

Under pressure: Understanding assessment anxiety

Resource for students

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Go to the Ako Aotearoa website to view the full report: <https://ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/understanding-assessment-anxiety/>

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Under Pressure: Understanding Assessment Anxiety

A resource guide for first-year university students

This resource is intended to help students understand assessment anxiety and provides strategies and tips to manage this.

*“Did I study the right topics for this exam?”
“Will I lose marks if I didn’t reference my essay correctly?” “If I don’t get a good mark, will I ruin my opportunities for university and career success?” “Will I disappoint my friends and family?” “Am I suited to university?”*

If any other these questions sound familiar to you, then **you are not alone**.

Such stress-related thoughts are typical of first-year university students. In moderation, these kinds of questioning can be good! Taking the time to reflect on our own preparation, progress, and future outcomes can help us to evaluate and modify our behaviours to achieve success. However, if we are unable to cope effectively with these thoughts, then **anxiety can take control**.

Why do most students experience stress and anxiety on their assessments? Consider two types of causes: internal and external.

- On the one hand, stress and anxiety can come from **internal causes**—your own actions or inactions—such as having poor time management skills or procrastinating to start doing an assignment, purposefully missing classes or not paying full attention

during class, lacking learning and study strategies, being perfectionistic, and allowing circumstances outside of university to disproportionately affect your focus on studies.

- On the other hand, stress and anxiety can come from **external causes**—things that are mainly outside of your control—such as illness (leading you to fall behind in coursework), a fast pace to learn and master course topics, tight assessment deadlines, the lecturer(s) not being clear on what you are supposed to do, and having pressure from your family and whānau to perform well.

In small doses, these factors can motivate you to do things you never thought you’d be able to do. However, if there is **too much** going on...

- You may feel underprepared and begin to doubt yourself.
- You may feel physically tense, upset, and nervous.
- You also may lack focus and be easily distracted.

Each of the listed items is a common feature of assessment-related anxiety. In those instances, debilitating anxiety may reduce academic performance and personal wellbeing.



When you start to feel stressed or anxious about your assessments, ask yourself:

- What am I being asked to do for this assessment?
- Do I have the skills necessary to complete the task? If not, where can I develop those skills?
- What am I trying to achieve in my coursework and degree programme?
- Have I set a realistic goal for the assessment?
- What aspects of this assessment do I have control over?
- How can I make a plan to prepare for this assessment?
- Who can help keep me accountable?
- What have I learned from past assessment experiences?

Useful tips to help you with your assessments:

Early On

- Familiarise yourself with the university's grading scale and assessment policies. These may be dry and boring reads, but they will be helpful in knowing how you'll be assessed and what to do if something unexpected comes around the bend.
- Find out information about your course assessments early. Lecturers will normally post this in advance in the course outline and/or on the course website. What is the format of the assessment (e.g. multi-choice, essay, exam, short-answer), and how much will it count toward your final grade in the course?
- Don't avoid taking a course because of a certain type of assessment. Sometimes students "hate" [fill in the blank] assessments. Think about what a challenge could offer you. If you dislike oral presentations, think consider whether the challenge could benefit you in terms of your career preparedness. If you think essays are not beneficial to your career, consider if improving your written communication and critical thinking skills could benefit you.
- Planning buffers you from stress and anxiety. Get a planner or diary you'll actually use. Keep it with you at all times, whether it's an electronic or printed calendar. After your first lectures, write down all the dates you have listed as assessments. You can then backtrack to estimate how long it may take and when you might want to start working on it. Every time something comes up with a date or deadlines, including appointments or club events, pop it into your calendar so you'll know how many commitments you have and how you prepare them. Each day—in the morning or evening—plan your next day and few days.

- Build friendships in your course. In addition to having a more positive experience, it will also help you to form study groups and catch up on missed content when preparing for assessments.
- Take time to relax and exercise, eat well, and get enough sleep.
- Seek clarification. If you are not sure what your assignment is about or how you should do it, ask your lecturer or tutor. They are usually happy to help you.
- Use the student support on campus. All institutions have people on staff whose job it is to help you—this includes people such as librarians, student support staff, and learning skills staff. Find out how you can make an appointment with them (their website will typically tell you). Many have on-campus as well as distance-learner support options.

Preparing for Assessments

- Take your time, but start early. Don't wait to do an assignment last minute. You will typically be given the assignment a few weeks before it is due. You will need that time, so plan accordingly. Although students often think they are "good" under pressure, they may be able to complete the work but often don't perform as well as they could.
- Set daily achievable goals and stick to them. For example: "Write 250 words on this assignment," "Read Chapter 1 and take notes," and "Use flash (index) cards to review material."
- Aim high but realistic and focus on mastering the material—this is something you have more control over than a score or grade.
- Multitasking does not help you to learn. Don't try to study while watching TV or chatting with friends. People generally are really poor multitaskers and perform poorly on these tasks while also being more stressed.

When you're already in deep

- If you fall behind, talk to classmates, tutors, and the lecturer for advice. Lecturers will typically prefer a student asking for help early on rather than waiting until the due date. They can often help you get back on track before it is too late.
- If you are worried about your performance, talk with classmates about what they're concerned about and how they're handling it.
- Use the student support on campus as mentioned above.
- If you have (mental) health issues, see a doctor or counsellor. Universities have processes in place to help students with health problems, but typically will require some form of evidence.

This resource emerged from a project that set out to understand the assessment-related anxieties which first-year students in Aotearoa New Zealand may experience. The report recommends that transitioning students and their respective families/whānau actively seek out ways to understand what the institution expects in terms of student conduct and study practices.

The resource has been developed as part of the Understanding assessment anxiety during the student transition to University" by Valerie Sotardi and Erik Brogt, University of Canterbury.

Go to www.ako.ac.nz to find out more about this project and download all resources: <https://ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/understanding-assessment-anxiety/>

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