



A Parents' Guide to Beating Exam Stress

In the run up to the external examination series, your son/daughter may be feeling more anxious than normal and be displaying behaviours that, as a family, you are not used to experiencing.

The purpose of this booklet is to provide information and support to help you, as parents, navigate the minefield of teenage examination anxiety and stress.

What is Anxiety?

First of all, anxiety is completely normal. It is something that we all experience to some degree. Anxiety is useful to us as it tells us that something is dangerous and that we need to be careful. However, if anxiety gets out of control or stops you from doing everyday things, then it can lead us to feeling unhappy, upset and frustrated. Here are some examples of how your son/daughter might feel if he or she is anxious about their exams:

- Worried
- Upset
- Feeling sick
- Feeling shaky or dizzy
- Feeling faint
- Thinking unpleasant thoughts
- Thinking that they may 'go crazy'
- Unable to sleep
- Irritable / irrational
- Unwilling to attend school

When anxiety gets really strong, your son/daughter might experience a 'panic attack'. This is when the body is getting ready to fight, freeze or to run away from the situation that they are viewing as dangerous. This is known as the fight, flight or freeze response. It can be quite scary to experience, and is not uncommon in the examination hall.

By understanding how anxiety works, it is possible to understand why your son/daughter might feel that way and hopefully help them move forward.

With exam anxiety your son/daughter can get into a vicious circle; thoughts go round and round in their head, impacting on how they act and the things they do. They may feel that they are 'rubbish at maths' and so avoid revising any maths to prove their initial view.

The 'fear of the fear' often makes students feel worse as they are literally waiting

for bad feelings to happen; they stop doing things that they link with the negative feelings or thoughts. This is called avoidance.

The next time they have to face the situation or event, their body tells them that it is dangerous and the fight, flight or freeze response kicks in. They feel that they either need to run away from the 'dangerous' thing, fight it or may feel that their body is frozen to the spot.

Either way, their body is not happy when they feel these thoughts. By understanding why your son/daughter might feel this way, you can try to take away the 'scared' feeling because you know it is just their body reacting to something that it thinks is scary, even though it is actually harmless.

Exam Stress

Everyone feels stressed during exams. This usually means that your son/daughter might feel tired, under pressure, confused, worried that they won't do well. This is normal and often encourages them to do that extra bit of revision, listen a little more to the information in a lesson and work a bit harder. This is good.

However, too much pressure and anxiety can make some young people experience negative thoughts. They may be unable to concentrate on their work and may find that they are overly worrying about how they will do in their exams.

Teenagers often deal with exam stress in unhelpful ways, such as ignoring the problem, not revising because they think they will do badly anyway and missing exams due to the anxiety that they are feeling. It can also be really easy to think that if you don't try and then you fail, you won't feel as bad as if you fail after trying really hard! This is an unhelpful way of thinking as it means that they will be limiting their chances of doing really well.

Exam anxiety could also make your son/daughter worry during the exam itself. For example, they may feel that other students are managing the exam better, or that others are finding it easy whereas they are struggling. This can cause teenagers to feel that their mind has 'gone blank' about information that they know they have revised or that they know well.

Help with Sleep

Whilst the stereotypical teenager is difficult to separate from their bed, an increasing number may struggle with disturbed sleep during the examination season. Promoting good sleep patterns is crucial to helping to lessen exam stress.

The advice below is a summary taken from the NHS website and may help to establish better sleep routines:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Childrensleep/Pages/teensleeptips.aspx>

