

EXAMINATION STRESS A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND STUDENTS

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Exam stress



Stress can be defined as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them.” It is a subjective response and something that will vary from person to person. Prolonged stress can lead to illness, both mental and physical.

The words pressure and stress are often used interchangeably but in fact they are quite different. Pressure can be positive and useful to complete deadlines or to help somebody avoid danger. However, when pressure is prolonged, it can be negative, and depending how the individual perceives it and reacts to it, can lead to the development of stress.

Exam stress is a natural reaction to too much pressure and can come from a number of sources including:

- young people themselves
- comparisons with others
- wanting to reach ambitious goals
- parental pressure
- peers or teachers

Symptoms of stress

Some people feel pressure and develop stress symptoms much more readily than others. When someone is faced with increased pressure (in this case at examination time) their body can go into a ‘fight or flight’ response which releases increased amounts of adrenalin into the body. This can lead to various symptoms including :

- Feeling cranky and irritable (increased shouting or crying, swearing, hitting)
- Feeling inadequate, negative self talk, blaming
- Problems getting to sleep or not wanting to wake up
- Strongly beating heart, sweating
- Chest pains, nausea, trembling
- Habits such as nail biting and fidgeting
- Indecisiveness, going blank, confusion
- Increased smoking, drinking, or increased drug use
- Losing touch with friends.

Stress responses can differ between males and females. Research shows that when girls experience exam stress they show internal symptoms and responses such as nausea, butterflies, and feelings of inadequacy which can lead to sadness and depression. Boys tend to externalise their anxiety and they can become increasingly irritable or feel angry.

The influences which determine how much exam stress someone experiences

Study Habits

Examination study stress is often influenced by the amount of preparation and planning a student has put into studying towards a particular exam and how confident they feel about the material they are to be tested on.

Several groups of students who are at risk of feeling the affects of exam stress are those students who expect to

cover everything perfectly, those who are not motivated to try to learn or prepare for an exam and those students who are struggling to understand the work.

Motivation

Motivation plays an important role in student learning and studying. Research shows that the type of motivation an individual has will influence how much a student studies and how much exam pressure they feel.

There are two types of motivation relevant to exam stress - intrinsic and extrinsic.

Students with intrinsic motivation are inspired by the rewards that come from the activity itself. For example, this could be the love of playing an instrument, interest in learning how the human body works or the magic of how numbers work. In this case, increased focus or study at exam time is part of the interest in the subject itself.

These students are likely to attribute their educational results to internal factors they can control and play an active role in determining their outcome. They are also interested in learning about and understanding a topic, not just relying on rote learning for an exam.

Students with extrinsic motivation are motivated by external things. For example, they may be motivated by a teacher, a parent or a particular goal. Sometimes rewards such as money or praise are also used as extrinsic motivators.

It is often harder for students motivated by extrinsic factors to stay focused at exam time, as they may have less real interest in the topic, thus they are less motivated and revision is more of a challenge.

Beliefs about ability and control



Recent research shows that exam stress can vary depending on a student's beliefs about the nature of their academic ability and their perceptions of control when approaching exams.

If a student believes that their ability is fixed and cannot change, they may feel a lack of control over exams and be unable to cope with additional demands. This can lead to:

- unproductive studying
- less persistence
- decreased effort when study becomes harder or greater in quantity
- avoidance of the challenge

However, if a student believes their ability can be increased with effort and planning, they often feel more in control because they can develop it to match the demands in front of them. This leads to more effective preparation, including:

- putting in more effort,
- being better organised
- planning more and showing persistence when study demands increase.

How does test anxiety impact on students?

Students can experience high test anxiety or low test anxiety when preparing for and undertaking exams. Many studies find that young people with high test anxiety are more likely to be preoccupied and dissatisfied with themselves. This can cause negative self-talk which is distracting and interferes with study performance.



As young people enter the testing situation, those with high and low test anxiety often have some of the same body responses, for example, clammy hands or stomach butterflies. However, once the exam or test is on its way, in most cases, these effects will disappear whether the student has high or low test anxiety.

