

Dealing with blackouts during exams

If, during an examination, you notice that you are starting to stress out and your mind is going blank, you need to tackle that first.

Your body is too out of sorts to be able to answer the questions correctly: your breathing becomes faster and higher, you start to sweat, your body temperature becomes unbalanced, and you experience negative, blocking thoughts. (*'Oh dear, here we go again...'*, *'I don't remember...'*, *'I can't do this...'*). Be aware that the way you feel has a history of its own, even if it's subconscious. A process has preceded it, and that process can also be reversed.

The quickest way to relax is as follows: sit properly, with your legs side by side, your back against the back of the chair, hands relaxed in your lap. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths in your lower belly. Notice that every time you inhale, your belly expands beyond the waistband. When you exhale, your belly will move inward again. Keep your shoulders soft and relaxed.

As you breathe deeply, repeat the following statement in your head: 'I'm going back to the moment when I felt good and relaxed.' Feel the tape that unleashed chaos in your body gradually being rewound, while you keep breathing steadily and low in your belly. Notice how your heart rate slows down, how your breath moves down to your lower belly, how the sweating stops. Notice that by rewinding that tape and repeating this sentence, your head gradually becomes empty. You can also try this: as you feel the stress leaving your body with every breath, picture a beautiful quiet beach, with a beautiful, warm sunshine. That image will get stronger and stronger. Imagine you can smell the freshness of the water and hear the sounds of the birds. If this image doesn't really appeal to you, choose one that does suit you and is a symbol of relaxation.

A second exercise: imagine that you can see the place in your head where the stressful thoughts blocking your mind are located. Notice how those thoughts sink down towards your heart with each gentle exhalation. Your shoulders lower with every exhalation. Once these stressful thoughts arrive at your heart, they all melt in a pleasant, big, warm light. See the light colour and feel the warmth. Feel them disappear! Do this several times, feel the thoughts move gently downwards through your body: from your head, to your face, your neck, your chest and to your heart. Do this until your head is empty and all stressful thoughts have melted in the big, warm light in your heart.

Once you have done the exercise, move your head and shoulders and stretch a bit – stretch your back and sigh deeply a few times. Continue where you left off in the exam.

And this is the final relaxation exercise (it seems a bit strange, but give it a go – it really works!):

- Make sure you are 'grounded': your feet should be flat on the floor, your back and your bum against the back of your chair, your shoulders soft and relaxed.
- Bring the fingertips of your left and right hand together; little finger to little finger, ring finger to ring finger, etc.
- Close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing. Breathe gently a few times. Find out where the 'bottom' of your exhale is.
- Keep the tips of your little fingers and ring fingers together, but interlock the other three fingers (like a half prayer position).
- As you do this, you will notice your breathing drop further down. You can breathe deeper and deeper into your lower belly, until you even feel the bottom of your pelvis move with each breath.
- Release your little fingers and interlock them. Instead, bring the tips of your middle fingers

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- together. The other fingers remain interlocked. You will notice your breathing move up a little bit.
- Now release the ring fingers as well. Bring the tips of your index fingers together. You will notice your breathing move up a little bit.

This way, by varying the way you position your fingers, you can raise and lower your breathing slightly (comparatively). You can keep doing this exercise for a few minutes. Concentrating on breathing in the lower part of your body will create a sense of peace and tranquillity, so that you can then focus more on the exam questions.