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# How to Deal with EPSO Exam Stress

## Addressing the Elephant in the Room

Written by Jan De Sutter

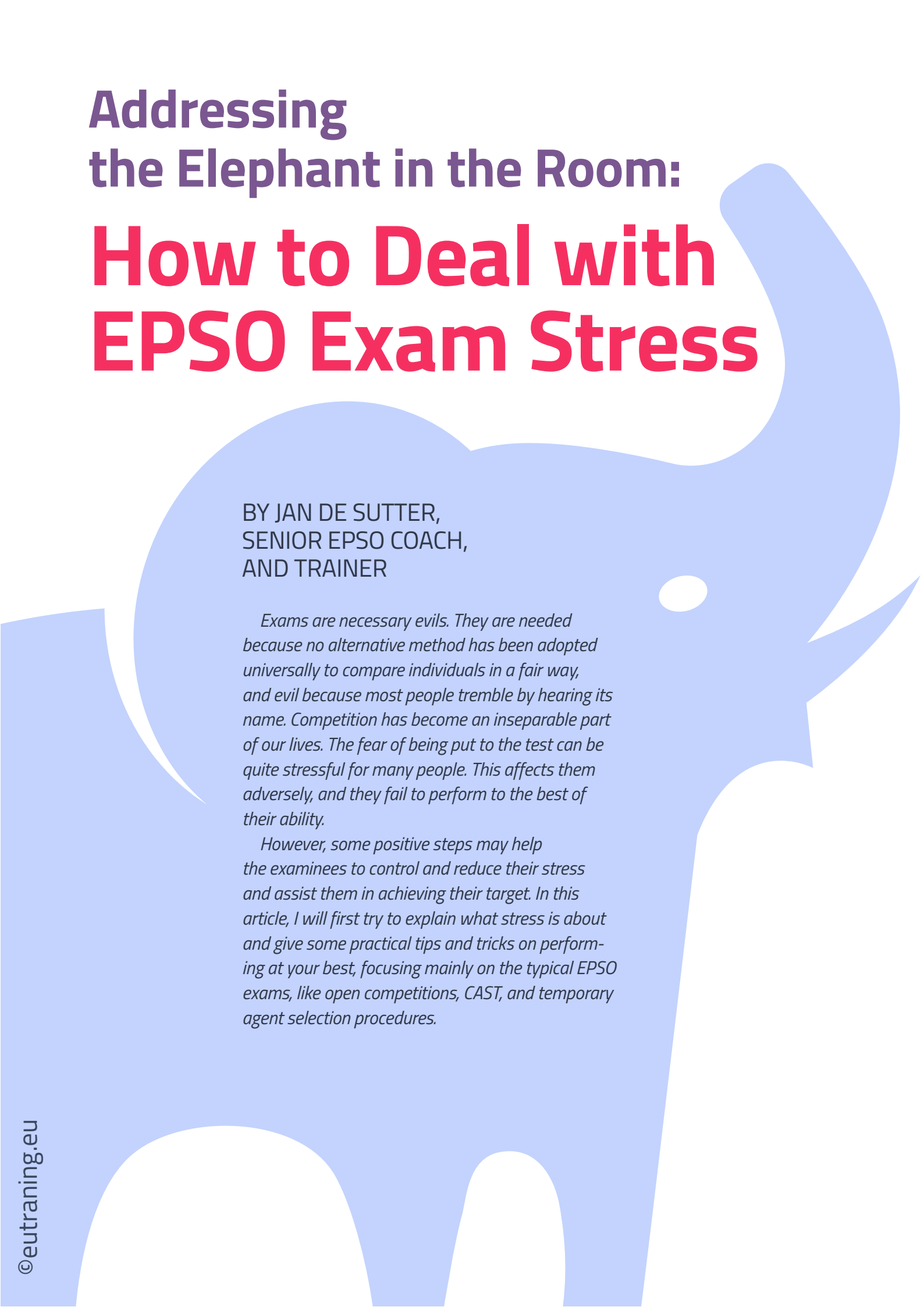
*Senior EPSO coach and trainer*

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# Addressing the Elephant in the Room:

