

Techniques for dealing with exam stress

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While all exams involve a certain amount of stress, this is particularly true of A-level exams which not only represent the culmination of two years of hard work, but can also be important in determining whether students will be able to go to their first choice university.

While some level of stress before and during exams is to be expected, there is a lot that your child can do to reduce exam stress and to give them the best possible chance of performing well during their exams.

Symptoms of stress

While different people experience and respond to stress in different ways, some of the more common symptoms of exam stress include problems with sleeping, a loss of appetite, anxiety and/or irritability, and experiencing migraines or headaches.

If your child is showing symptoms of stress then you should encourage them to take a break from their revision in order to unwind- a day off from revision, or even just a few hours, may really help them to relax which in turn will help to make their revision time more effective.

If your child becomes particularly stressed or anxious ahead of their exams it is important that they speak to their school and/or their doctor. Often schools are able to make arrangements in order to help such students to perform to the best of their ability in exams, while GPs are able to offer support in order to ensure that stress and anxiety are effectively managed, and do not have a detrimental effect on a student's general health.

Coping with stress before the exam

The key to successful revision is planning, and good planning will help to ensure that your child is well prepared for their exams and this in turn will help to reduce stress both before and during exams. For advice on how your child can plan their revision effectively please view our parents' article on revision skills.

In addition to careful planning and preparation there is a lot that your child can do in the weeks and months before their exams in order to reduce and manage stress.

It is important that your child **gets enough sleep** - ideally at least 8 hours each night. Revising for exams can be emotionally draining, and it is important that they get enough sleep to 'recharge the batteries'.

Eating healthily is also important in ensuring that energy levels remain high and can help with concentration levels. There is evidence that that breakfast cereals are especially good at helping to maintain concentration levels throughout the day.

In addition, **regular exercise** can help to boost concentration levels, and exercise can also help to reduce stress. Clearly, excessive exercise which results in exhaustion will be counterproductive, but a sensible amount of light exercise- walking, jogging, playing sport etc.- can really help to reduce and manage stress levels in the run up to important exams.

Finally, it is important to **take regular breaks** from revision. This can help both to reduce the level of stress by giving your child the opportunity to unwind, and will help them to revise more effectively as only a certain amount of information can be absorbed at any one time. Failure to take regular breaks will make revision time less effective, and this in turn will only serve to increase stress levels.

Managing stress during exams

For most students, the exams themselves will be the most stressful part of the exam period. While almost all students will experience anxiety during an exam, it is important that your child manages stress effectively so that it does not affect their performance in the exam.

In order to avoid unnecessary stress on the day of an exam we recommend your child ensures that they:

- organise the materials needed for the exam- stationary, identification, watch etc.- the day before so that they do not need to find things at the last minute, and don't forget anything!
- take water to the exam- this can help to avoid dehydration which can lead to headaches, and there is evidence that drinking water in an examination can increase performance
- make time to relax and be calm during the hours before the exam- trying to revise new material during this period is unlikely to be effective, and it is more important to be in a relaxed and positive state of mind ready for the start of the exam
- carefully read each question and plan their time before starting to answer questions in the exam (this is especially important during exams when your child is able to choose which questions to answer)
- answer the easiest questions first- this should help them to relax by getting them off to a good start, and will avoid them getting stuck on a hard question early in the exam which may leave them short of time at the end (note that this technique may not be possible in exams where questions relate to each other, such as in certain mathematics exams).

After the exam

Once your child has completed an exam, regardless of how they feel the exam went, you should encourage them to forget about their answers and to put the exam behind them. It is more important to focus on the next exam than to dwell on what went well and what didn't go well in a previous exam.

Following exams it is natural for students to dwell on the parts of the exam that they felt were the most difficult, and to forget that if they found the exam difficult then it is likely that other students did too!

Bath University send a monthly parent's bulletin' which aims to keep parents informed about the university application process and the transition to university life. To sign up to receive the parents' bulletin and to receive future bulletins please visit: www.bath.ac.uk/study/teachers-advisers-parents/parents/index.html

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