Avoiding exam meltdown

Sarah Armstrong urges you not to panic if you’re preparing for your final exams. If you’re organised and stay focused on what you need to do, you’ll cope with the pressure.

Finals exams are drawing close for final year students across the UK and by now revision will be in full swing. If you sit your exams the most important piece of advice is, try not to panic! As easy as that may sound, students can often worry themselves to a standstill, getting caught up by everything they don’t know. Remember, you are not expected to be experts in every dental discipline, these are not specialist exams – try and focus on what you do know, and build on these foundations.

Unfortunately, there isn’t a finite amount of information you need to know, which can be frustrating when tackling your revision, but try and work on the premise that “common things are common” rather than getting caught up in the complexities of weird and wonderful rare conditions. Examiners just want to see that you are safe, competent practitioners who are aware of their limitations.

Organisation is a key factor to exam success. Make sure you have all your notes in order, and if in doubt compare with your colleagues and get copies of what is missing. Dental schools often have set criteria which must be met prior to sitting your exams for example completing quotas of treatment, or undertaking clinical assessments etc. Make sure you are aware of these and have completed these by the deadlines set. Be aware of when/where your exams are to be held, and what each entails to enable you to plan your revision accordingly. Find out how each exam is weighted and distribute your revision, but try and work on the questions that are set and the depth of knowledge required.

When it comes to revision, do what works for you. There will always be several people in your year who, come exam time, take up residency in the library. Although the very sight of them is enough to strike fear in the rest of us, it doesn’t work for everyone. Choose your own location to work in, only you know where you can concentrate. Some students irritantly seem to have the knack of sitting in front of the television to revise, but for most of us, this isn’t going to work!

Practice exam questions

Usually mock exam papers are hard to come by. This is because exam questions are very difficult to set and tend to be from a limited bank of questions available. This can be frustrating, however, there are plenty of textbooks available containing practice questions, and although these may not be in the same format as your dental school exams, they are ideal for identifying gaps in your knowledge. If you had mock exams, try and think back to what and how the questions were asked. Although you are unlikely to get the same questions, mock exams can give you an idea of how questions are set and the depth of knowledge required.

When it comes to revision, focus on yourself. As I’ve mentioned in previous articles, by final year most of your friends and often your flatmates are dental students. Although this may have seemed like a good idea at the time - come exam time it can make the situation an awful lot more stressful. Tempers are fraught, conversation seldom veers from the long run and cramming can frequently have the opposite of its intended effect.

Seek advice

If you find you are struggling – ask for help, your dental school is full of specialists, if you don’t understand something, there’s bound to be someone who will be more than happy to help. If you are feeling under pressure, - you won’t be the only one. Don’t suffer in silence, discuss things with your tutor or senior colleagues, no-one can help you if they don’t know there is a problem.

Remember, if you’ve put the work in, keep calm and you’ll be fine. Good luck.

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