# How to Deal with EPSO Exam Stress



BY JAN DE SUTTER,  
SENIOR EPSO COACH,  
AND TRAINER

*Exams are necessary evils. They are needed because no alternative method has been adopted universally to compare individuals in a fair way, and evil because most people tremble by hearing its name. Competition has become an inseparable part of our lives. The fear of being put to the test can be quite stressful for many people. This affects them adversely, and they fail to perform to the best of their ability.*

*However, some positive steps may help the examinees to control and reduce their stress and assist them in achieving their target. In this article, I will first try to explain what stress is about and give some practical tips and tricks on performing at your best, focusing mainly on the typical EPSO exams, like open competitions, CAST, and temporary agent selection procedures.*

# The Biology of Fear

*"Don't be afraid of your fears. They're not there to scare you. They're there to let you know that something is worth it."*

**- C. JoyBell C.**

Fear is a biological response to imminent danger.

Primarily, a brain region called the hippocampus is involved in our response to perceived threats. This region, and the prefrontal cortex are responsible for memory storage and decision making. When stimulated, these centres assess the perceived threat, such as the sight of a wild animal, and trigger a fear response in the amygdala, another cluster of neurons sometimes called our 'emotional brain.' The amygdala responds by sending signals to the hypothalamus, which then stimulates the sympathetic nervous system, prompting the adrenal glands to release adrenaline into the bloodstream.

This release of adrenaline results in increased heart rate, contracted blood vessels, and dilated air passages. These changes allow more blood to get to the muscles and more oxygen to the lungs quickly - so your physical performance improves, and you are ready to either run away from the threat or defend yourself. This is known as the 'fight or flight' response.

Once we act, the fear becomes pointless. The fear goes away since acting makes us feel in control. Our focus becomes on our task - fighting or fleeing - and the worry gets relegated to the background. Once you've passed the fight-or-flight moment, your heart rate and breathing slow down, and your muscles relax. In a short time, your body returns to its natural state without any lasting adverse effects.

The amygdala stores the memories of stimuli related to fear and the hippocampus seems to hold all the fear memories about contextual information about the stimulus. So, our response to fear is just another pattern recognition mechanism.

All this may seem a bit complicated, but the main thing to remember here is that the 'fight or flight' response isn't a conscious decision. It's an automatic reaction, so you can't control it.

# Stress

*"Cheer up, the worst is yet to come. Simply put, quit worrying over the little stuff and wait for something really big."*

**- Unknown**



While fear is a response to imminent danger, we speak of anxiety when no threat is imminent. Stress is a state of anxiety that persists for a long period.

We are no longer wandering in the woods encountering dangerous animals like our ancestors did. Currently, our fears are usually about things we feel helpless to act upon, such as climate change, Covid-19, the war in Ukraine, or not being good enough. Our body and brain don't know what to do with the energy summoned to act. And in return, we are immobilised by it; 'freezing' is fight-or-flight on hold. It's also called reactive immobility or attentive immobility.

Behind our unconscious fight-flight-freeze reaction to danger, several powerful hormones are in charge. A squirt of adrenaline raises your heart rate, blood pressure, and energy supplies, preparing your body for immediate action. And another hormone, cortisol, allows the body to concentrate on the dangerous situation. It does so by increasing sugar in the bloodstream and suppressing the processes that aren't immediately essential. Cortisol takes more time than adrenaline for you to feel the effects.

Usually, after a dangerous situation passes, our cortisol and adrenaline levels will return to normal, and we will feel calm and at ease. However, getting too stressed regularly can have a harmful effect because cortisol suppresses bodily functions such as the digestive system, the reproductive system, and growth.

However, not all stress is bad. Some stress can help us to perform better. This type of stress is called *eustress*<sup>1</sup>. Eustress also boosts happy hormones like endorphins, dopamine, and others.

Dr Peter Nixon, a British heart doctor, developed a diagram called the Human Function Curve (Figure 1) that illustrates the balance of good and bad stress. Nixon calls any state where you are awake and reacting to stimuli arousal. If you compare the amount of pressure to your performance, your performance improves when you experience eustress. However, according to this model, there is a point where chronic stress can impede your performance. In Figure 1, you can see in the boredom zone, for example, that your performance is low. You may not have enough positive stress to perform at a decent level. When raising the pressure, your performance improves into the comfort zone. When you reach the fatigue zone, you could experience chronic stress, which interferes with your performance. As you can see, performance improves with a certain amount of stress, but once that stress becomes episodic or chronic, your performance worsens.

