

Visualise to Improve Your Exam Preparation and Performance

You behave according to the person you know yourself to be – that is the attitudes, beliefs, values and habits you hold about yourself. Much of these self-images are non-conscious memories and you have a whole thinking process that works to maintain how you see yourself.

If you do better than you know yourself to be, your mind tries to correct for the mistake of doing well by engaging you in limited thinking and behaviour to bring you back to what is ‘normal’ – the ideas stored in your memory. So, your academic potential may be much higher, but you will operate from a belief level which is the most dominant images in your mind.

To improve academic performance, you must deliberately imprint your self-images to a higher performance level to where you are now. This engages your mind to work towards a ‘new normal’ for you. This is where visualisation is useful.

Airline pilots use simulators to mentally rehearse high-pressure problem scenarios so that they may perform effectively if that scenario is to occur. Likewise, students can mentally simulate (rehearse in their mind) situations in the exam room so they can perform under pressure.

Two thirds of your brain activity is the same, whether it is mentally rehearsed through visualisation or actually practiced in reality. Your brain does not know the difference. Neural processing responds in the same way. For a great exam performance, students must do both visual and real practice.

The problem is, students new to exams do not get enough real practice in the exam room to condition their ideal response – calm, relaxed, confident and so on. So, visualisation is the only way a positive response can be imprinted into memory ahead of time.

Visualisation must use forethought to create a mental movie of exactly the future scene in the exam room. Visualisation must use many senses: what you would see, hear, feel etc. For example: the pressure is on. You are sitting in the exam room in the side row beside a window. Your friends are sitting around you. The examiner calls to begin. You flip open the exam booklet and begin reading the questions. You smile to yourself and feel great because you can see that your preparation will pay off. You feel calm. You know that everything you need to score well in this exam is within you and you can recall it with ease....

Visualise Your Ideal Exam Performance

To visualise your ideal scene, spend some time writing an exam visualisation script. This is a ‘story’ of how you want to see yourself in the exam room, what you want to say to yourself (affirmations) and how you want to feel. When you have written your script, record yourself reading it so that you may listen to it repeatedly prior to exams. Through repetition, you programme your brain to create a new normal for you so that when you come to do the exam in reality, your imprinted response flows naturally.

Visualisation techniques are widely used in sports performance. They can be equally helpful in giving an exam performance – especially if you suffer from exam anxiety. Here are some guidelines for writing and recording your script.

Writing and Recording Your Scripts

Begin with a relaxation session to help slow brainwaves into the alpha range. This is a feeling of relaxed alertness which enables the brain to be receptive to incoming suggestions. For example, you might say something like:

Close your eyes and begin to breathe deeply...in through your nose and out through your mouth. With every out-breath imagine any tension in your body going out with it. I am going to count from 5 to 1 and as I do, you will feel yourself relaxing with every descending number. At number 1, you will be totally relaxed, yet alert to what I am saying.

[Insert Name] As I count now from 5, beginning to relax...4...breathing deeply...letting go, 3...begin to get a sense of your body, the position of your arms and hands, the position of your legs and feet: feel your weight in the chair... 2...continuing down... 1, totally relaxed as you quietly repeat to yourself: "relax...relax...relax..." Feel yourself letting go of any tension in your body. You are totally relaxed [Insert Name], yet totally alert. Rest in this state for a moment – this is Alpha State. Now I want to imagine yourself in your next exam....

Continue to create your future ideal scene with words, pictures and feelings as if you are there now. Through repetitive reading or listening of your script, you will surprise yourself at how your behaviour is modified when you come to sit your next exam.

Go well.

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Personalised [Zoom] Mental Rehearsal Coaching

If you would like one-on-one mental rehearsal coaching for any kind of exam preparation situation, please contact Patrick at patrick@passingexams.co.nz