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To cram or not to cram? that is the question

It is a student's worst nightmare – sitting in an exam staring at a blank page, unable to remember anything learned in a whole course of study. This experience, called "white out", is not just a nightmare – it is a reality for many students. The stress of exams prevents them from remembering material that has been easy for them in class.

Anxiety caused by lack of preparation and lack of sleep is the main cause of this exam stress. We advise students to not cram the evening before an exam. If they have not mastered the material in the months leading up to this exam, there is little chance that it can be mastered at this stage. It is much better to relax, get to bed early and have a good breakfast. This will help them to at least do well on the material they do know, rather than forgetting this as well.

A good memory is a student's best asset. Whether your child is a quick learner or a slow learner, knowledge and skill gained need to be stored and recalled for it to be of any use. So a good memory is actually more important than the speed with which concepts are acquired.

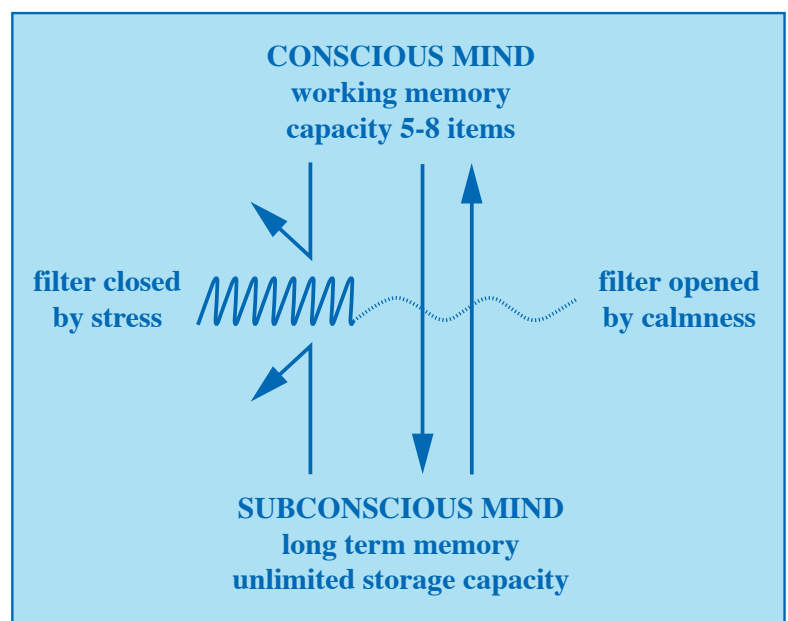
How the memory works

Students say things like "If I don't study the night before, I'll forget it in the exam." This means they believe their short-term memory is capable of storing the information. It is not. It is like a bucket with holes in it. The short term memory is also called the working memory. The brain keeps items in the conscious mind only long enough to work on them before either disposing of them or storing them in the subconscious mind in long term memory.

There is a filter between the conscious and subconscious mind. Stress speeds up the electrical activity in the brain and prevents the input of information into long-term memory by closing the filter between the conscious and the subconscious mind. Stress also prevents the recall of information from the subconscious. You can slow the electrical activity in the brain to the alpha level by using relaxation techniques. This makes learning and remembering easier by opening the filter.

Putting something into your long-term memory requires three things: it is important to you, it is interesting to you and it is understood by you. If one of these is missing, it is more difficult. Many students waste a lot of time trying to memorise something before they understand it.

To memorise material, try to involve several of the physical senses, especially sight, hearing and touch.



The use of imagery, drawings, shapes, colours and rhymes when first learning and when reviewing material can help. New ideas should be associated with old ones as an aid to understanding – mind maps are very useful for this. All these activities which use the right side of the brain really help to store memories in the subconscious mind in such a way that they can be recalled later when needed.

Repetition of what is learnt should occur ten minutes after the end of study, again twenty-four hours later, one week later, one month later and each month thereafter. Organised revision like this can keep recall at almost one hundred percent. Try to adopt a positive attitude towards the subject before you try to memorise it, because it is natural to forget something, especially if it is not interesting or important. Students

often wonder how teachers can remember so much. Teaching others is actually the most effective way to remember something yourself. I am sure your parents would love to hear your lecture on “Biodiversity in the rainforest”.

Parents can help their children to cope with an exam period by reminding them of the following:

- Try to stay focussed – it won’t last forever.
 - Keep your study program balanced across all subjects.
 - Include periods of rest and recreation.
 - Eat well and get some exercise.
 - Be positive – you have the talent, you are putting in the effort, you deserve the reward.
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