Who to refer for Exam Support

How do we work?

We see trainees individually for one session of 1 to 1 ½ hours. During this time we explore with trainees their examination 'history', going back to medical school and sometimes earlier looking for any evidence of previous difficulties or known learning disability. We will then look in detail at their study skills and revision methods. Following this we will offer suggestions as to how the trainee might adjust or fine tune their revision approach. We also discuss any other factors potentially affecting success and can refer for more specific specialist support as required.

Adjusting their approach to revision usually takes a little time so it is most helpful to see trainees as soon as possible to allow time for this to make a significant impact before their next exam attempt.

What problems do we commonly find?

Postgraduate exams are hard and require a significant period (often up to 3-6 months) of quality revision time. Exam failure can occur in isolation with a trainee who is otherwise performing well clinically. Sometimes this is due to other distractions in their life preventing good revision and it might be better to defer an exam in this situation rather than struggle on and fail. Failure, and particularly repeated failures, leads to low motivation and low morale.

Many trainees try and revise for exams primarily by using question banks without initial reading across the breadth of the subject. Often we find that revision techniques and planning can be improved. Managing distractions is increasingly important as mobile phones, computers and social media become part of trainees’ normal life. It is important that trainees look after themselves, for example, getting enough sleep, maintaining a reasonable work-life balance through the process and continuing some exercise.

Learning difficulties can impact on the ability to read questions quickly and accurately or to structure answers well in oral exams. Following referral, a dyslexia screen is given to each trainee and this does indeed pick up trainees who have managed with a lot of hard work to get through school and medical school without being diagnosed. We are lucky to be able to refer to our dyslexia expert Gail Alexander for in depth diagnosis of anyone picked up on screening, followed by a session for support and coping strategies.

We also have trainees referred who have difficulty with communication and lack confidence presenting themselves in oral examinations. We have found that referral for sessions on advanced communication skills with Jo Murphy works well, and with her acting background she is able to give valuable help with non verbal communication as well as spoken English. For trainees with significant anxiety impacting on their performance, coaching can help on its own or in conjunction with medical support, and on occasions support from a clinical psychologist.

Referrals for exam support should ideally be made by training programme directors, DME’s, case managers and College Tutors. Educational supervisors can also make the referral after discussion with someone from these roles. Rarely we can accept direct trainee referrals.
Referral is by way of the standard PSU Form A and B, plus form E which gives details of their examination history to help triage.

**Exam support from the PSU is most useful for those who**

- Feel it is their technique or ability to perform the exam, rather than lack of knowledge that is the root cause.
- Anyone with learning difficulties who fails an exam but feel they have gained the level of knowledge required.
- Anyone that you suspect could have learning difficulties. There is a screening tool given to all referrals for exam support from the British Dyslexia Association – called the adult dyslexia checklist which is available via the PSU website. This can be considered before referral in native English speakers.
- Anyone for who English is not their first language who fails an exam, but feel they have gained the level of knowledge required.
- Anyone who has failed two or more times unless known distractions from working have been the likely cause.
- Anyone for whom you feel low morale is more of a factor than usual post exam failure.
- Anyone for whom anxiety is affecting them to an extent that they need help managing this.

An early referral is most helpful to allow the trainee time to make any adjustments to their revision technique. This takes time and the longer they have before their next attempt will allow them time to make the most of the recommendations we suggest.