



# reCAPS

Counseling & Psychological Services  
University of California, Santa Cruz

## Mistakes We Make in Coping with Anxiety and Mood Problems

Just about everyone experiences stress, anxiety, or a low mood from time to time. There are ways we try and cope, both to prevent these issues from getting worse and to feel better when we have these experiences. Some strategies work better than others. Knowing about some common “mistakes,” or less helpful ways for dealing with anxiety and mood issues, can help free you up to try the strategies that may be more effective.

Here are some of the most common maladaptive coping strategies, and some “fixes”:

1. **Being inactive.** Anxiety and low mood can sap your energy and make it tempting to isolate yourself and/or lie on the couch all day. However, getting exercise, being social, and doing things you enjoy are usually more effective for reducing symptoms in the long run than doing nothing.

You don't need to overdo it—find the right balance for you. Try scheduling one thing each day to get you moving or interacting with people—put it in your planner.

2. **Letting your anxious or self-critical thoughts run rampant.** Sure, it's hard to control your thoughts, but it is possible. Therapy can help, and there are also some good self-help websites, books, and apps to teach you how. Just becoming more aware of your thought patterns and whether they are helpful is a good first step. Be patient—change takes practice—but learning to reframe, “talk back to,” or distract yourself from unhelpful thoughts can have an impact even in the short term.

3. **Spending time with anxious or negative people.** While being social can be helpful

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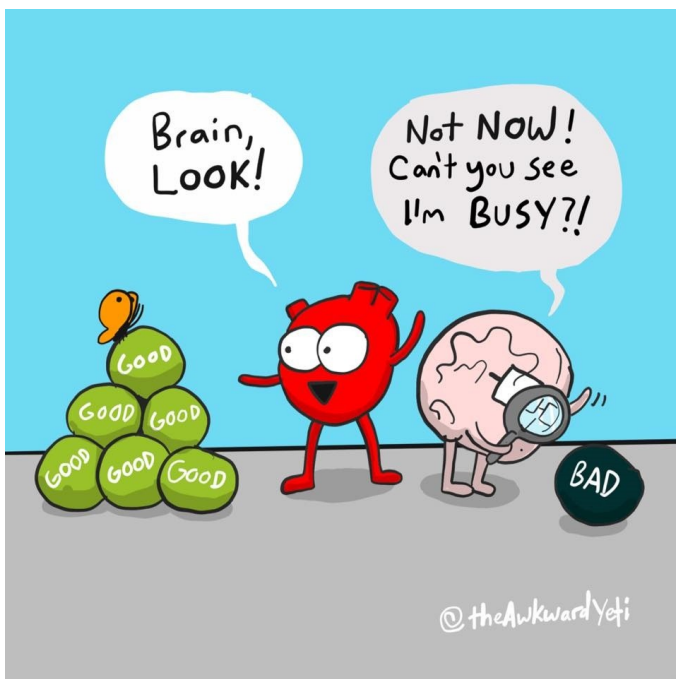
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## All About CAPS

Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) offers confidential mental health services to registered UCSC students all year:

- Helpful workshops, trainings, and self-help tools
- A variety of therapy and support groups
- Let's Talk drop-in consultations
- Brief individual and couples counseling
- Referrals to on- and off-campus resources
- Limited psychiatry services
- Crisis services in person Mon–Fri 8 am–5 pm and by phone 24/7 at (831) 459-2628

To make an appointment, call (831) 459-2628 or stop by (Student Health Center, East Wing, 2nd floor) weekdays between 8 am and 5 pm. To learn more, visit our [website](#), check out the [CAPS blog](#), and like us on [Facebook](#)!



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in managing anxiety and mood, hanging with people who are constantly expressing worry, complaining, or being critical can make you feel worse. Try to limit contact with stressed-out or critical people and spend time with positive and calm ones, or try changing the tone of a negative or unhelpful conversation.

4. **Relying on alcohol or other drugs, including prescription medication.** Drugs and alcohol may temporarily mask anxiety or difficult feelings, but they can make symptoms worse in the long run because of their physiological effects and by preventing you from using more helpful strategies. They can also cause

additional problems, such as legal issues, health issues, or conflict with other people, that can increase anxiety and lower mood. Anxiety medications have some valuable uses, but they are not long-term treatments: They are meant to be taken in small quantities for short periods because they are addictive and can increase anxiety on withdrawal. Talk to your doctor about the pros and cons of any meds. Some herbal remedies may be calming or mood boosting, but some have side effects or interact with other meds, so be sure to ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice. Meds are typically most helpful when combined with positive lifestyle changes and therapy.

5. **Giving up on a coping tool if it doesn't help right away.** It can take time to see progress, so be sure to give new strategies a chance to work. It's also important to have realistic expectations: We can't *eliminate* anxiety or low mood—these experiences are part of being human. However, we can get better at reducing anxiety and mood issues and coping with them more effectively.

## Wellness Tip: Exercise

Exercise is good for the body. But did you know that it is also good for your mental health? It has a positive impact on stress, helps improve memory and sleep, and boosts overall mood. Research indicates that even modest amounts of regular exercise (30 min a day five times a week, which can be broken into two 15-min segments a day), can make a difference—you don't have to go all out to feel the effects.

