



Tackling End-of-Semester Stress

While much of our world has been on pause these past several weeks, students have generally experienced ongoing academic demand, culminating in end-of-semester responsibilities. Even under “normal” circumstances, finals week is often a time of mixed emotions, a strange combination of stress and accomplishment. As we plan to shelter-in-place for another month, you may find yourself experiencing an even greater mix of emotions, as well as unique challenges for your motivation and productivity that you may never have faced before.

Whether you are an undergrad wrapping up several classes, a graduate student juggling multiple research projects, or a medical student trying to maintain two years of knowledge for an upcoming step exam, it makes sense to feel overwhelmed. We also understand that while you are addressing all of these demands, you may also be trying to make plans for summer or fall against the uncertain backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic. *It's when this stress makes our tasks feel too big or too impossible that we tend to lose motivation.* Some other reasons we lose motivation include:

Loss of structure. Many students struggle to study at home. But with so many of the outside structures we used to rely on being unavailable, like coffee shops and libraries, we lose some of the external cues that tell us it's time to buckle down and get to work.

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Loss of accountability. Similar to lack of structure, when we find ourselves in relative isolation, we don't always have someone to keep us accountable. Many students benefit from studying with friends or seeing a professor/TA in person to stay on task, but doing so in the current climate requires not only a different format for interaction, but additional motivation to restructure those relationships.

Low interest. Sometimes, your workload may be completely unrelated to your interests. But even those who are passionate about their major/class sometimes feel disinterested in or exhausted by a particular task. Both are common experiences, though also understandably unpleasant.

Avoidance. It can be helpful when you are lacking motivation to consider if there is anything about the task or what it means that you might be trying to avoid. For example, if you are anxious about finding a job after graduation, it may be difficult to complete your end-of-semester tasks, knowing that to do so would move you one step closer to confronting that reality. Something else we tend to avoid is...

Feelings of inadequacy. If you are struggling to motivate yourself to get your work done during this unusual time, [you are not alone](#). Unfortunately, it can be hard to remember that others experience this too, making low motivation/productivity lead to negative thoughts about yourself. This in turn makes it even harder to get work done - it's a vicious cycle that can be difficult to break.

Exhaustion. Burnout usually stems from extended periods of work without adequate restoration; under the stress of a global pandemic, our threshold for burnout is much lower. You may find yourself thinking, “I don't feel as busy as I normally am – why can't I get ___ done?” This can cause us to be harder on ourselves than we really deserve, given that our minds and bodies are likely balancing other unique stressors related to COVID-19.

Do any of these resonate with you? Try to keep them in mind as you read our next section. We hope that by understanding your own unique barriers to motivation, you are able to employ real solutions that get to the heart of your concerns and help you to do and feel your best at the end of this strange semester. We are rooting for you!

Motivation and Procrastination

You may have noticed in the text above that some of the barriers to motivation are external, like study environment, and others are more internal, like feelings of inadequacy. We've compiled some tips that correspond to both external and internal types of barriers, but in either case, we want to encourage you to make *small adjustments*, not *monumental changes* to your study habits and routine. Similar to how it is difficult to motivate yourself for an overwhelmingly large project, it can also be an unrealistic expectation to drastically change lifelong habits, especially during such a stressful time, leading to even more discouragement. So be gentle with yourself as you consider what tweaks could help you through this end-of-semester season.

Create structure. This may seem like a simple solution in response to loss of structure, but it can be easier said than done, especially during the stay-at-home order. Start simple by noting when you need to sleep, and start to [build your schedule](#) around those times. Next, consider your natural work rhythm: are you more productive early in the morning, late at night, or some other time? Mark those times and note when you typically need breaks. Fill in the rest of your calendar with other important parts of your day-to-day functioning, including time for physical, mental, social, and spiritual needs. From there, you can break down projects into manageable parts and map them out into your dedicated work times. If possible, create a space in your home that is exclusive for academic work, and try to make it a place where you want to be. Click [here](#) for more tips on structuring your study schedule; our colleagues at [Ace](#) can also help you create a personalized end-of-semester schedule. Remember to be gentle with yourself if you deviate from your plan – you can always start again!

Check in with others. Not only is staying in touch with others essential for our mental health (now more than ever), it can help us to stay accountable with our work. The next time you feel pulled to connect with someone, turn it into an opportunity to stay on track by telling your friend or family member about what you need to get done and how they can help.

Take a values inventory. If you are finding yourself disinterested in the task or subject matter at hand, it may be worthwhile to invest a few minutes in a [values inventory](#). Take a few minutes to acknowledge your values and evaluate whether they are represented in the work you need to do. If they are, try to use this as motivation to keep moving forward. If they are not, see if you can frame the task at hand in terms of one of your values (e.g., if you highly value relationships, consider how finishing your responsibilities will lead to more time with others). You can also use this to limit your time spent on other activities (e.g., if you tend not

to highly value nature, consider asking your roommate to sort the recycling to save you some time).

Radical acceptance. If you are feeling avoidant, radical acceptance can go a long way. Using this technique, you stop fighting with reality and accept where you are in life right now, along with everything about it. You may say to yourself, "I know I'm afraid to face life after graduation, but that is the phase of life I'm in. I need to accept that and do the work in front of me, even if it means I suffer in the short-term." You can learn more about radical acceptance [here](#) and evaluate whether it is the right approach for you.

