

Hello!

Welcome to the fifth issue of the ZSB newsletter.
Our focus this time around is **how to deal with exam anxiety.**



'What we have learned to understand, we no longer fear.'
(Marie Curie)

Since the dates for exams have been set, I've been feeling uneasy at times. I keep thinking of previous exams. When I'm in good spirits, I think of the ones that went well. But my memories of exam situations where I couldn't remember all the knowledge and skills I had, or even blanked out, are much stronger.

Does that sound familiar? And do you wonder how best to apply your knowledge in exam situations in future and reward yourself for what you've learned? To be successful at this, it's helpful to look more closely at the phenomenon of exam anxiety and possibilities for self-regulation to counter it.

Does being nervous improve performance?

You've likely often heard it said that a certain level of nervousness in exam situations is normal, appropriate or even beneficial and that a high level of excitement can even boost your cognitive abilities. Yes, but it's a fine line. And anyone who suffers from exam anxiety is probably more likely to have experienced this excitement as a disruptive experience, together with the feeling afterwards of actually having known way more.

Blanking out, fearing the fear, and exam preparation

Exam anxiety manifests in different ways: Some students have experienced 'blinking out' in an exam situation and being unable to 'access' their knowledge. Others fear the possibility of feeling anxious, of failing their exam, and of the possible consequences. And it is not uncommon that students are afraid of an exam because they haven't managed to acquire enough knowledge in preparation.

How does our brain actually work?

Our autonomic nervous system plays a decisive role in exam anxiety. Our autonomic nervous system is responsible for, among other things, recognizing when an acute threat exists. It scans our environment to determine whether we are safe or in danger, putting our systems directly into the appropriate mode.

If we feel safe, we don't have to keep our energy reserves at the ready for possible threats. This means we can use all our energy for thinking and communicating.

Things are much different **if we feel threatened**. In this case our autonomic nervous system activates defensive or protective reactions, such as freezing or increased activity, which can be accompanied by clearly noticeable physical reactions (e.g. a racing heart, beads of sweat on our forehead, a growling stomach, etc.).

These reactions to the perception of 'danger' or 'security' are driven by structures in the brain that are incapable of conscious thinking. The brain cannot determine whether or not the 'threatening' situation is real. It perceives both as reality and reacts accordingly. All of these reactions are evidence of a healthy and properly functioning body, but they are not always conducive to performing successfully in an exam situation.

This is why it's important to influence exactly this area when dealing with exam anxiety. We can only access and communicate our knowledge optimally when we don't feel threatened! So what can we do to make ourselves feel secure? And how can we regulate our bodies when we have distressing physical symptoms?

Self-regulation methods

The methods for dealing with exam anxiety work either with our thoughts or our physical symptoms.

Our thoughts

In terms of our thinking, lots of different factors can cause exam anxiety, such as unrealistic expectations of achievement; negative expectations of achievement; other people's high expectations; catastrophic thinking, i.e. what will happen if...; and much more. Talking with someone often helps us become aware of these negative thoughts.

The goal is to reduce the power these self-descriptions have over us, since they significantly weaken our performance and can trigger exam anxiety. **The mind bully** is a super exercise to help with this.

You can also make a shift in the learning process itself. We're often in the habit of looking at everything we still need to learn and seeing the 'big pile' in front of us. We can instead practice focusing on what we've already learned, thus helping our brain to feel more secure and much more able to absorb new information. **My favourite exam question** is one exercise for doing this.

Physical reactions

When it comes to physical reactions, our **breath** is a wonderful tool. Although our breathing is controlled by the autonomic nervous system, we can intentionally influence it. This makes the breath an important starting point for dealing with physical stress reactions. Through our breathing we can regulate other fear-related reactions such as a racing heart and sweating, because these functions are directly connected. When we breathe in, our heart receives a stimulus that increases its activity; when we breathe out, it receives a stimulus to reduce activity. Through a simple breathing exercise, we can influence our heart rate and experience a significant calming effect. Try out the **Calming breath** exercise.

Exam preparation

Preparing well for exams is an important factor in dealing with exam anxiety. If this type of anxiety is an issue for you, having a good study strategy is especially important. You can find a number of different tips to try out in our [newsletter on preparing for exams](#).

Planning how you're going to study, starting early in the semester, and integrating regular progress checks will help you feel more secure. But it is also important to know that your brain can't work effectively under the influence of fear. If you can sense symptoms of exam anxiety even when you are studying and you're unable to control them, you should get **professional support**:

- Individual psychological and educational counselling

The Toolbox

Featuring in this issue:

Calming breath

My favourite exam question

The mind bully

[FIND OUT MORE](#)

Have you seen...?

Book tip: Doris Wolf, Rolf Merkle: "So überwinden Sie Prüfungsängste. Psychologische Strategien zur optimalen Vorbereitung und Bewältigung von Prüfungen", PAL 2017

What's next?

Be sure to read our June issue on **concentration and how to improve it**.

Missed one of our issues?

No problem. You can find the issues on [planning your semester](#), [staying motivated](#), [preparing for exams](#) and [relaxation](#) here.

On Course with the ZSB

The Student Counselling Office team (ZSB) is there to support you during your studies, no matter what's happening in your life. In our **newsletter, 'On course with the ZSB'**, we want to give you ideas and information that will help you succeed during your studies.

We wish you inspiration and success!



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