



Exam Stress Workshop

Mental Health Support Team

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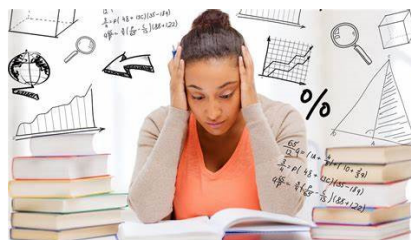


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Exam Stress

Remember, it is normal to worry before an exam – the challenge is how to manage the worry so that it works for your young people rather than against them!





It is also normal for parents to feel increased stress whilst their children go through exams. Lots of the strategies discussed in this workshop can be applied to parents too!

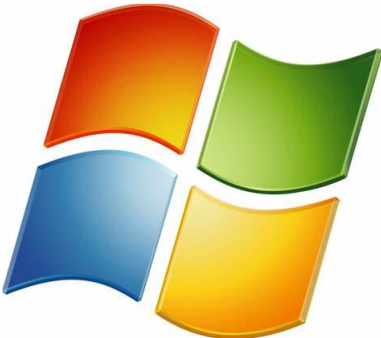
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"I failed in some subjects in exams, but my friend passed in all. Now he is an engineer in Microsoft and I am the owner of Microsoft"





Bill Gates

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Activity


- Have a think about a time you had an exam, deadlines to meet at work or managing competing demands as a parent:
 - One thing that **helped you** manage at that time
 - One thing you **found difficult** or would have liked more help with

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Video: We all have mental health




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What exam stress feels like

I feel like a million things are going on in my head! I have so much revision to do for my GCSEs and really want to get to college after my exams. **I do not feel confident that I am going to get my predicted grades** of A*'s and A's but when I tell my teacher they just tell me not to worry and that I can do it.
(Girl, 12-15)

I just feel like crying all the time. **I am stressed with exams and Mum is always shouting at me** because she thinks I am not studying hard enough. She doesn't seem to realise that because of my home life it makes it harder to concentrate and focus at school. (Anon)

The amount of work I have from school is piling up and I am finding it hard to keep up. I am in my GCSE year and it's important to be on track but all the extra work and deadlines is making me so stressed I end up taking it out on my family by shouting at them. **Everyone keeps telling me I am not trying hard enough which doesn't help** – nobody will listen. My family don't seem to have much time for me which makes me upset and angry with them as they don't seem to be taking me seriously.
(Unknown, Secondary School)

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Watch for signs of stress

Children and young people who are stressed may:

- Worry a lot
- Feel tense
- Have headaches and stomach pains
- Not sleep well
- Be irritable
- Lose interest in food or eat more than normal
- Not enjoy activities they previously enjoyed
- Be negative and have a low mood
- Feel hopeless about the future

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Anxiety

- A normal emotion that can be used to enhance performance
- Becomes a problem when it is more severe and frequent and interferes with everyday life, it can effect social life, academic performance, and mood
- No one factor is responsible for the development of anxiety, rather it is a combination of things including: genes, adverse life events, learning by example, learning from others reactions, and coping experiences

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Video: Body reactions to exam stress



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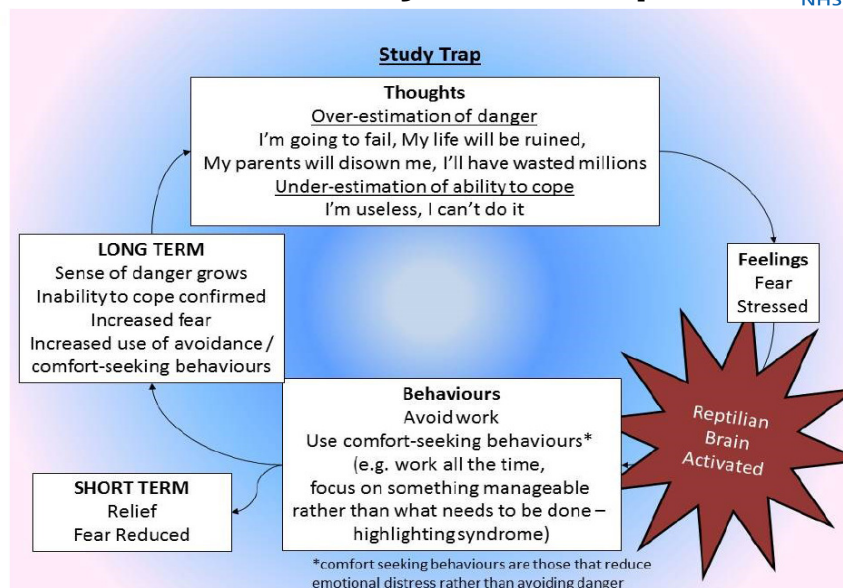


