

EFT Special Report

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How To Overcome Exam Anxiety Using EFT

NOTE: Although this article is addressed to professionals working with exam-anxious people, if you suffer from exam anxiety yourself it applies equally well to you. Simply substitute the word "you" for the word "person" and follow the steps.

If you or someone you are helping has experienced exam anxiety you know the symptoms well. The exam-anxious person often feels despair when facing an examination. They may shake or tremble at the thought of it. They may have ice-cold clammy hands and feel panic, or their mind may go completely "blank" during the examination. Exam anxiety can cause people to have headaches, nausea and many other unpleasant physical symptoms as well. It is a serious problem recognized by educators throughout the world.

EFT can be remarkably helpful in overcoming this prevalent type of anxiety. By definition, exam anxiety is not "rational", and so does not lend itself well to reasoning one's way out of it. A much more effective approach than rational thought is required, something that can dispel the underlying sense of fear that drives the exam-anxious person. EFT fits this description well.

To clarify what I mean by an exam-anxious person, we are not talking here about the student who takes an exam without having studied for it and is understandably *realistically* anxious about taking it, or about a student who is unable to understand the subject matter in a particular course and is therefore *realistically* anxious about taking an exam based on it. Such reality-based fears are not "exam anxiety".

Exam anxiety is an *unreasonable* fear of an exam in a student who is otherwise reasonably well prepared to take it. People who have exam anxiety may be extremely fearful that they are not going to measure up, that somehow the test is going to reveal their weaknesses. It is therefore

particularly important, when applying EFT to this problem, to discover the specifics of each person's fear, the content of the "self-talk" with which they harass themselves before and during an exam. What are they *thinking* about themselves as they approach the exam that is so self-deprecating that it terrifies them?

An Exam Can be a Challenge to Self Worth

One of the most frequent causes of exam anxiety is that the feared examination is seen as posing a threat to the person's basic sense of self worth. Usually this feeling of threat has a long history in their life. Tracing the causes of the exam-anxious person's self-doubt and self-criticism, and tapping down their anxiety about a *specific evaluation event* from their past, can be one of the most valuable tactics one can use here.

The challenge to self-worth that an exam represents can manifest in various ways, but in my experience working with exam-anxious students I have noticed that the most frequent response is an all pervasive fear of being found out as being "stupid". Children are likely to encounter many experiences, particularly in school, that can inadvertently make them feel "dumb" even when they may be intelligent.

An Exam Can Invite Unfavorable Comparison With Others.

One of the most frequent reasons a person may feel that they are too stupid to do well on an exam is because they are comparing themselves to someone else whom they perceive as much brighter, more successful etc. than themselves, and therefore much more likely to do better on an examination. Perhaps the exam-anxious person was unfavorably compared to a brother or sister or to children at school when they were young, or they may have created this type of unfavorable comparison in their own mind. Whatever its source, an unfavorable comparison with another person can seriously damage a person's sense of self-worth.

An Exam Can Seem To Impose Impossible Standards

An early experience that can lead to a feeling of "stupidity" is the way that the exam-anxious person's parents evaluated their achievements in school or elsewhere. For example, the parent who, when the child brings home an exam paper on which they got a 98, says, "Why didn't you get 100?" (or one of the many variations on this theme of total lack of appreciation for what the child *did* achieve) can create a hopeless feeling in the child who then feels they will never be able to do *well enough* on any examination.

Similarly, a teacher's scribbled comments on an examination paper that is returned to a student can either create a feeling of confidence and pride, or a sinking feeling of never being able to measure up *no matter what they do* — depending on how the comments are worded. Actually, most examinations in the school system are geared to finding out what the student *doesn't* know, so that what they *do* know may not register as being important. The student may therefore feel that they must be "really dumb" to have achieved, for example, a grade of 85 on an exam when that means to them that they had 15% of the answers *wrong*.

An Exam Can Be Feared Because It Threatens To Expose One's Inadequacies

This fear is basic to much exam anxiety but fortunately it responds extremely well to the use of EFT. There are several ways to apply this method to this problem, one stands out particularly.

You can ask the exam-anxious person what their childhood experiences with exams were, and *when* their fear of exams started. Sometimes this fear did not commence until high school or later when some unfortunate experience with an examination caused deep distress, but more often you will find that it started early in life, usually during the grade school years.

Whatever age it commenced, the person will often have vivid and discouraging memories about exams as a result. Were they constantly berated for not being the "best in the class" or told that they were the "dumb

one" in the family — or what *exactly* happened? You will need to know this to formulate the correct EFT statements for them to tap on.

Following Gary Craig's advice, you would then have this person create a "mental movie" of a specific event that typifies their exam experience, they are to recall a representative scene, perhaps the most distressing in a series of scenes that they remember on this topic.