Note that the peak performance zone lies past the comfort zone, meaning that going beyond the usual routine is needed to perform at your best. Also, the stress levels associated with the different zones are highly individual; everybody responds to stress differently.

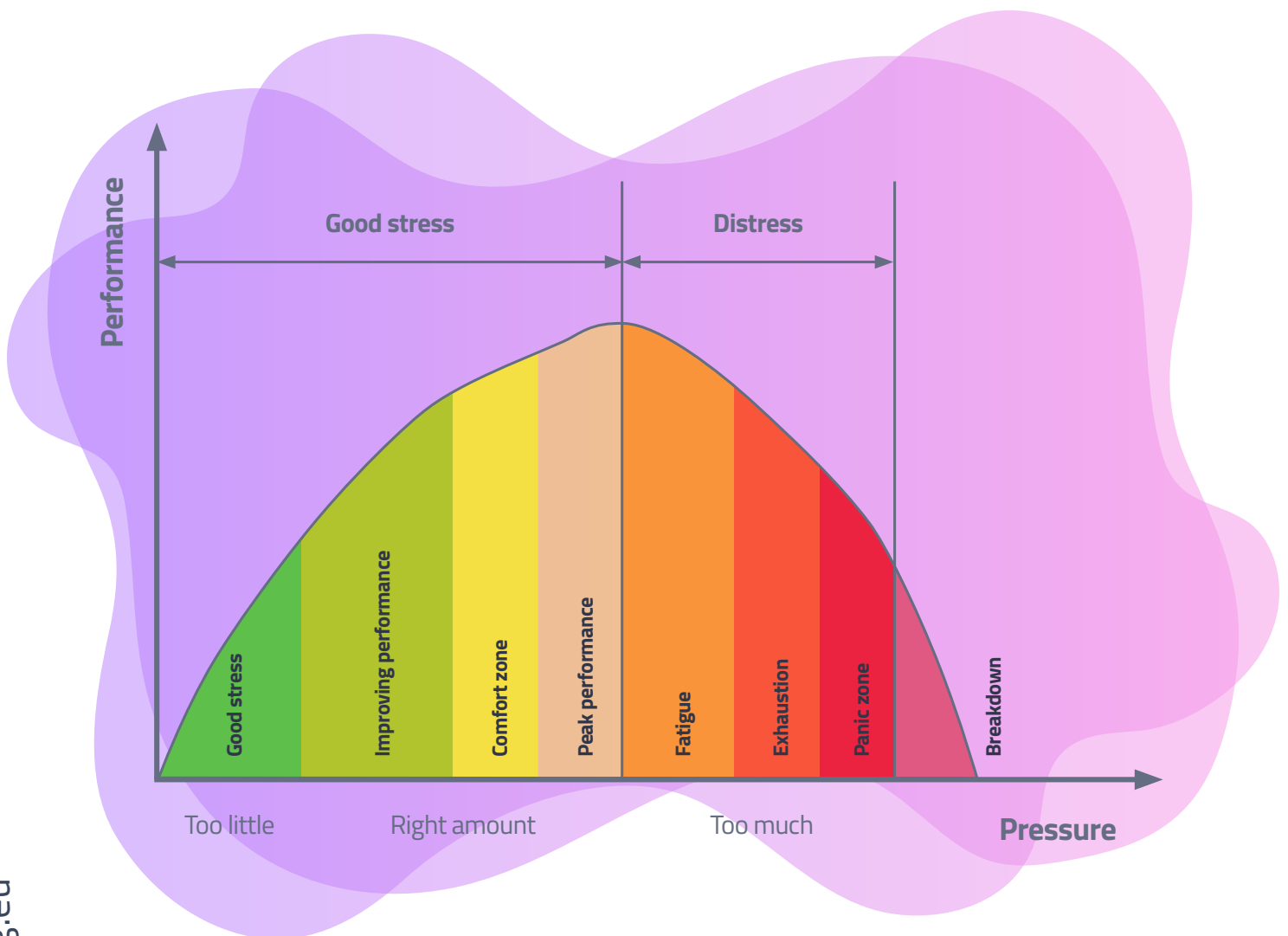


Figure 1 - Human Function Curve

# General Tips to Control Exam Stress

## PREPARATION IS KEY

The more you prepare for your exam, the less likely you'll feel nervous leading up to it. Start planning and preparing for your exam early.

