MINDTHEORY

Why You Freeze in Exams

(And How to Unstuck Your Brain)

1 The Neuroscience

Your brain has two key parts involved in exam performance:

Amygdala (Alarm System)

- Detects threat or danger
- Releases stress hormones
- Shifts brain into survival mode (fight, flight or freeze)



Prefrontal Cortex (Thinking Brain)

- Helps you think clearly
- Focuses attention
- Retrieves memories
- Solves problems

When stress is high, the amygdala takes over and temporarily shuts down the prefrontal cortex. This makes it hard to think, recall information, and solve questions — even when you have studied.

2 Yerkes-Dodson Law

A moderate level of stress can boost performance, but too much stress impairs thinking.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 It's an Involuntary Threat Response

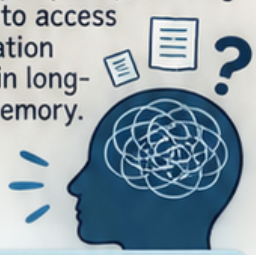
Your brain mistakes high exam stress for a real threat and activates the amygdala.



This triggers a freeze response, even though you are actually safe.

2 Working Memory Gets Overloaded

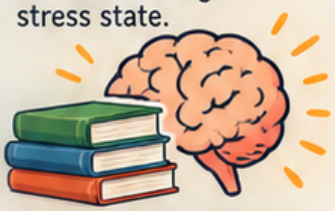
Stress hormones reduce the brain's working memory capacity, making it hard to access information stored in long-term memory.



So, you may "blank out" even when you have studied well.

3 Your Knowledge Is Still There

The information isn't gone — it's just harder to access while your brain is in a high stress state.



Once you calm your nervous system, your thinking brain comes back online.

4 You Can Train Your Brain

Simple, science-backed techniques can quickly reduce stress and help you regain access to your memory and focus.



With practice, you can stay calmer and think more clearly during exams.

ACTION STEPS

Quick Tools to Unstuck Your Brain

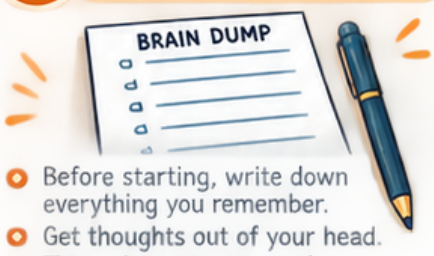
1 Physiological Sighs (2 quick inhales, 1 long exhale)



1. Take a small inhale through your nose.
2. Take a second small inhale (top it up).
3. Exhale slowly and fully through your mouth.

Do this 2–5 times to quickly calm your nervous system.

2 5-Min Brain Dump



- Before starting, write down everything you remember.
- Get thoughts out of your head.
- This reduces anxiety and frees up working memory for the actual exam.

3 Physical Grounding (3 Objects)

Look around and notice:

1. 1 thing you can see (e.g., a pen)
2. 1 thing you can touch (e.g., the desk)
3. 1 thing you can hear (e.g., a fan or ambient sound)

This brings your attention to the present moment and helps calm your brain.