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. For many, this is the most stressful and challenging part of the course. But don't 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 time accordingly.

Practice exam questions 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, 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 irritatingly seem to have the knack of sitting in front of the television to revise – from cranial nerves to apical can erupt into a full-blown panic across the dinner table. By this stage of the course everyone 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 irritatingly seem to have the knack of sitting in front of the television to revise – from cranial nerves to Coronation Street, but for most of us, this isn't going to work!

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 dentistry; the slightest query about a radiolucency on a periapical can erupt into a full-blown panic across the dinner table. By this stage of the course you will have found out what style of revision works best for you, so try not to get sidetracked by what everyone else is doing and focus on yourself.

Seek advice
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Taking time off is essential. Make sure you schedule regular breaks into your revision – even if it's just to pop out for a coffee for an hour – there’s only so much revision a brain can take in one go. Make sure you are getting enough sleep, staying up working until 2am every morning is unlikely to help in the long run and cramming can frequently have the opposite of its intended effect.

About the author
Sarah Armstrong qualified from Newcastle University in 2008 and is currently working as a vocational dental practitioner in Brampton, Cumbria.