EPSO is notoriously bad in respecting their planning. In recent (Covid) times, candidates had to wait more than two years between the pre-selection stage and the Assessment Centre. They typically only announce an 'indicative' period of when the next part of the process will take place and even then, you don't know whether you will come at the beginning or at the end of that period. This uncertainty generates a lot of chronic stress with the candidates, to the point of being discouraged or dropping out for other reasons.

The best way of fighting this uncertainty – and the associated stress – is to prepare a timetable, as soon as you have subscribed to a competition and follow it regularly. You can base your schedule on the indicative planning from EPSO, as they will never shorten the timing, so this is a safe bet. Be aware, however that they will most likely NOT respect their own timetable, but don't count on it. See this as an opportunity to be even better prepared.

*"A book may give you excellent suggestions on how best to conduct yourself in the water, but sooner or later you must get wet ..."*

**- Dale Carnegie**





Another uncertainty is whether you will have to take the psychometric tests (better known as the 'Computer Based Tests or CBTs<sup>2</sup>) during the pre-selection phase or as part of the Assessment Centre, which comes many months later. This is decided only when the number of candidates is known. If this number is small, the CBTs will be part of the Assessment Centre, if not they will be in the pre-selection phase.

As for preparing for the CBTs, the advice is that you can never start soon enough, even before you think of subscribing to a competition. Since these tests are purely based on thinking patterns that can be learned by practice – a lot of practice – it is never too soon for 'rewiring your brain'. For most EPSO competitions, you only need a 'pass mark' for the CBTs, and the scores for the CBTs will never be considered for the final score, so 'good enough is best', there is no reason to worry about this. When practicing early for the CBTs, you will soon find your strengths and weaknesses (verbal vs. numerical vs. abstract reasoning), and you can focus on the weak spots. EU Training has a database with thousands of CBT questions<sup>3</sup> in 24 languages, and they provide classroom training (online)<sup>4</sup> to kickstart your exercise practice.

For the other exercises (intermediate stage and Assessment Centre), it only makes sense to start preparing once you pass the pre-selection stage, as there will be months ahead before you must take the exam. No need to stress out beforehand. Here too, EU Training has a lot to offer<sup>5</sup>: webinars, eBooks, written exercises, EU-knowledge practice questions, classroom training, and individual coaching, online or in person. Be aware that, with the exception of the CBI Simulations, *the classroom training sessions* are only available in the weeks preceding the (indicative) test period and that this training is not 'generic' but focuses on specific competitions, so you should consider this when filling out your timetable. For individual coaching, there is more flexibility, but the coaches are very busy, especially during the weeks before an exam, so don't wait to book a session, even months beforehand.



## DON'T PROCRASTINATE

Many people tend to procrastinate when preparing for an exam. Procrastination is carrying out less urgent tasks in preference to more urgent ones or doing more pleasurable things instead of less enjoyable ones. Otherwise said, procrastination is putting off tasks, sometimes to the last minute before the deadline. Procrastination is a negative behaviour. Procrastination is wasting time. And above all, procrastination generates stress. I suggest watching Tim Urban's talk *Inside the Mind of a Master Procrastinator*<sup>6</sup>. He entertainingly explains the mechanisms of procrastination and makes you think about your behaviour.

If you do not regularly indulge in meditation, you are advised to bring about a slight change in your daily routine in the months leading up to your exam.

- In the morning, for 10 minutes, sit quietly with your legs folded and close your eyes.
- Forget everything and concentrate on the items listed in your timetable.
- Try to evaluate your situation, how much work you have completed, and how much is yet to be finished.
- Then decide which topics you want to complete on that day.

This will serve a dual purpose. First, for 10 minutes, your focus remains on your exams only, serving the purpose of meditation. Since meditation is nothing but keeping your focus on one thing and forgetting the rest. Many people find it hard to meditate since their mind is always thinking about multiple things at a time. They find it hard to concentrate on any one thing even for 10 minutes. Secondly, since you are thinking of your studies only, you are mentally devising a target you intend to achieve on that day. This helps to plan your studies daily.



