

Tackling exams like an athlete

December 7 2017



Credit: University of Manitoba

You have a big exam coming up. You've done everything you can possibly to do to prepare. You attended all your classes, took good notes, and studied often. You stayed up late the night before the exam, cramming every last nugget of knowledge into your brain. There's no way you're not going to be ready for this.

Then, for some reason, you're not ready for it. You start drawing blanks. You begin to lose focus. And you panic. You end up having a bad [exam](#) experience and not earning the grade you were striving for.

For the most part, students need to prepare mentally for an exam ... just like an athlete needs to be in the zone before and during a game. And, just like in sports, ignoring that mental aspect can translate into disastrous results.

Mental skills consultant Dr Leisha Strachan [B.P.E/97] has been mentally preparing [elite athletes](#) for the big game throughout her professional career. She's provided UMToday with a handful of proven tips she routinely shares with her athletes, all of which can be easily applied to many walks of life—including preparing for and writing exams.

They're both categorized as performances. On an exam, you need to apply your knowledge to answer questions, meaning you need to perform to do well at them," says Strachan, an associate professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management.

"An exam is long performance, sometimes three hours in length."

Relaxation and mindful breathing

We know that focused and centred breathing helps physiology in terms of reducing heart rate and other types of physiological things that come with being anxious. Mindful breathing might be something you want to do in the middle of an exam if you're having a hard time thinking.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Analyzing your body for tense muscles and consciously relaxing those muscles in order to help your body release some of the tension that builds up when you're worried about something.

Positive imagery

Seeing yourself as being successful in writing your exam. I like to tell athletes to utilize those moments before bedtime to see themselves doing well. It will also help with getting a productive night's sleep.

Sleep

Of course, sleep is important.

Be up two hours before your exam

I had a music teacher who was really into research and she passed on to me that it's important to be awake two hours before an exam. It apparently takes your brain two hours to make the connections from the previous days learning. For those early morning exams, that two-hour buffer period also gives you time to eat a good breakfast.

Know yourself and find your recipe

If pre-exam crowds make you anxious, avoid them. Find a quiet spot away from the bustle to collect your thoughts, control your breathing, and see yourself being successful. And don't get too caught up in immediate post-exam chit chat with other students. The exam is done and there's nothing you can change!

I tell athletes all the time that learning about yourself and how you compete is like a recipe. You have to figure out what your recipe is

because yours is different from everyone else's. You also have to be patient enough to refine whatever your recipe is. Journaling is a great way to refine your recipe for success.

Another great way to learn about yourself is trying different techniques when writing pop-quizzes or smaller tests. Whether that's going through the entire test and answering the questions you know first; making notes beside each question as you go before answering; or answering the questions worth the most points first while your mind is fresh, might be ideas you could try. If those types of strategies are working, they'll probably work for you on an exam.

Mindshift App

[Mindshift](#) is a fantastic applied resource students can use in terms of positive self-talk as they're going through exams and breathing scripts.

Provided by University of Manitoba

Citation: Tackling exams like an athlete (2017, December 7) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-12-tackling-exams-athlete.html>

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