of exams feels overwhelming try and keep these feelings in perspective. What is the worst that can happen? I will fail an/all my exam(s). Yes this may feel awful but this doesn't mean that you will never pass anything, that you are thick, that you will never get a good job, or that you are unlovable or unworthy (parents, your son

or daughter may need reminding of this). Yes things may be harder for a time but they will get better again and you will find a way, your way, which, with determination, will get you to where you want to be. Good luck and always find someone to talk to if you feel things are getting too much.

Jo Ringrose is a psychotherapist at Karuna Counselling & Psychotherapy in Harrogate, North Yorkshire. For further articles see www.karunatherapy.co.uk