## BECOME AN EXPERT ON YOURSELF

Sun Tzu was a Chinese military general, strategist, philosopher, and writer who lived during the Eastern Zhou period. One of his famous quotes sounds like **"know yourself and you will win all battles"**. The same is true when preparing for an exam.

In EPSO, the very first question they will ask you during a competency-based interview is to present yourself. The reason why is that – for this interview – the only thing they know about you is your name. They haven't seen your CV or application form because they must conduct the interview in a neutral and unbiased way. Likewise, during the so-called 'Interview in the Field' they may ask you to present yourself first, because they only had the opportunity to skim through your Talent Screener (which may even be outdated because of a long selection procedure). The same is true for the final job interview if you are on a reserve list.

Being able to deliver a good self-presentation is a skill that any interviewer will highly appreciate as it makes their life a lot easier. And you can prepare that at any point in time, even before you think of taking an exam. The tips are straightforward:

- **Only provide them with information that is relevant to them:** dates, names, durations, places, academic achievements, job roles you have been doing etc. Your age, number of children, what food you like, or your hobbies are irrelevant to them. Neither is it appropriate to tell them how good a team player or a leader you are, or why it is so vital for you to get this job (if they want to know they will ask about it with a separate question).
- **Keep a simple structure:** e.g., first talk about your academic achievements and then your professional career (even if these overlap). And do it in chronological order, starting with your first job and ending with the current one.

- Do not learn your entire self-presentation by heart, but **write down the keywords** (dates, names, etc...) in the proper (chronological) order and **learn these by heart**. That shouldn't be a big deal because you know these things anyway. When delivering the self-presentation, just improvise around those keywords and your presentation will feel and sound genuine and natural.

Also, during the competency-based interview, they will ask you to tell them stories about situations in your past. These situations will invariably be based on what is called an "anchor", which are things that every normal human being certainly has experienced in the past. Well then, the list of anchors is not a secret, so you can prepare for this interview by digging in your memory for the best example you can find for every one of these anchors.

In the Field-related interview, they will be mainly interested in your past career. You can also prepare by digging in your memory – or your CV – for the relevant information (dates, names, etc...) to reproduce during the interview.

In job interviews, they may ask you some "theoretical" questions about the field. Once again, you don't have to wait for the interview date to dig up your university courses, or do some research, to be prepared for these "unexpected" questions.

## RESEARCH THE EXAMINERS

In EPSO, the list of examiners is always public. Have a look at that list and try to figure out who these people are (background, current job, etc.) just to get a feeling, and thereby taking away some anxiety on your side.

## PRACTICE OFTEN AND ALOUD

It would help if you continued practicing until you're comfortable with what you're going to say. Your confidence will increase as you realise that you know what you're going to say.

# The Final Countdown



*"The human brain starts working the moment you are born and never stops until you stand up to speak in public."*

**- George Jessel**

## DAYS BEFORE THE EXAM

- **Last Rehearsals:** A great musician practices a symphony hundreds of times before playing it in front of an audience. A great speaker practices the words before they find themselves on the spot. Rehearsing will enable you to detect errors, look and feel more comfortable, improve your gestures' effectiveness, reduce annoying motions, ensure a strong start and finish, help present your visuals smoothly, and end on time. You can ask for a 'dress rehearsal' with a coach, for example for an oral presentation, any of the interviews, or a role-play or you can do it with a 'sparring partner' like your spouse, a colleague or a friend.

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Rehearsing in front of a mirror doesn't make much sense. You cannot think about your words and gestures and observe your behaviour simultaneously. And in a mirror, you don't see yourself as others see you. It is better to use a camera or a webcam and record yourself to see yourself as an outside observer.

If possible, practice in front of a live audience and ask them to be very critical. Have the test audience role-play some questions and situations that may arise. If you're rehearsing alone, pull out questions from a hat and practice answering them randomly.

- **Visit the venue:** Try to visit the presentation site in advance, if possible. If you are unfamiliar with the city, test out the route and transportation mode from your hotel to the venue. Ask for a mobile phone number of a person you can contact in case you are stuck in traffic or encounter some other problem en route.

If your exam is taking place online, make sure you have a good quality connection, familiarize yourself with the online tools, read the instructions carefully, and participate in the (mandatory) connection test a few days before the exam.