- **Promote the benefits of good sleep**
Emphasize to your teenager the importance of sleep. It has proven advantages for memory and performance. A minimum of eight to nine hours' good sleep on school nights is recommended for teens.
- **Exercise for better sleep**
Regular exercise helps you sleep more soundly as well as improving your general health. Teenagers should be aiming for at least 60 minutes every day, including activities such as fast walking and running.
- **Cut out the caffeine to beat insomnia**
Suggest that your teenager drinks less caffeine (contained in drinks such as cola as well as tea and coffee). Too much caffeine stops them falling asleep and prevents deep sleep.
- **Don't binge before bedtime**
Let teenagers know that eating too much or too little close to bedtime may prevent sleep due to an overfull or empty stomach. This can be a cause of discomfort throughout the night.
- **Bedtime routines are a great sleep aid**
Encourage your teenager to have a bedtime routine. Doing the same things, in the same order, an hour or two before slumber time can help them drift off to sleep.
- **Is the bedroom sleep-friendly?**
Ensure they have a good sleeping environment, ideally a room that is dark, cool, quiet, safe and comfortable. It might be worth investing in thicker curtains or a blackout blind to help insulate against the light of summertime early mornings (and late evenings). A sleep mask and earplugs can be purchased cheaply and will block out light and sound.
- **Ban screens in the bedroom**
If possible, don't have a TV or computer in the bedroom as the light from the screen interferes with sleep. A music system is preferable. Ensure mobile phones are switched off at night.

How Else can Parents Help?

Make sure there are plenty of healthy snacks in the fridge and try to provide good, nutritious food at regular intervals. Encourage your son/daughter to join family meals, even if it's a busy revision day - it's important to have a change of scene and get away from the books and computer for a while. Also encourage your son/daughter to take regular exercise. A brisk walk around the block can help clear the mind before the next revision session.

Try not to make too many demands on your son/daughter during exam time. Arguments are counter-productive and will only add unnecessary stress and distract from revision.

It's important to get a good night's sleep before an exam, so discourage your son/daughter from staying up late to 'cram'. Eating a good breakfast on the morning of the exam is important and walking to school before the exam will clear the mind and help establish a calm outlook.

Throughout the run up to the exams and after, it is important to reassure your son/daughter that no matter what results they achieve, there are options. It may not be their first option, but, there are other ways to get the same qualification. Give them as much encouragement and support during these times.

Relaxation Techniques

Breathing can help your son/daughter to regain control over their feelings and help to control exam stress. The aim is to breathe in and out slowly and in a regular rhythm as this will help your son/daughter to calm down.

Practising this technique at home in a non-stressful environment with your teenager is a very positive way you can help.

- Fill up the whole of your lungs with air, without forcing. Imagine you're filling up a bottle, so that your lungs fill from the bottom.
- Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Breathe in slowly and regularly counting from one to five (don't worry if you can't reach five at first).
- Then let the breath escape slowly, counting from one to five.
- Keep doing this until you feel calm. Breathe without pausing or holding your breath.

Practise this relaxed breathing for three to five minutes, two to three times a day.

Encourage your son/daughter to smile in the Examinations Hall. Research shows that smiling during stressful situations can help to reduce the intensity of the body's stress response, regardless of whether a person actually feels happy. Bringing new meaning to the phrase grins and bears it!

Getting help and support

The good news is that anxiety is treatable! This means that there are things that can be done to reduce feelings of anxiety. The first step is to encourage your son/daughter to speak to someone that they trust about how they are feeling. This could be their form tutor, a teacher, a teaching assistant, their Climate for Learning Leader or a member of the Pastoral Support Team. Talking to someone in school

will reduce the pressure of anxiety and stress, it may also help them to realise that they are not alone in how they are feeling.

Encourage your Son/Daughter to:

- Choose someone that they trust in school to talk to.
- Tell the chosen adult how they have been feeling and try to give them an example so that they understand clearly how the problem is affecting them.
- Try writing the problem down if they are finding it hard to talk about their anxiety.

Always reinforce that it is fine to be upset and it is fine to ask for help. If your son/daughter is unable to share their anxieties within school, then a phone call from parents will be treated with sensitivity.

External Support

- support@phobics-society.org.uk.
- <http://phobics-society.org.uk/youngpeople.php>
- Anxiety UK Helpline number: 08444 775 774
- Family Doctor/GP
- School Nurse – Wednesday lunchtime in the SSC
- Childline www.childline.org.uk - Helpline: 0800 1111 (Freephone)
- NSPCC www.nspcc.org.uk Helpline: 08000 1111 (Freephone)
- CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably) www.thecalmzone.net
- Youngminds www.youngminds.org.uk/young-people
- Kooth www.kooth.com