

Facing Finals: some (psychological) tips from the Oxford University counselling service

Presumably most of you listening to this podcast are finalists. But you're also individuals with different stories, personalities, academic ambition levels and circumstances. It's impossible to give advice that will be helpful to everyone, but in this podcast I'd like to share a dozen of the things that counsellors at the Oxford University counselling service find ourselves saying to the finalists who come to see us. You will probably find at least one thing on this list that speaks to you. I invite you to listen for that one thing and commit yourself to making use of it.

This podcast does *not* offer practical guidance about revision and exam strategy--topics addressed in other podcasts in this series. The focus here is on the psychological.

1. Resolve to be kind to yourself. Try not to motivate yourself with fear tactics or doom predictions. Be gentle and encouraging, and remind yourself often that you're doing your best and that is enough. Your finals are important, but only because *you* are important. Cherish and look after yourself through the process.

2. A bit of anxiety is normal, but if you're very anxious, be open to the possibility that this is a message from you to you that something needs to change. Consider what that something might be. Perhaps you've been in a state of denial about the approach of finals. Perhaps you've been working, but on the wrong things. Or perhaps there are specific features of your approach that don't feel right or productive. Whatever the problem is, once you acknowledge it, your anxiety level will begin to come down.

This is a specific instance of a general principle of **turning towards whatever is making you anxious, not away from it.** Every time you hide or retreat from what scares you, you reinforce the belief that you can't manage it. You also allow it to slip further out of control. Dig deep and find the courage to look it in the face. If you are 100% on the case, the anxiety is likely to subside. If what you discover is too much to manage on your own, find someone who can help you work out your next move: a tutor, a friend, a member of the college welfare team, a counsellor.

3. Perhaps your problem isn't too much anxiety, but too little. Maybe you are entirely lacking in motivation. If so, please **don't wait for the fairy godmother of motivation to appear and touch you with her magic wand.** This isn't likely to happen, at least not any time soon. If you lack motivation, this is probably because you've unplugged some internal circuitry to protect yourself from anxiety and in the process ended up with no feeling at all. The way to restore your motivation is to proactively re-engage with your work. Work whether you feel motivated to work or not. Once

you're on the case, doing what is required of you, your underlying anxiety level will come down and your motivation will return.

4. Jettison any unrealistic expectations of what you 'ought' to be able to do. Accept that you have limitations and be really smart and ruthlessly tactical about how you use your limited time, your limited brain.

5. Zero-base your revision plan. 'Zero-basing' means starting with the assumption that you will do no revision at all for a particular paper, then adding into your revision plan only the tasks for which you actually have sufficient time, being sure to choose the tasks which will contribute most to your preparedness for finals. This is in contrast to the all-too-common approach of making a wildly unrealistic revision plan, and ending up doing only a small part of it. Zero-basing takes real courage, because it entails honestly with yourself about the real limitations of time. You may need to leave substantial swathes of a course syllabus on the cutting room floor. But zero-basing also has compelling advantages. It gives you much more control. It puts you in a position to make strong tactical choices about what is most important. And—importantly--it gives you a reasonable chance of success.

A suitcase metaphor may be helpful here: If I tell you that you are going to the Amazon rain forest for a month and can pack whatever you like, you will easily fill a massive suitcase and will probably take a lot of things you don't really need. But if you only have a carry-on bag you'll prioritise pretty ruthlessly. And if you only have a handbag, you may not take much more than your toothbrush, passport, mosquito spray and mobile phone. The point is, you shouldn't start packing without knowing how much space you have. If you start packing as though you had a massive suitcase and then run out of space, chances are you'll have wasted much of that space with items that weren't the most important. In the same way, you shouldn't decide what to revise without reflecting on how much time you have. You need to scale the ambition of your revision to fit the available time.

6. Start now. The longer you leave it, the steeper and more impossible-to-climb the revision mountain will feel, and the more reliant you will be on the appearance of some magical, omnipotent version of yourself riding in on a white horse and saving the day. This is scary, because you don't know when, or whether, that version of yourself will show up. Fortunately, there is a better way. Forget the white horse and be a normal person who goes to the library *today*.