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The study/exam trap

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Common 'study traps'

- Ignore it – head in the sand
- Blaming yourself – never feeling like you're doing enough
- Setting unrealistic targets
- Cutting out fun treats and study breaks
- Taking stimulants e.g. caffeine, alcohol, drugs
 - These impede your energy and concentration in the long term
 - Instead, keep your brain hydrated by drinking plenty of water and eat slow-burning-energy foods (e.g. pasta, fruit, veg)



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What strategies can be helpful?

Study

- Plan
- Break things down
- Prioritise
- Manage our time
- Maximise our thinking (reduce distractions, writing things down)
- Manage mind blocks (start somewhere else, come back to it, take a break)
- Make use of support

Exams

Same as Study +

- Reduce uncertainty
- Calming the reptilian brain once rational brain has gone!
- Plan for immediately after exam



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Sleep

- No screens at least an hour before bed & leave your phone out of reach
- Go to bed when you feel tired
- Do something relaxing and unrelated to work in the half hour before you go to bed
- Try and stick to the same wake up time each day
- Make sure you have had enough exercise and fresh air during the day
- Try some mindfulness/relaxation exercises if you can't fall asleep



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What strategies may your young person find helpful?


What do I already find helpful?


What else could I try?

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What can we do to manage our anxiety? Try challenging some of our negative thoughts

Situation: Sitting an exam

WORST CASE SCENARIO
I won't know any of the questions
I will panic
I will fail the exam
I won't be able to get a college place or a good job

BEST CASE SCENARIO
I will get every question right
It will be a breeze I will get offered scholarships
The examiners will give me a round of applause

SOMETHING IN THE MIDDLE
I might not know all the answers, but I have revised
All I can do is my best
If I do badly it's not the end of the world

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Changing unhelpful to helpful thoughts

Unhelpful thoughts are...

- negative
- critical of ourselves or what we can do
- predict that we won't cope or be successful
- focused on the things that could go wrong or aren't right

Helpful thoughts focus on...

- positive things about ourselves
- our strengths and successes
- our achievements
- coping and being successful



CATCH IT - Notice that it is an unhelpful thought



CHECK IT - Take a step back - Am I sure things are as bad as I feel they are?



CHALLENGE IT - Is there any evidence this thought might not be 100% true? Might there be another way of looking at it?



CHANGE IT - What is a more helpful way of thinking about this?

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An unhelpful thought pattern: Having unrealistically high standards for yourself

- Wanting to do well is a helpful motivator for studying, however no one can achieve perfection and striving for this can lead to increased stress and impact your self-worth
- Perfectionism strengthens negative thought patterns – the more you think the negative thoughts, the easier it is to bring them to mind
- Never experiencing failure makes the idea of failing even scarier. If we then do fail, we have no experience of how to cope. A way to manage this is to practice imperfection and coping/bearing with it
 - NB: start with something small/manageable!
 - Can practice coping by using slow breathing, mindfulness, focusing attention on something else
 - 'Ride the wave' of the feeling until it passes/reduces
- **Catch it** (notice the thought) – **Check it** (is this expectation actually helping me?) – **Challenge it** (is there another way of thinking about this?) – **Change it** (set a more realistic expectation for yourself)

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Barriers to revising: what gets in the way?

