

Guidance for Special Arrangements and Exemptions from School Exams

One question that comes up frequently, with relation to SM, is how can someone with SM (an anxiety disorder) better handle exams, particularly an oral examination either in their mother tongue or in a second language. The following advice is written primarily for the UK education system but contains information that might be useful in other countries and education systems.

Introduction

Everybody handles anxiety in a different way. We know that people with SM find some situations highly stressful and examinations are just one of those causes, or triggers, which can generate high levels of anxiety. This is commonly visible as what is known as a 'freeze', which renders the person incapable of completing the examination in a normal fashion, in the normally allotted time, or with the expected results. Oral examinations, where speech is required can often be impossible for someone with SM.

We hear of some students who are deducted marks from their score for 'failure' at the oral stage, even where the failure is not due to lack of knowledge. We hear of others who obtain agreed **adjustments** to exempt them from such examinations and we hear of those who obtain agreement to sit the oral examination under special conditions such as 'with a parent' or 'using a recording device'.

What we are looking for are reasonable adjustments to the normal examination procedure for those who usually struggle with that, and have a justifiable reason for needing an adjustment. Common sense is probably not considered as 'justifiable' but should be applied. The procedures are looking for documented evidence of the reasons why someone should receive an adjustment. It's a formal process. It needs time, and it needs planning. Clearly this situation needs managing in advance and we hope that this document gives some useful advice.

UK Regulations and Guidance

The adjustments available for external exams (e.g. GCSE, GCE AS & A Levels & vocational qualifications) are called 'Access Arrangements' and there is a deadline by which schools have to apply for them. This deadline depends on when the exam is due to be taken, and is likely to be several months in advance of the exam, e.g. a date in March is common for June GCSE exams. For this reason it is sensible to make enquiries about Access Arrangements with the school at the start of any exam course to allow plenty of time to discuss the needs of the student, for the school to do the administration required and to allow evidence to be collected to support the application.

The following links to the Joint Council for Qualifications (for Key Stages 4 & 5) and the Standards and Testing Agency (for Key Stages 1 & 2) give advice on how to go about getting such adjustments to an exam.

<http://www.jcq.org.uk/exams-office/access-arrangements-and-specialconsideration/regulations-and-guidance>

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/2016-key-stage-1-assessment-and-reporting-arrangementsara/section-5-participation-in-tests>

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/2016-key-stage-2-assessment-and-reporting-arrangementsara/section-5-participation-in-the-tests>

General Advice

Education establishments, schools, academies, colleges and universities all have processes and procedures for dealing with examinations and will also have procedures for dealing with special cases. Parents and students should approach the establishment to discuss what processes exist and what the specific procedures are.

Usually it would be the establishment that carries out the procedural work, contacting the authorities to gain approvals for adjustments. Parents and students would provide the justification required by the procedures (e.g. may need medical reports).

- The establishment may need to get permission for a student to have extra time for the exam;

- For special equipment in exams e.g. the use of a laptop, the establishment will have to show proof that the student usually uses one in class i.e. it is their 'normal way of working'. Some SM people find a laptop easier for exams as they may physically freeze and find it difficult to write manually when anxious, and they can rewrite things if they are not happy with them, thus relieving some of their anxiety. If you think a laptop would help then get the school to either provide a laptop or provide your own but insist they allow it to be used for lessons from the start of the exam course - they can then honestly state that it is the student's normal way of working in lessons;
- Schools can provide some access arrangements without having to ask the exam board first, such as a separate room (with invigilator) & timeouts;
- Think about using recording devices, video, etc. where they don't themselves raise anxiety;
- Use common sense.

... .. and finally

Education establishments may be reluctant to go through the procedure, as it requires them providing documentary evidence that the student needs them and takes time.

Don't let them fob you off! Parents and students can successfully guide the establishment to what they want them to arrange.

Appendix

Other Links

Home-Educated Students

<http://ehe-sen.org.uk/exams.php>

Other Needs

http://driveryouthtrust.com/index.php/special-educational-needs-and-disability-who-should-be-eligible-for-access-arrangements-inexams/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=JKtweets

Glossary

SM – Selective Mutism

Bibliography

None for this document.

Please refer to the SMIRA bibliography published on the

www.selectivemutism.org.uk site.

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