Three ways to reduce exam anxiety

1 Practise abdominal breathing
A guide for students on exam pressure, with advice by the professor of education at Liverpool John Moores University David Putwain, was published last month by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation. One of the tips is to practise diaphragmatic — or abdominal — breathing. Putwain says that when we are anxious we tend to take shallow breaths from our upper chests, which can exacerbate feelings of anxiety. The trick is learning to engage the diaphragm, so that your breathing remains deep and measured, helping you to maintain control. Place one hand on your abdomen just below the ribcage and the other hand on your upper chest. Inhale deeply through your nose for five seconds and hold your breath for five seconds. Exhale slowly and focus on the feeling of your diaphragm, not the chest, moving in as you breathe out and moving out as you breathe in.

2 Inhale rosemary oil
Two years ago there was a pre-exam-season surge in sales of rosemary essential oil after trials at Northumbria University revealed that its aroma helped to fire up neural pathways and improve performance in memory tests by between 5 and 7 per cent. Yet there are other benefits to its use: several studies have found that it also helps to relieve anxiety. In one study, published in the International Journal of Neuroscience a few years ago, psychologists evaluated changes in electrical activity of the brain (using an EEG machine) and in the emotional states of 40 adults who were exposed to rosemary or lavender essential oils. The results showed that lavender aromatherapy made subjects relaxed but drowsy, whereas rosemary aromatherapy promoted a relaxed but alert state — just what you want when sitting an exam. Inhale it before heading into the exam room for maximum effect.

3 Eat berries and porridge
Helen Bond, a registered dietician and spokesperson for the British Dietetic Association, says that during exam season your focus should be on nutrient-packed food that provides a sustained energy boost. “Foods such as porridge and wholemeal toast topped with hummus or avocado will help to prevent blood sugar spikes that can affect your mood and anxiety levels. Berries are great, in a smoothie or as a snack, because they are packed with antioxidants and have been shown to lower stress.” A juice or smoothie made of 220g of fresh blueberries has been shown by scientists at the University of Reading to produce improvements in cognitive performance, alertness and mood.

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