



DEALING WITH EXAM STRESS

The College of Intensive Care Medicine (CICM) examinations are stressful for trainees to negotiate. The exam is a compulsory part of training in order to ensure acquisition of appropriate knowledge and skills to become an intensivist. This requires long hours of study over a prolonged period of time. It is also during a period when trainees are often already working very hard to negotiate the training scheme. These exams represent perhaps the biggest hurdles many trainees have ever faced and can seem overwhelming. However, exam success is an achievement of which to be proud and the work done in passing sets trainees up with a strong platform to build their intensive care careers.

It is important to acknowledge that although this is an enormous challenge, success in the exam does not define the person and failure is a setback rather than a catastrophe. Although the pass rate for both exam parts sits at around 50-60%, most candidates will eventually make it through. Remember that even some of the most esteemed and respected intensivists may have attempted this exam more than once.

The following article provides some strategies for dealing with the stress of exams. Much of this you will already know but the importance on checking in on your welfare cannot be underestimated. Looking after your welfare is part of exam success.

General trainee welfare issues - It is important to consider the welfare implications of the exam in the context of the whole intensive care training scheme. Strategies for dealing with trainee welfare are outlined in this article: (see "Welfare of the Intensive Care Trainee" article with hyperlink - https://www.cicm.org.au/CICM_Media/CICMSite/CICM-Website/Fellows/Special%20Interest%20Groups/Trainee-Welfare-Website-Resource_1.pdf).

- 1. Study plan** - Success in the exam and keeping stress under control is assisted by having a good plan and sticking to it. Time spent discussing what is required with previous candidates, gathering resources and plotting a clear course reduces uncertainty and creates a platform for success. A study timetable should be realistic and adhered to where possible. Trust your brain. Although it can seem daunting to move on from a topic, a broad body of knowledge must be acquired to enable deeper understanding and perseverating on a small area risks stalling. Good time management throughout the study process can significantly reduce the stress involved.
- 2. Warning loved ones** - The demands in the lead up to an exam are significant. In order to get through, family, partners and friends should be made aware of what is happening and the important timeframes. This is so that they can provide support where required, identify wellbeing issues and to have some understanding of the reduced availability of the exam candidate at this time. However, it is also important to acknowledge the role they play and the demands this may impose on them too. Some time set aside for them and expressions of gratitude to maintain important relationships may help frame the exam as a team goal.
- 3. Discussing with others** - The intensive care community can provide plenty of support and reassurance at this time. Although involvement in study groups and study techniques are up to the individual and their needs, it is recommended to seek out some colleagues with whom to discuss your exam preparation. Having understanding colleagues for empathy at such a time can allow some debrief and normalisation of the process. Exam courses may also be useful in this respect as they allow the candidate to gauge where they sit compared to other candidates and from course faculty.

4. **Annual leave** - Annual leave should be taken for rest and relaxation. Exam preparation is intense and requires breaks to refresh. Leave will allow the trainee to be at their best when they are studying. It can also be helpful to plan for a block of leave following the completion of exam to recharge and have something exciting to look forward to.
5. **“All in” - committing** - Success in the exam does require significant commitment, focus and a determination to succeed. Where possible, unnecessary distractions or other commitments should be set aside to enable the best chance of success. However, this does not mean being totally single-minded or uni-dimensional. It is important to maintain some connection and balance and allocate time to some other activities and people.
6. **Contingency planning** - Although it is important to visualise and work towards exam success, failure is always possible. Having thought about this possibility and having a plan in case it comes to pass is useful insurance. For candidates who are unsuccessful, the supervisor of training can assist in providing feedback from the college, support in regrouping and planning ongoing training. Other colleagues can be very useful in helping to debrief and process afterwards.
7. **Maintaining perspective** - A sense of perspective helps to prevent the exam from dominating. There are plenty of more important things in life. When too overwhelming, it can help to put the exam back in its box by acknowledging that it is simply a big, difficult test. Although it is necessary to complete CICM training, its timing is voluntary and it can be deferred if necessary.
8. **Psychology** - There are many psychological aspects involved in optimising performance for the exam and managing stress. A psychologist or some form of supervision may be useful in assisting with thought processes.
9. **Practice and feedback** - Seeking out senior colleagues can be useful in providing feedback and practice prior to the actual exam. Practice enables stress inoculation whereby regular, smaller exposures to exam stress reduce the burden on the day with familiarity. Along with feedback, it also exposes areas for further development and reassures where training is adequate.
10. **Personal health - sleep, exercise, relaxation time** - It is important to maintain one's personal health when under pressure. Good sleep hygiene will reduce fatigue for study. Regular exercise will assist in energy levels, mood and improve cognitive performance. When unwell, sick days should be used to recover and when well, time should still be scheduled for rest and relaxation to allow brain recovery time.
11. **Personal expectations** - Be kind to yourself. We are all human and at times of high physical, cognitive and emotional demands, it is important to acknowledge this. The exams are stressful for every trainee and it is normal to feel stressed.

Overall, the CICM examinations are both enormous hurdles to negotiate. However success, once achieved, is worth celebrating. Passing a post graduate medical exam is an accomplishment of which to be proud and represents a significant step forward in development towards specialist practice.