7. Strive for flow. You know what flow is--that state of absorption in what you are doing that is so complete you lose all sense of time, and those voices that can sometimes be overactive questioning what you are doing, criticising you for not doing it better or suggesting that you do something else

are finally, miraculously silent. There are substantial books about achieving flow, but remember the fundamentals: a clearly defined task that is stretching but achievable, zero distractions (and that means no phone in sight), and total immersion for long enough to really achieve something. The Pomodoro time management method is often helpful in achieving flow. If you don't know about the Pomodoro method, Google it or ask a friend.

8. It you are a perfectionist, you don't need to get rid of your perfectionism completely. Just send it to rehab. In other words, replace one objective for which you strive wholeheartedly with a different one for which you strive equally wholeheartedly. Old perfectionist you might strive to read everything on the syllabus, or work 12 hours days. New perfectionist you could strive instead to prioritise ruthlessly, to maintain the best possible quality of engagement with your work (rather than quantity), to exercise regularly and get to bed at a certain time. Make a sticker or star chart or find other ways to reward yourself for doing these things.

9. Distinguish clearly between self-care and self-harm. For example, if you feel exhausted and lethargic, it is all too easy to tell yourself that ignoring commitments and retreating under the duvet is self-care, when in reality it is very likely to make you feel worse about yourself, and more out of control. With exams looming, self-care generally entails a clear routine which accommodates basic needs for food, sleep, exercise and companionship within a framework of positive self-discipline. Make sure your self-care is *enlightened* self-care, not self-defeating behaviour dressed up as self-care.

10. Put yourself first. There are times to make yourself available to listen to your friends' problems, or to help sort out a difficult family situation. This is not one of those times. Even if it doesn't come easily to you, consider putting yourself unequivocally first on the list for a few weeks. Do this whether or not your friends or family 'understand'. You don't need their understanding, or permission. This is a choice you can legitimately make. If anyone has the temerity to suggest that this means you don't care about them, challenge this meaning. Tell them you *do* care, but need them to understand this is a uniquely pressured time for you.

11. Think of yourself as a small firm with one worker and one manager. The worker does all of the work. The manager's role is to specify the task, and to manage and motivate the worker. Notice how your manager interacts with your worker, and ask yourself: is this the way to get the most out of my worker? If your worker is feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, and your manager responds by standing over the worker's shoulder shouting abuse like "You're useless! What is wrong with you!", or making doom predictions like "This is going to be a train wreck!", this is not very likely to

result in the worker becoming more productive. An enlightened manager would reflect on questions like:

"Is the worker over-tired? Would he benefit from a brief break?"

"Is the worker's confidence sagging? Would it help to bolster his confidence with some encouraging words?"

"Is the worker overwhelmed by a task that is huge and daunting? Would it help to scale back the task, so that it feels at least theoretically do-able?"

Just to be clear--this isn't about being a *nice* manager. This is about being an effective manager, and getting the most work out of the worker. Effective management generally entails insight and compassion, not abuse.

and finally...

12. Form a clear intention from within. Reflect on how *you* want to approach this process--what would feel good, satisfying and rewarding to you as a way of going about things. After all, these are your finals, not anyone else's. This is different from setting a goal or objective, which can quickly turn into a source of self-imposed pressure. An intention is something that comes from within. Setting one is empowering, and releases new energy. You can form an intention about how you want to do finals as a whole. For example, "I want to stay positive and energised" or "I am determined to show up at the library on time every day and do what I can". You can also form an intention about how you will use the next 20 minutes. For example, if you are sitting in the library, feeling dispirited because you had haven't been able to memorise all the vocab you wanted to, you can set an intention: "I just want to see how much I can do in the next 20 minutes, before I break for lunch". You will probably find that, once you've got a clear intention, you have a bit more energy to see it through.

Try writing your intention down and sticking it on the wall in front of your desk, or by your bed. Don't be perfectionist about it, but do your best to put it into practice so that you will have something to feel good about and proud of when finals are done. Remember: you cannot guarantee the outcome of your finals, but you can control the quality and integrity of your participation in the process, so focus on that.

I hope you've found something here that's of use, but if you are struggling and need more help, reach out to someone and ask for it. Whatever your situation, it is likely that there is a strategy that will see you safely across the finish line.

Good luck!

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