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Help your child beat exam stress

Tests and exams can be a challenging part of school life for children and young people and their parents or carers. But there are ways to ease the stress.

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

Having someone to talk to about their work can help. Support from a parent, tutor or study buddy can help young people share their worries and keep things in perspective.

Encourage your child to talk to a member of school staff who they feel is supportive. If you think your child is not coping, it may also be helpful for you to talk to their teachers.

Try to involve your child as much as possible.

Make sure your child eats well

A balanced diet is vital for your child's health, and can help them feel well during exam periods.

Some parents find high-fat, high-sugar and high-caffeine foods and drinks, such as energy drinks, cola, sweets, chocolate, burgers and chips, make their children hyperactive, irritable and moody.

Where possible, involve your child in shopping for food and encourage them to choose some healthy snacks.

Read more about eating a balanced diet (Link: www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/how-to-eat-a-balanced-diet/eating-a-balanced-diet/).

Help your child get enough sleep

Good sleep improves thinking and concentration. Most teenagers need 8 to 10 hours' sleep a night.

Allow half an hour or so for your child to wind down between studying, watching TV or using a computer and going to bed, to help them get a good night's sleep.

Cramming all night before an exam is usually a bad idea. Sleep will benefit your child far more than a few hours of panicky last-minute study.

Be flexible during exams

Be flexible around exam time. When your child is revising all day, do not worry about household jobs left undone or untidy bedrooms.

Staying calm yourself can help. Remember, exams do not last forever.

The Family Lives website has more information about coping with exam stress (Link: <http://www.familylives.org.uk/advice/teenagers/school-learning/exam-stress/>)

Health for Teens also has information and advice about how to prepare for exams and deal with exam stress (Link: <https://www.healthforteens.co.uk/feelings/exam-stress/>)

Help them study

Make sure your child has somewhere comfortable to study. Ask them how you can support them with their revision.

Help them come up with practical ideas that will help them revise, such as drawing up a revision schedule or getting hold of past papers for practice.

To motivate your child, encourage them to think about their goals in life and see how their revision and exams are related to them.

Talk about exam nerves

Remind your child that it's normal to feel anxious. Nervousness is a natural reaction to exams. The key is to put these nerves to positive use.

If anxiety is getting in the way rather than helping, encourage your child to practise the activities they'll be doing on the day of the exam. This will help it feel less scary.

For example, this may involve doing practice papers under exam conditions or seeing the exam hall beforehand. School staff should be able to help with this.

Help your child face their fears and see these activities through, rather than avoiding them.

Encourage them to think about what they know and the time they've already put into studying to help them feel more confident.

Encourage exercise during exams

Exercise can help boost energy levels, clear the mind and relieve stress. It does not matter what it is – walking, cycling, swimming, football and dancing are all effective.

Activities that involve other people can be particularly helpful.

Read more about the physical activity guidelines for children and young people (Link: www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercise-guidelines/physical-activity-guidelines-children-and-young-people/).

Do not add to the pressure

Support group Childline says many children who contact them feel that most pressure at exam time comes from their family.

Listen to your child, give them support and avoid criticism.

Before they go in for a test or exam, be reassuring and positive. Let them know that failing is not the end of the world. If things do not go well they may be able to take the exam again.

After each exam, encourage your child to talk it through with you. Discuss the parts that went well rather than focusing on the questions they found difficult. Then move on and focus on the next test, rather than dwelling on things that cannot be changed.

See Childline's advice on exam stress and pressure (Link: <https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/school-college-and-work/school-college/exam-stress/>)

Make time for treats

With your child, think about rewards for doing revision and getting through each exam.

Rewards do not need to be big or expensive. They can include simple things like making their favourite meal or watching TV.

When the exams are over, help your child celebrate by organising an end-of-exams treat.

When to get help

Some young people feel much better when exams are over, but that's not the case for all young people.

Get help if your child's anxiety or low mood is severe, persists and interferes with their everyday life. Seeing a GP is a good place to start.

Read more about anxiety in children (Link: www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/anxiety-in-children/).

Video: coping with exams

In this video, teenagers prepare themselves and build the confidence to sit their GCSE exams.

Media last reviewed: 1 February 2021
Media review due: 1 February 2024

More in Advice for parents (Link: www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/)

Children and bereavement (Link: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/children-and-bereavement/>)

Helping your child with anger issues (Link: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/help-your-child-with-anger-issues/>)

Anxiety disorders in children (Link: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/anxiety-disorders-in-children/>)

Anxiety in children (Link: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/anxiety-in-children/>)

Depression in children and young people (Link: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/children-depressed-signs/>)

Talking to your child about feelings (Link: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/talk-to-children-about-feelings/>)

Teen aggression and arguments (Link: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/teen-aggression-and-arguments/>)

Coping with your teenager (Link: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/cope-with-your-teenager/>)

Worried about your teenager? (Link: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/worried-about-your-teenager/>)

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Talking to your teenager (Link: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/talk-to-your-teenager/>)

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