It may be nice to know that Ambiorix Centre<sup>7</sup> has facilities, office spaces for rent, where you can take your online exams without having to rely on the whimsical at home.

- **Go to sleep early:** Sleep is essential to several brain functions, including how neurons communicate. Your brain and body stay remarkably active while you sleep. A study published in July 2019 in the journal *Current Biology*<sup>8</sup> indicates a poor night's sleep negatively impacts brain function, including the work of amygdalae. These are almond-sized clusters of neurons located deep within the brain's temporal lobes and responsible for the consolidation of memories for long-term learning, and the processing and storage of memories associated with events that cause strong emotions. Upon awakening, study volunteers who experienced disrupted sleep remained reactive to emotional events from the previous day. Needless to say, a heavy meal or hanging about in the bar of your hotel before going to sleep is not such a good idea.



## HOURS BEFORE THE EXAM

- **Exercise lightly:** Around one hour before the exam, do some light stretching, a few knee-bends, or take a walk around the block. This sends oxygen to your brain.
- **Arrive much earlier:** You don't want to get stuck in traffic while people are waiting for you. Get to the room early and ensure you're comfortable with the set-up.
- **Focus on positive thoughts and images:** You can decrease stress and increase a sense of well-being and control by holding positive thoughts and images in your mind. Visualise yourself doing a brilliant exam.

## MINUTES BEFORE THE EXAM

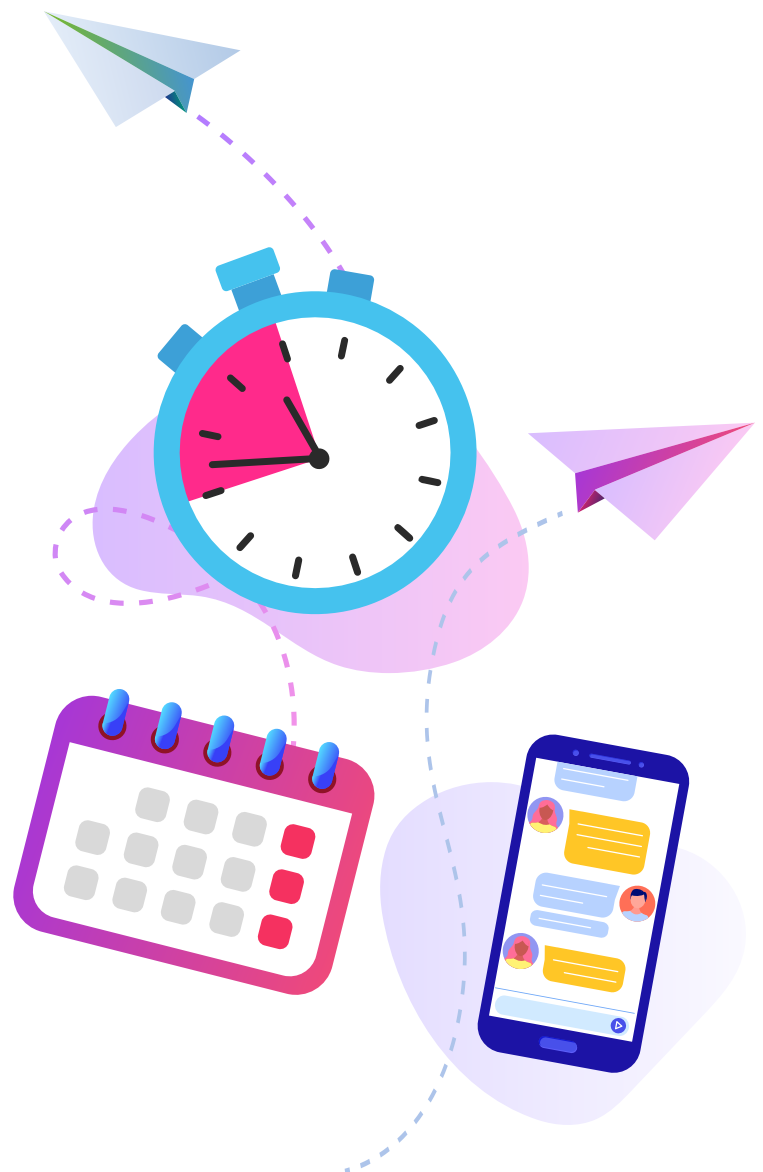
What you do in the last minutes before your performance can significantly affect the quality of your presentation.