There have been many studies on the impact of regular exercise on depression and anxiety. It can be as effective as medication in reducing and preventing mild to moderate depression. There are several reasons: Not only does it promote neural growth and reduce inflammation in the brain, it also releases endorphins—powerful brain chemicals that make you feel good. What's more, activity boosts energy, relieves tension, and serves as a helpful distraction from worries and thoughts that feed depression and anxiety.

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You may not be aware that exercise is also an effective tool for managing ADHD. Because physical activity immediately boosts dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin in the brain, it can improve focus and attention. These effects work in a similar way to ADHD medications.

Starting or amping up an exercise routine can be tough. Try beginning with activity that is not too strenuous for just a few minutes a day a few days a week and build up the intensity, frequency, and length of exercise gradually. Try to do something you enjoy, and exercise with a friend to increase motivation. If you like dance but hate lifting weights, you're more likely to stick with that aerobics

class than doing a weight circuit at the gym. Hate working out indoors? Take a walk around campus or a hike in the forest. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Bike or walk to class instead of taking the bus.

Be sure to check with a medical professional before starting a new exercise routine if you have any injuries or health conditions that might make exercise problematic for you.



## Dear CAPS,

*How can I be less anxious about final exams?*

—*Stressed Test-Taker*

Part of managing stress around exams is to be prepared. Studying and keeping up with classes gives you the best shot of success, and this can reduce your anxiety. Getting extra help when needed (e.g., from a TA, professor, MSI) can also help you go into an exam feeling more confident.

There are some things you can do the night before and day of an exam that also can help. The night before, try to get a good night's sleep. Manage your time so you don't feel compelled to pull an all-nighter. Being sleep deprived will increase anxiety, and cram-

ming the night before is not usually the most effective study strategy.

The day of the test, try and eat a good (but not huge) breakfast that includes some protein for energy. Don't overload yourself on caffeine, as this can increase anxiety. If possible, avoid talking to other students who are super-stressed about the exam. Instead, talk to those who seem more calm, or take a few minutes by yourself to do a little deep breathing, listen to calming or inspiring music, or take a short walk. Try and get to the exam site a few minutes early to avoid adding to your stress by running late.

The messages you tell yourself also have a big impact on anxiety. If you find yourself engaging in self-criticism

or worry before the exam, practice telling yourself something more positive (but realistic). For example, "I prepared; now all I can do is to try my best," "I will get through this OK," "If I take some deep breaths, I'll feel better," "My self-worth does not depend on one exam." Trying to conjure up a positive image can help too—picture yourself finishing your exam and doing well and feeling confident.

If you would like some extra help combatting exam stress, drop in for CAPS' "Test Anxiety" workshop on Wednesday, March 7th, from 3 to 4:30 pm at our main office (Health Center complex, East Wing, 2nd floor). Our trained peer educators will give you great advice about managing exam stress. (Plus, there's free pizza!)



Photo by ccarlstead.



## Upcoming Events

See our [website calendar](#) and [Facebook page](#) for more upcoming events.

**LET'S TALK:** Let's Talk is a drop-in space where you can have a brief, confidential, chat with a professional CAPS counselor. It's free, and you don't need an appointment—just walk in! Let's Talk is held four afternoons a week at different, convenient locations around campus when classes are in session (not held during finals week or summer). All registered undergraduate and graduate UCSC students are welcome to any location of Let's Talk. Read more and see the current schedule on our [website](#).

**TEST ANXIETY WORKSHOP:** Drop in Wednesday, March 7th, from 3 to 4:30 pm at the CAPS main office (Health Center complex, East Wing, 2nd floor) for great tips from our trained Peer Educators on managing your test anxiety. (Plus, free pizza!)

**STRESS LESS WORKSHOP:** Drop in Friday, March 9th, from 11 am to 12:30 pm at the CAPS main office (Health Center complex, East Wing, 2nd floor) for great tips from our trained Peer Educators on managing stress. (Plus, free pizza!)

**WELLNESS WORKSHOPS:** CAPS offers a different wellness workshop every Wednesday, 3 to 4 pm when classes are in session (not during finals week or summer), at the Student Health Center Mural Room (first floor, front). These hour-long workshops provide info and tools for being mentally healthier. Topics include sleep, moods, self-compassion, mindfulness, and improving academic focus. Read more on our [website](#) and [Facebook page](#).

**YOGA FOR MENTAL HEALTH:** This drop-in yoga group meets Thursdays from 4 to 5:30 pm in the Student Health Center Mural Room (first floor, front). Led by CAPS psychiatric nurse practitioner and yoga teacher Sharon Haight-Carter, this group teaches ways to use yoga for mental health and well being. Appropriate for all levels. No sign-up required—just come to one or all weeks! Last meeting is Thursday, March 15th. Yoga for Mental Health will also be offered in spring quarter, same day and time (start date TBD).

**CAPS GROUPS:** CAPS offers a variety of therapy and support groups. Most of our weekly groups are taking members for spring—call to find out more about signing up. We also have some drop-in groups, where you can drop in any or every week with no sign-up or appointment required. Check out our [Groups web page](#) or call us at (831) 459-2628 for more info.