Treatment for test anxiety

A number of treatments are available to help decrease test anxiety. These fall into three categories and are especially successful when used with each other. The categories are:

- study skills
- cognitive procedures
- emotional treatments

Study skills

Nothing helps students as much as good study skills and habits, including:

- memorising
- making a summaries and précis
- rehearsing work with a friend
- studying with a definite goal or task in mind
- taking time to relax or have a snack

Cognitive work

Cognitive training assists a person to imagine being calm and steady in a test situation. This helps to reduce their anxious responses when it comes time to sit the exam.

Emotional treatment

Self-controlled relaxation and desensitisation are effective treatments used to decrease emotional/physiological responses to exam stress. Students are taught to use the onset of anxiety as a cue to remind them to relax instead of leaving the exam situation or letting their mind close down. Students are often taught to say a cue word such as 'calm' each time they breathe out. Often, repetition of this cue word brings relaxation and relieves anxiety.

What Parents can do



One of the best things parents can do if their child is experiencing exam stress is to try to be as supportive and tolerant as possible. Reassure them that there are more important things in life and that this is only part of the story. Let your child know you will help them no matter what and, although naturally you want them to do well, you will not think any less of them if these particular exams don't work out.

Below, is a list of study, practical and relaxation ideas that young people have said helped them to manage exam stress. Also included are some tips on how to help your child deal with stress on exam day.

Study and learning habits

Helping your child to establish effective study and learning habits can help to reduce stress:

- Is there an uncluttered table where they can work? Help them to find somewhere which is likely to be undisturbed.
- Encourage your child to find out exactly what the test involves - are there past test papers they can look at to help them understand what to expect?
- Encourage your child to ask for help or ask their teacher for clarity if they are unsure of something or if they feel confused.
- Help them to make 'mind maps' to collect ideas and summarise thoughts - use bright colours to help remember important links.
- Help them to plan their study schedule early on so that they have sufficient time to study. It can be helpful to

develop a clear, realistic plan of what they want to cover in each study session. Can they break it down into small chunks?

- Remind your child to take a short rest and move around in between each part of their study.
- Offer help sometimes. It can be useful having someone to listen or practise with.

Practical ideas to help your child cope with exam stress

- Encourage your child to stick to a routine of going to bed at a reasonable time, eating regularly and making time to have fun and exercise.
- Help them to cut back on coffee or any other stimulants they may be using, as these can increase agitation. Encourage them to drink lots of water instead.
- Encourage them to take time out when they eat, rather than carrying on with study.
- Encourage them to eat fresh fruit, vegetables, cereals, grains, nuts and protein - they are all good for the brain and blood sugar levels.
- Encourage them to eat when they get hungry. This keeps blood sugar and hydration levels steady.
- Avoid junk food if possible because it will bring a sudden sugar high and then fall away quickly leaving a person feeling tired.
- Try not to nag as they may be feeling a lot of pressure already. It helps to stay calm and offer support - perhaps offer a cup of tea occasionally or record their favourite TV programme to watch later.

Relaxation ideas to help your child cope with exam stress

- Always encourage your child to relax before they go to bed after concentrating for long periods of time. Activities such as reading a book or chatting to a friend may help them unwind and sleep better.
- Encourage them to go out for a walk, run or to do some other exercise that they enjoy.
- Relaxation techniques can be very effective if you see your child's anxiety rising. For example, put on some gentle music, get them to lie down, close their eyes and breathe deeply while visualising a calming scene such as a deserted beach.
- Encourage your child to visualise success - this can really help with self-confidence.



Ideas for exam day

Talk about these ideas before exam day so as not to add to anxiety levels.

Suggest to your child that they:

- Organise and pack everything that they need to take with them into the exam, the night before.
- Keep them away from people who may agitate them before the test or may say unhelpful, anxiety-provoking comments.
- Take time to slow their breathing and relax when they first sit down.
- Read through the paper, underlining key words and instructions. Work out how long they have for each question or section.
- Watch out for the wording of the questions - make sure that they understand and address what the question is really asking.
- Answer the questions they find easiest first, then as they relax more, move onto the other ones (by then their mind has relaxed and they are likely to find the work easier).
- Re-read answers if possible and make any changes that are necessary - cross out notes, correct spelling, check workings.



(Oscar stressed – the inspiration for this article! – Picture by kind permission of Osar’s parents)

By following these tips and ideas it is hoped that your child will achieve.



SUCCESS !
(picture by kind permission of Oscar’s parents)

Dr Martin Phillips
June 2012.