- **Use the restroom.** Needing the toilet is a common physiological reaction to stage fright. And you wouldn't want to 'have to go' during your exam. So, why take chances? While you're in the restroom, check yourself out in the mirror. To ease any potential concerns about your physical appearance, you should take a quick look in the mirror before you start. This way, you'll have one less thing to worry about.
- **Switch off your phone.** Don't scroll through social media, read the news, or listen to voice messages minutes before your big presentation. It may seem like a good distraction, but if you see, hear, or read something upsetting, it might throw you off.
- **Remove any potentially distracting items** before you start the exam; ID badges, cell phones, sunglasses, etc.

- **Sip water** that is at room temperature. This helps with dry-mouth and clears the throat. Avoid cold food and drinks, dairy products, and carbonated beverages and ensure a glass or bottle of water is within arm's reach during your speech.
- **Assume a standing position.** By standing up you activate energy ahead of time, give your body a chance to warm up and place yourself in a posture ready for action.

## SECONDS BEFORE THE EXAM

- **Take several deep breaths.** Just before you start, breathe in, counting up to seven, and breathe out when you reach eleven. Do these three or four times. It helps slow the build-up of adrenaline and reduces your heart rate, thereby diminishing feelings of nervousness or anxiety.



# Managing Stress During the Exam

*"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."*

**- Maya Angelou**



## DON'T SAY HOW NERVOUS YOU ARE

Try not to complain to others about how anxious you feel. Dwelling on it will just intensify your anxiety. Instead pretend to be confident even if you are not.

## FAKE IT TILL YOU BECOME IT

In her famous TED talk<sup>9</sup> Harvard psychologist Amy Cuddy describes power poses as expansive and open stances where you take up a lot of space and hold your arms and legs away from your body. When you expand your body, "your mind starts to feel more confident and powerful - it starts to see those challenging situations not as threats but as opportunities."

## PLAY A ROLE

Taking an exam is like a performance, no different than when an actor steps onto the stage. You can pretend to be someone else on stage when you speak. You can pretend to be more poised and confident - someone who thrives while speaking in public.

## LOOK AT THE BIG PICTURE

What's the worst that can happen if you don't do well in this exam? Likely, nothing. You'll move on with your life, and so will everyone else.

## FOCUS ON PATTERNS

When you speak, try to get into a rhythm or a flow. Keep your sentences short and to the point and repeat key points. A short pause in between points can add anticipation to what you are going to say next.



## KEEP A GLASS OF WATER NEXT TO YOU

Having a dry mouth while taking an exam happens to everyone. To keep from feeling like your mouth is filled with cotton, take sips of water occasionally. Squeezing some lemon into your water helps as well. It helps lubricate your throat. The water should be at room temperature, not colder.

## MAKE THE EXTRA ENERGY WORK FOR YOU

The adrenaline has prepared your body and brain with extra energy to fight, not to flight. You can use it in a positive way to help give a dynamic impression during an exam.

## KEEP IT SIMPLE

Albert Einstein allegedly said that if you can't explain things to a six year old, you don't understand them yourself. He also said everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.

## AVOID TALKING TOO FAST

Talking fast interferes with your breathing patterns. When you speak too fast you will breathe less. Feeling short of breath will make you panic and more susceptible to fear. People tend to talk more quickly when they are nervous so make a conscious effort to slow down. You will be less likely to stumble over your words if you aren't rushing through your answers.

## RESPECT THE TIMING

An exam typically fits in a tight schedule, and you must respect the time you are given while conveying the complete message you want to come across. Prepare your timing in advance, use repetition and silence to calibrate on-the-spot. Speak slower.

## DON'T FEAR A MOMENT OF SILENCE

If you lose track of what you're saying or start to feel nervous, and your mind goes blank, it may seem like you've been silent for an eternity. In reality, it's probably only a few seconds. Even if it's longer, it's likely your audience won't mind a pause to consider what you've been saying. Just take a few slow, deep breaths.

## RIGHT AFTER THE EXAM

Once the exam is finished, do something else. Don't try to focus on all the mistakes you have allegedly made. It's pointless. It will only increase your stress, not reduce it. Start preparing with a clean mental slate for the next step.