Promote competence and self-compassion. We find that many students know what they need to do to feel more productive but struggle to do it. Often, this has less to do with lack of discipline and more to do with feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem – for example, what if you try and fail? What would that mean about you? These can be scary thoughts to confront. To begin working through these, practice [self-compassion](#). When you need to get work done, start with a manageable task that makes you feel competent; this can give you the momentum and the self-esteem you need to keep going.

Rest and relaxation. To combat or avoid burnout, it can help to understand that you may need more comfort and self-care during the coronavirus pandemic than you ordinarily would. While it's difficult to be separated from sources of restoration that may exist outside of our homes, consider how you can integrate things that make you feel happy and peaceful throughout your day, including during study time - it will help you stick to your study goals. Take a look at our [self-care issue](#) for ideas.

For Procrastination

For many students, motivation eventually strikes – at the eleventh hour. Want to try a different way?

- Set earlier deadlines, with alarms and reminders of why you want to finish sooner.
- Incorporate or finish with rewards. You are much more likely to study if there is something to look forward to about it.
- Break down your projects into smaller increments that you can space out over time.
- Identify and limit your access to the things you usually use to distract yourself. If you can only engage with distractions that are less appealing, you are less likely to use them
- Think about your future self and how grateful they will be to you for getting this done for them.

COPING WITH TEST ANXIETY

Test anxiety can come from many places: concerns about how your grades will impact your future, how others will view you, or your own view of yourself as good enough. Just because exams are online does not necessarily mean that test anxiety will diminish; for some, navigating a new platform for performance and evaluation may enhance anxiety.

It may help to remember that learning is state dependent, meaning that people tend to perform better when they are tested in environments similar to where they prepared. In that way, taking exams at home may give you an advantage relative to testing on site! But these unique circumstances also make it important to:

Practice how you perform. Try studying/taking practice exams under time constraints that are similar to how you will be tested. Other things you can do before an exam that can prevent test anxiety include:

Good self-care. Self-care may not seem relevant, but it makes us less vulnerable to stress. Eat a balanced diet, drink lots of water, take breaks for exercise, and see our [self-care issue](#) for more tips. And remember that students who get a good night's sleep before an exam perform better than those who pull all-nighters!

Practice relaxing. By practicing [mindfulness](#) or [relaxation](#) skills, you make yourself more prepared to employ these skills during high stress. Many people find [diaphragmatic breathing](#) to be a helpful reset, as it activates the parasympathetic nervous system when you are in "fight or flight" (or freeze) mode. You can also identify a mantra in advance that helps to stay calm and move forward, such as "I am ready for this."

If you find your heart racing and mind going blank during your exam, try these tips:

Ground yourself. Name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can feel, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste. Since you're at home, you could also get up and get a glass of cold water. Take a few diaphragmatic breaths, and employ other relaxation tips you've practiced. This may take a few minutes, but it is an investment in your performance and in your mental health.

Accept that anxiety is normal. It makes sense to feel anxious when being evaluated, but it does not have to get in your way. You are more than your academic performance and are doing your best under stressful circumstances.

Look at what you need to do and visualize yourself succeeding. Make a plan for the remainder of the test and take one item at a time. Use your encouraging mantra, and remember that you have done many hard things in your life, and you can do this too.

UPCOMING WORKSHOPS/EVENTS

COVID-19 AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT EXPERIENCE

THURSDAY, MAY 7TH FROM NOON-1PM

We would like to invite all African-American students to participate in an open forum discussion focusing on the impact COVID-19 has had on our daily lives and communities. [Click here](#) for more information and to register.

MANAGING YOUR MOOD DURING A PANDEMIC WORKSHOP SERIES

TUESDAYS FROM 4:30-6:00PM, STARTING MAY 25TH

Join us online for a 4-week structured dialectical behavioral therapy skills workshop! [Click here](#) for more information and to register.

UNITED PEER SUPPORT NETWORK GROUPS

MEETING WEEKLY AT THREE DIFFERENT TIMES!

Looking to feel more connected during this time of isolation? Our peer-led support groups are now meeting online and are open to any student! [Click here](#) for more information and to register.

UIC Resources

[Ace](#)
[Math and Science Learning Center](#)
[Writing Center](#)
[Write-ON for Graduate Students](#)
[Write @WLRC](#)
[For Graduate Students: Tips for Online Prelims, Defenses, Grading for Spring 2020; Newsletters from Graduate College](#)
[More UIC Academic Resources \(including peer mentoring, tutoring and specialized workshops\)](#)

Time Management

[Time-Management Skills Test](#)
[ACE: Tools for Success](#)
[Effective Time Management while Working Remotely during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

Focus and Productivity

[10 Ways for College Students to Succeed during COVID-19](#)
[Staying Productive as a Graduate Student during COVID-19](#)
[26 WFH Tips while Self-Isolating during the COVID-19 Outbreak](#)
[11 Strategies to Maximize Productivity while Working from Home](#)
[How to Focus When All You Can Think about Is COVID-19](#)
[TED Talk: Unwavering Focus](#)

Helpful Apps and Programs

[Alarmy \(for Android, IOS\)](#)
[Pomodoro Technique/PomoDone App](#)
[Mindful Browsing](#) (for Chrome)
[Self-Control](#) (for Macs)
[StayFocused](#) (for Chrome)
[Forest: Stay Focused](#) (for Android, IOS)
[Coffeeshouse Sounds](#)