BARRIERS	SOLUTIONS
Leaving it too late	
Hate revising	
Poor organization	
Confusing revision notes	
Nowhere to revise	
Not enough time	
Other things to do	
Think you can't do it	
Cramming/too much revision	
Not knowing how to revise	

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Barriers to revising: what gets in the way?

BARRIERS	SOLUTIONS
Leaving it too late	Act NOW! Set a day and time to get started
Hate revising	Try different strategies & materials, make it fun, revise with friends, try a quiz with family/friends testing you
Poor organization	Study timetables/lists, prioritise certain subjects/topics where needed
Confusing revision notes	Use BBC Bitesize/revision books/speak to teacher/colourful notes
Nowhere to revise	Find a small area that can be used as a small study space/local library
Not enough time	Make time – plan revision time into your week/daily activities, prioritise
Other things to do	How important is this? What's in it for you?
Think you can't do it	Reflect on positives/your strengths/past achievements
Cramming/too much revision	Start early, use effective planning, break down the tasks into manageable chunks
Not knowing how to revise	Try out different methods taught at school/find one that suits you

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Other ways that you can help your young person through exam season

- **Make sure your child eats well**
 - Where possible, involve your child in shopping for food and encourage them to choose some healthy snacks
- **Help them study**
 - Ask how you can help and support with practical ideas
- **Talk about exam nerves**
 - Normalise; natural reaction
 - Remind them of the work they've put in
- **Do not add pressure**
 - Listen, give support, reassure and avoid criticism
 - Focus on the positive: don't dwell on what went wrong

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The 'Back-up Team'

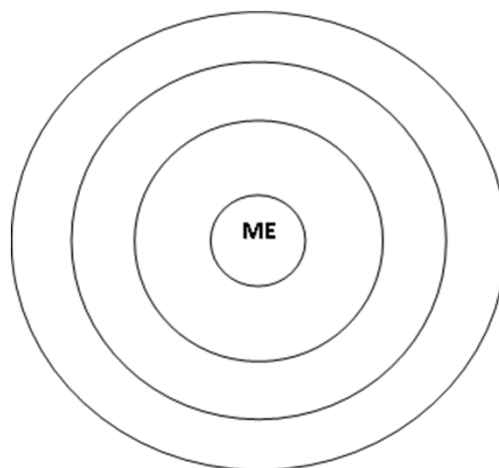


A young person may need support to create a back-up team. You may be someone that they find helpful to have as part of their team.

Think about:

Who would they like in their back-up team? What sort of support can individuals in their team offer?

- Emotional?
- Practical?
- Talking?
- A hug?
- Learning?
- Make you laugh/fun?



The back-up team works better if the people who are in it, know they are in it.

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Who could offer more support?



For your young person:

- School staff e.g. Year Lead or Pastoral Team
- MHST: EMHP (via school)
- EWMHS (CAMHS) (via self-referral, school)
- ChildLine
- Online:
 - YoungMinds
 - Kooth
 - The Mix

For you:

- School staff
- Other parents
- Family Lives: www.familylives.org.uk/advice/teenagers/school-learning/exam-stress/
- NHS: www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/help-your-child-beat-exam-stress/
- Young Minds: <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/a-z-guide/exam-time/>

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WATCHING TV/A FUNNY FILM/
YOUTUBE CLIPS

PLAYING ON THE PLAYSTATION/XBOX

BAKING

SHOPPING

HAVING A BATH

Some self-soothing ideas

LISTENING TO MUSIC – HAVE A
“RELAXING” PLAYLIST

SPENDING TIME WITH PETS

PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

DOING NAILS/MAKE UP/FACE MASK

DOING SOMETHING PHYSICAL
E.G. GO FOR A WALK, PLAY FOOTBALL, GO
SKATEBOARDING

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Recommended Apps

Cove

CLEAR FEAR

Catch it

SMILING MIND

HEADSPACE

STOP, BREATHE, THINK

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Thanks!

Any questions?

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