# What if you didn't pass the exam?

*"The difference between winning and losing is most often not quitting."*

**- Walt Disney**



## SHOW RESILIENCE

Try not to complain to others about how anxious you feel. Dwelling on it will just intensify your anxiety. Instead pretend to be confident even if you are not.

## FAKE IT TILL YOU BECOME IT

Resilience is an individual's ability to properly adapt to stress and adversity. Individuals demonstrate resilience when they can face difficult experiences and rise above them - or "bounce back" - with ease. The least you can say is that not passing an exam is a difficult experience. You have put a lot of time and effort into this, and it is normal that you are disappointed at this stage. There is a common misconception that people who are resilient experience no negative emotions or thoughts and display optimism in all situations. The truth remains that resilience is demonstrated within individuals who can effectively and relatively easily navigate their way around negative experiences and utilize effective methods of coping with this.

## THINK HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THE SITUATION

You should remain fully aware of the fact that **you are one of the few people to have made it to the final stage of the exam.** Most of your competitors didn't make it that far. They were either not admitted on formal grounds, or they were eliminated from the exam during the pre-selection phase. In EPSO, the figures are extreme: for some competitions only 0.5 percent (that is 5 out of 1000) make it to that stage, and you were one of them!

There is absolutely no ground for self-doubt, or a trough in your self-esteem. You have proven that – at least intrinsically – you have what it takes to become an EU official. Consider that – in a small town of say 10.000 people, somewhere in Europe, on average only one will be an EU official (there are roughly 50.000 people working for the institutions compared to a total population of 500 million). The fact that you were invited to the exam means that your dream to become that one has been seriously considered. EPSO, and the EU institutions, have gone through great lengths for that.



The EPSO competitions are exactly that: competitions. Only the very best win. You could compare them with the Olympic games: only the very best (at that given moment in time) make it to the podium. This doesn't mean that the others are bad athletes. On the contrary, they were the best of breed in their country, but they didn't make it to the podium.

## YOU HAVE LEARNED A LOT

There is at least one positive outcome to your effort of participating in an EPSO exam: you will have learned a lot.

First, you have learned a lot about yourself. You are now aware of the fact that you can do this. You are smart enough, skilled enough and motivated enough to try it again another time.

In your competency passport EPSO will have given you an overview of your strong points, your relative weaknesses and the ways to further develop yourself. Much like an Olympic athlete you know where to improve so that you can compete better during the next games.

You have experienced first-hand how the EU selects staff. From the exercises you have had a glimpse of what working for the EU looks like, feels like. This is very important, because you now know exactly what is expected.

## RECONSIDER YOUR OPTIONS

After your (first) EPSO experience you may conclude that a position in the EU is not what you were really dreaming of after all. You may have had the wrong ideas about what is like. This happens, and there's nothing to be ashamed of.

On the other hand, you may still be positive that an EU career is really something for you, you could consider taking another competition, different than the one you did this time.

Another aspect to consider is the long-term repercussions of your choice: not only will your exam profile determine the required professional knowledge (with it, the question whether you meet the formal eligibility criteria) but it will also affect your recruitment prospects once placed on the reserve list. It is for obvious reasons that EPSO creates sub-profiles and specialist profiles in the selection process: if an expert on environment law is sought, those on a lawyers' reserve list may have better chances of being offered a job than those on a Public Administration list (though this is not a formal rule and depends a lot on other external and individual factors as well).

# References and links



<sup>1</sup> For the Brexiteers: 'eu' has nothing to do with the European Union. In Greek it means 'good'

<sup>2</sup> [Competency-Based Test / CBT](#)

<sup>3</sup> [EUT database with thousands of CBT questions](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Classroom training sessions](#)

<sup>5</sup> EU Training EPSO Exam Resources (free and for purchase):

- [Webinars](#)
- [eBooks](#)
- [EU Knowledge Test questions](#)
- [Case study exercises](#)
- [Personal coaching](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Tim Urban: Inside the mind of a master procrastinator | TED](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Ambiorix Centre](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Restless REM Sleep Impedes Overnight Amygdala Adaptation](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Your body language may shape who you are | Amy Cuddy](#)

Please note that the official source of information for EU competitions is the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO). We do everything in our power to provide you with the most accurate and up-to-date information possible.



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