Managing anxiety and panic attacks during exams

Controlling your breathing:

Focusing on your breathing and breathing ‘fully’ is an important and effective way of alleviating panic. Here are two simple exercises you may find useful:

Square breathing

Try to make yourself comfortable and relax your shoulders, then...

1. Breathe in through your nose for the count of 4 seconds
2. Hold your breath for the count of 4
3. Breathe out through your mouth for the count of 4
4. Then, hold your breathing again for the count of 4, before starting the cycle again

You may find it helpful to visualise each side of the square below as you complete the exercise. You can alternatively try focusing on a nearby square object (e.g. your desk) to help you ground yourself.

Re-breathing or ‘cupping’ your breathing

If you’re feeling particularly dizzy during a panic attack, this may be due to a lack of carbon dioxide in your bloodstream from not breathing properly. In order to combat this...

1. Cup your hands over your mouth and nose
2. Re-breathe in the air (which is rich in carbon dioxide) for five or six breaths
3. Repeat if necessary, until the feelings of dizziness subside

Confront the panic:

- Confront the situation directly and try to remind yourself that the panic attack is temporary and will pass.
- Panic is a natural response to stressful situations such as exams that can affect us all.
- Remind yourself that you have successfully completed exams before and you can do the same again. If this exam doesn’t quite go as planned, remember that it’s not the end of the world.

Distracting or redirecting your thoughts:

Sometimes, temporarily focusing your attention on something else can help to minimise anxious thoughts and the likelihood of a panic attack. If you’re feeling this way, you might find the following examples helpful:

- Listing different things that you can see in the room in front of you
- Going through the alphabet backwards in your head
- Visualise a place and time when you have felt calm and relaxed