The next step is to apply EFT to that scene and then to any new aspects that may arise with regard to it.

EFT Phrases To Use For Exam Anxiety

The default self-acceptance phrase, "I deeply and completely accept myself", is appropriate for dealing with any sense of inadequacy and therefore can be an effective antidote to the feeling of futility and failure that the exam-anxious person experiences. Similarly, the default Choices phrase, "I choose to be calm and confident", can also be very useful, as in, "Even though I could never please my father no matter what marks I got, I choose to be calm and confident *today*." Another effective Choice for this purpose might be, "...I choose to know that *today* things are different."

Using a Personal Resource State To Combat Exam Anxiety

In order to help the person overcome their feeling of inadequacy with respect to taking exams, it can be very useful to have them access a Personal Resource State. This is a memory of any time in their life when they were able to solve a problem they did not expect to be able to solve.

This memory of their own resourcefulness need not be connected with an academic problem but can be a memory of solving *anything*. The exam-anxious person might remember, for example, how they once surprised themselves by figuring out how to repair their bicycle when it broke down, or how they solved a problem for their soccer team at an important game when their teammates were floundering, etc. Often the person who feels stupid when facing an academic challenge can easily remember success in a non-academic area, and that will work perfectly as a Personal Resource.

When you have located the Personal Resource State, ask the person to vividly recall their moment of success, and in particular to recall the *feelings* that they experienced at that time. Their Resource State can then lead to some extremely valuable EFT choices. A person might, for example, say:

"Even though I'm terrified of taking that exam, I choose to remember fixing that bicycle."

Or,

"Even though I'm terrified of taking that exam, I choose to feel the way I did when I was the one who remembered the way to get home when no one else did." "

An exam-anxious person's Personal Resource State might not be a memory of their *own* behavior however. It could be a memory of another person's behavior whose resourcefulness at solving problems they particularly admired, in which case they might say something like:

"Even though I'm terrified (afraid, anxious etc.) about taking that exam, I choose to be like (the other person's name)". If that person seemed to them able to conquer an exam with perfect ease, then this could be a highly effective Choice. *(For more ideas on the use of Personal Resource States for EFT, see Chapter 8 of my Choices Manual, listed in the Resources Section)*

A Fear Of Unexpected Exam Questions

One of the things that trouble people who suffer from exam anxiety is a fear that they will not be able to handle unexpected questions that are "sprung on them" during a test. If a person has this fear, you will do well to help them reframe this situation so that they can actually feel good about the unexpected challenges an exam may pose.

The truth is that the human race, as well as all animals, thrive on the unexpected. It is the source of adventure and verve in life. How much fun would it be if we could always predict exactly what was going to happen to us? If nothing was ever a surprise?

You can use our human tendency to relish adventure and feel excited when confronted by the unexpected, to reframe this situation very effectively for the exam-anxious person. To do this you might suggest a Choice such as:

"Even though I'm afraid that they will spring a surprise question on me, I choose to remember how much fun it was being surprised at my birthday party (or on a holiday, or by someone else's response to them, etc.)."

The point is that you want to help the person remember a time (or times) when the "unexpected" was unexpectedly *pleasant*, and insert mention of it in their Choice. A general Choice along these lines might therefore be,

".... I choose to enjoy the challenge of unexpected things."

Remembering Unpleasant Exams From The Past

A useful approach to handling exam anxiety with EFT is to ask the exam-anxious person to tell you their experiences with past examinations. We all have a long history of taking tests in school, and one of the features of exam anxiety is that once we have experienced difficulty taking an exam, it is all too easy to remember that difficulty the next time we take one.

For example, suppose a person had difficulty focusing on the questions during a particular exam because of their anxiety. This could create a fear in them of not being able to focus in the future when they take the next exam, which in turn would be very likely to create a self fulfilling prophesy. Helping the exam-anxious person to remember a time when they were remarkably focused on some task (usually a task quite different from exam taking) can be very valuable.

Asked about this, a person might, for example, remember a time when they were driving through lashing rain and had to focus intently on the road in order to guide their car safely through the storm, but they had been able to do this successfully. This person might formulate a Choice like this:

"Even though I'm afraid I won't be able to focus during the exam, I choose to remember how well I focused on the road that stormy night!"

Fear of "Blanking Out"

One of the most troublesome fears of exam-anxious people who have had unfavorable experiences with exams in the past is that they will "blank out" during the exam and be unable to think at all. For them it is extremely useful to point out that blanking out, even when it occurs, is usually not a permanent experience for anyone — they have always recovered from the blank out, their mind did eventually begin to work normally again.

