

Boosting mind and body for exams

With Junior and Leaving Cert starting this week, I give advice how to perform to your full potential. Next week, I will complete my series on Bipolar disorder in the Westmeath Topic by explaining the treatment of bipolar disorder. A more comprehensive and referenced article done by me on Bipolar disorder can be obtained for free in Whelehans Pharmacy.

Avoid marathon study sessions

Marathon study sessions are not advised. Breaking your study day into sections will help as it is harder to concentrate for long periods without a break. A study plan will help achieve this. It is important to allow time for sleep, exercise and fun.

Reducing anxiety

Going to bed and getting up at the same time each day reduces stress and ensures your mind is sharp and works to its full potential. Having a regular sleep pattern can increase exam performance by up to 30%. Although it can be tempting to study the night before an exam, this may only increase your anxiety levels. Try to relax the night before exams by doing something you enjoy like reading a book or going for a swim. If it causes you too much anxiety not to study the night before, it is best just to review what you have studied already rather than starting into new topics.

Familiarise yourself in advance with each exam paper before each exam. This will help prevent any nasty surprises while in the exam hall. Before each exam, do out a quick plan of how long you need to spend at each question based on how many marks each question is worth. It may sound obvious, but always read the instructions on each exam paper and know what you are being asked for. Always double read each question before answering. With adrenaline flowing, it is easy to misread a question and jumping in to it too quick and answering it incorrectly.

Food for thought

When studying and facing into exams, energy levels are important. A healthy balanced diet is important and there are certain foods that will help prevent an energy lull. Oatmeal it releases energy slowly. Therefore porridge is an ideal start to your day as you are less likely to get hungry before lunch and you should not have an energy lull. Coffee stimulates the mind and makes us more productive at work and study. Limiting your coffee intake to two cups per day can be very beneficial for our energy levels. Drinking more than two cups of coffee per day is counter-productive as you end up getting withdrawal symptoms, one of which include fatigue. The same is true when you drink too much tea. It is important to drink plenty of water when drinking coffee as coffee is a mild diuretic and can leave you dehydrated. Bear in mind, drinking too much tea or coffee before an exam may mean having to get up to go to the toilet which may upset your rhythm.

Lunch

Many students experience fatigue or a dip in energy after lunch. High-protein lunches appear to produce greater alertness and more focused attention, whereas lunches that are high in fat tend to lead to greater fatigue, sleepiness and distraction. Chicken, tuna, lean beef and eggs are examples of lunch options that are high in protein and low in fat.

Bananas

They are rich in Vitamin B6, potassium, vitamin C and Fibre. They are an ideal healthy snack if you have a sugar craving while studying as they taste great and contain plenty of carbohydrates, the body's main source of energy. Chocolate, sweets and other high sugar snacks cause an energy crash within a couple of hours as they raise sugar levels quickly but there is soon a sudden drop causing tiredness. Other fruits such as grapes, apples and watermelon are also fat free energising snacks which are full of nutrients.

Water

Staying hydrated is important to ensure all our nutrients are absorbed properly. Water also means we can release heat by sweating. Dehydration causes fatigue. In a climate like Ireland, we should aim to drink about 6 to 8 glasses of water per day (approx 1.2 litres) to stop us getting dehydrated.

B vitamins

Our body uses a variety of enzymes to break down food and convert it to energy. Many vitamins are needed for this process, particularly the B vitamins B1, B2, B3, B5 and B6. Therefore B vitamins are essential for energy release. Example of good sources of B vitamins include bananas, lentils, potatoes, beans, brewers yeast, egg yoke and yogurt. The B vitamins have many other roles in the body including ensuring a healthy central system and immune system, promoting metabolism and ensuring cell growth. There is no substitute for healthy eating, however, if you feel you need a pick me up in the run up to and during your exams, Whelehan's Tonic contains iron and B vitamins and can give you the energy boost you may need.

Fish Oils

There is evidence that omega 3 fatty acids are an effective stress buster. Studies report highly significant improvement in mood from omega 3 fatty acids supplementation. Research has shown a link between the amount of a fish people in different countries eat and the level of depression. In Japan, where people eat on average 70kg of fish a year, the rate of depression is 0.12%. Whereas in New Zealand, where people eat only 18kg of fish a year, the rate of depression is almost 50 times higher. It is thought that omega 3 stimulates serotonin in the brain which can boost your mood. DHA has been shown in research to aid memory and concentration. Omega 3 fatty acids are primarily found in oily fish such as salmon, fresh tuna, mackerel, herring, sardines and pilchards. Everyone should eat two portions of fish per week, one of them oily. If you don't eat enough fish, you may want to increase your omega 3 levels with Whelehans high strength Omega 3 capsules which are now only €5.99 per 30 pack.