Another point you may want to make to them is that a certain amount of "blinking out" during an examination may actually be useful because it can allow their *subconscious* to work on the problem, and when their mind comes back into focus again the answer may just pop into their mind. To reinforce these reframes, you might suggest Choices such as the following:

"Even though I'm afraid that I'll blank out during an exam, I choose to see blanking out as an opportunity to let my subconscious do the job for me."

Or,

"...I choose to remember that my mind will come back into focus because it always has."

The Behavior Of Others During An Exam Can Be Alarming

If the exam-anxious person is anxious to begin with, it is very easy to lose their composure if, when going into an exam, they come into contact with someone who is unbearably nervous about taking it. We all tend to pick up on the concerns and fears of others.

The thought of seeing another student do better than oneself can also make one anxious. To help an exam-anxious person who tells you that, "other people always finish first, I feel terrible when I see them handing in their exams early and marching confidently out of the room.", it can be very helpful to suggest a Choice such as:

"Even though I get upset when I see other people finishing first, I choose to remember that because they turn in their exam early that doesn't necessarily mean that they did well on it".

This is in fact true. Some students habitually rush through an exam and turn it in early to avoid confronting their own lack of knowledge. Others just give up, put down *any* answers, and in effect flee from the situation by turning their exam in early. It is not always the best students who finish first and choosing to remember this can be very reassuring.

Ways To Apply EFT For Exam Anxiety

In my Choices Video (*see Resources Section*) you see me working with an exam-anxious woman, Joanne, by asking her to bring some sample exam materials to the session so that we can approximate her "real life" anxiety. If you watched the video, you have seen that this worked excellently. One of the advantages of working with sample exam materials (or an approximation of them) right on the spot is that it becomes extremely easy to test for the effectiveness of EFT because the person can reread the sample exam questions after each round and see for themselves if their attitude is changing. The questions will usually look far less threatening as the person continues doing EFT. This can be very convincing if they have always feared exams, and it can make a substantial difference in the way they will handle exams in the future.

Other ways to work with real learning materials when doing EFT are described in several articles that I wrote for Gary Craig's email list that tell about a web designer, Martin, who was afraid of learning new material and therefore could not learn the computer language, JAVA. (*To access this report, see Resources Section*).

Role-Playing the Exam

A great way to help a person overcome exam anxiety with EFT is to role play the exam with them. To do this, you will may want to take the role of the teacher or monitor who hands out the exam, or of the person reporting the results of the exam to the student. In enacting this role you should strive

to make the experience as difficult as possible for the person by pretending to be a strong disciplinarian rather than a kindly teacher.

The person will use EFT to tap on the anxiety brought up in them by your role-playing, and then you should have them retake their Intensity Rating. If necessary, keep repeating this sequence that consists of role-playing then tapping, until the person's reaction changes markedly. (*for more suggestions on how to use role-playing in EFT see my article listed in the Resources section*).

There are also some *general* choices that can be used productively for exam-anxious people, such as:

"Even though I'm afraid of this exam, I choose to handle it expertly."

Or,

"Even though I'm afraid of being ambushed by surprise questions on the exam, I choose to rely on my good coping abilities to answer them perfectly."

Or,

"Even though I'm afraid of this exam, I choose to be calm and confident and *remember my strengths*."

You may have to help the person trace through a number of threads when applying EFT to exam anxiety but this can usually be done in one or several sessions. Exam anxiety is a "natural" for EFT because it has definite origins that are usually quite traceable and "tapable". I can, imagine a day when EFT will be used routinely in schools and other places of learning to overcome this widespread problem in education. You can be in the forefront of this educational advance by using it *right now* for that purpose. If you do, don't be surprised to find yourself achieving some remarkable successes!

Good luck!

Pat Carrington

Resources

1. The authoritative work on EFT Choices is my book, "Creating Positive Choices in Energy Psychology: The Choices Manual". For information on it or to order go to www.eftupdate.com.
2. To see my demo on the use of EFT for an exam-anxious graduate student you will need to watch my videotaped workshop on the Choices method. For information on it or to order go to www.eftupdate.com. and click on "EFT Choices Videos".
3. For a useful discussion on the use of actual physical materials when using EFT to overcome learning problems, go to www.eftupdate.com , click on "*Browse Collection of Articles by Patricia Carrington*" and then on "*Using EFT to Enhance Education Skills*".
4. For an article on the uses of role-playing in EFT, go to www.eftupdate.com, click on "*Browse Collection of Articles by Patricia Carrington*" , then on "*The Use of Role Playing in EFT*".
5. For a detailed discussion on the use of Personal Resource States in EFT, see Chapter 8 of the Choices Manual (for information or to order go to www.eftupdate.com).