

GETTING THROUGH THE



EXAM SEASON

A GUIDE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE SITTING ASSESSMENTS

At Centre 33 we understand that there are a variety of factors that can lead to increased stress, anxiety or low mood during the preparation for exams and assessments. Our team of Children and Young People's Wellbeing Practitioners (CWPs) work with students who are experiencing these types of challenges. We have created this guide to share with you some tips for managing anxieties and concerns you may have about upcoming assessments.

This guide is not just for those of you preparing to take exams this year. All the strategies listed are applicable to any age, whether you are at school or college. By working on wellbeing strategies earlier you will have the strategies in place to support you later with your GCSEs/A-Levels/B-Tecs or Finals when they arrive.



HERE TO HELP

If you need to talk, we are here to listen and help!

hello@centre33.org.uk
0333 4141809
07514 783745
www.centre33.org.uk

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF

EXAM STRESS AND ANXIETY?

Firstly, it is important to recognise when you are experiencing stress or anxiety related to your exams. Sometimes this feels obvious, but it often takes practice to identify clues. The following sensations can be common when you are experiencing stress or anxiety:

- Struggling to sleep
- Having negative thoughts about the future
- Feeling irritable
- Crying more often than usual
- Increase or decrease in appetite
- Always thinking about your exams and worrying about them
- Not able to enjoy things anymore
- Feeling tired all the time
- Frequent headaches or stomach aches
- Increased heart rate or panic, perhaps even leading to a panic attack
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Loss of motivation
- Mind 'fog' or loss of concentration
- Feeling nauseous or 'butterflies' feeling in stomach.



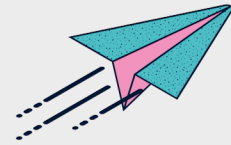
WHY DO WE EXPERIENCE ANXIETY AROUND EXAMS?

Feeling some anxiety around exam time is very normal. Most people want to do well in exams both to gain a sense of achievement and to help access next steps like college, university, or work. These things alone create a natural pressure which is difficult to completely avoid. The key to managing exam related stress is to try and prevent it from becoming overwhelming. Understanding what is happening to your body when you are under stress can be a helpful place to start.





FIGHT - FLIGHT



Feelings of stress and worry can activate a response in the mind and body that is often referred to as 'fight or flight'. This is an evolutionary response all humans have which is designed to protect us from things that are seen as a threat, either by addressing the stressor ('fight') or escaping from it ('flight').

So what might this response look like when it comes to exam stress?

FIGHT

Some people find that they are 'deadline orientated' and that exam-related stress motivates them to study. When a deadline approaches, they find that their thinking becomes clearer and less distracted, and they have more energy to complete the task. Afterwards, however, they may feel exhausted. Although, you may feel that a deadline-orientated strategy works best for you, people relying on deadlines might be operating at the edge of healthy stress and overload and it may not be strategy that always works. There might be lots of different factors, such as WI-FI, public transport, other people, or good health may affect your ability to achieve deadlines and constantly switching between low stress and toxic stress levels can have negative health implications.



Relying on something external to motivate you might also leave you feeling a little out of control. If this 'fight' response is your main way of preparing for exams or assessments, then it might be helpful to practice reducing your reliance on external motivations by trying things like setting your own deadlines, reviewing your study timetable, or rewarding yourself for completing a task earlier. You could experiment and see if a slight change in your usual way of working affects your wellbeing and ability to do the task.

FLIGHT

It is not unusual for the pressure of assessments or exams to bring on feelings such as a racing heart; shortness of breath or digestive problems; struggling to think clearly or settle on one task.

Because these feelings are often unpleasant, this can lead to avoidance or procrastination. You may avoid all thoughts of working and put off studying. You might find yourself easily distracted and unable to focus.



MY REVISION GOALS		
My Step	How difficult do I think it will be?	My reward for doing it
e.g. essay practice		A day off with a friend
e.g. write notes on topic		Watch something on Netflix

If this is the case, it may be helpful to start breaking your study down into smaller, more manageable steps or 'goals'.

You could rate each goal from easy (smiley face) to hard (sad face) before you work towards them. Start by working towards the easier goals and then progress up to the ones that you have rated more difficult. Reward yourself after achieving each one.

By breaking tasks into more manageable goals, while you still may feel some anxiety, you are less likely to avoid them compared to tackling the whole topic at once.

If a task feels too difficult to even start, it could be helpful to think of a mindful/grounding technique (see later page 'Wellbeing Tips for Exam Self Care'). Slow breaths followed by longer outbreaths can help the body to feel calmer, more settled, and you may feel more able to begin studying.



STUDYING WITH LOW MOOD

Low Mood can affect your ability to study. People experiencing low mood can feel tired, unmotivated, find it difficult to think clearly or have energy to take on tasks. They may feel self-critical, feel that others perceive them negatively, or feel negative or hopeless about the future.

It can also mean that people avoid doing things like activities they used to enjoy, and feel less sociable.

It is important to recognise that you may be experiencing symptoms of low mood and that these may be affecting your motivation and ability to study. Try and catch any labels that you may direct towards yourself. You are not “lazy”, “useless”, “stupid”, “hopeless” or whatever name you may call yourself. You have low mood and things may feel difficult right now.

Research suggests that low mood can be improved with a strategy called ‘Behavioural Activation’- by finding small ways to get back into meaningful activities, this can give a boost to people’s mood, energy and motivation levels, helping them then feel able to do even more. This is like a snowball effect.

If you are experiencing low mood and it is making studying difficult, try thinking of some small, easy activities you aren’t currently doing, and give them a go.

Then see if it has a positive effect on your mood and ability to study. It may be that these are easy study tasks, for example you re-read something you know well and may have enjoyed previously, or you write a list of what you may need to study for an exam and then put it to one side. It may be that you do a wellbeing activity (see below) such as you could go for a walk or do something active, do something creative or contact a friend and suggest a meet up.

Activity I can try	How do I feel before?	How do I feel after?
	☹️ 😐 😊	☹️ 😐 😊
	☹️ 😐 😊	☹️ 😐 😊

If these first steps feel hard, break them down into smaller steps that feel easier. In this way Behavioural Activation is like riding a bike or driving, you start in a low gear to get the vehicle moving. By redoing activities, in time you will hopefully feel that your mood begins to improve- as does your motivation to study- and that you start to feel more positive towards the future.

"ALL I EVER DO IS THINK ABOUT EXAMS AND ASSESSMENTS"

Rumination is a type of thinking pattern. It is where people go over and over the same information in their heads about things which have happened in the past, or that they think could happen in the future. These may be thoughts like "I should have done better in my mocks" or "The teacher won't give me a fair grade". Ruminations might take a catastrophic path- "I have failed my mock and so I will fail everything!" Be careful about falling into thinking traps where your thoughts may not be true.

Thoughts like this may circle around and around when you are trying to focus on your studies or when you are trying to fall asleep, and this can reduce your ability to study effectively.

There are strategies which help decrease your ruminations. The first step is to identify what they are.

What are my ruminations?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

It may be helpful to notice when you usually ruminate. At these times plan a distracting activity, or instead allow yourself a set time to ruminate with a scheduled ending, for example set an alarm after ten minutes. Other people find it helpful to identify the worry and try and see if they can problem solve it, can they do anything about it? If so, try and identify the steps needed to solve the problem. If there are no obvious solutions and your thoughts still go round and round, try and distract yourself with an activity.

Other strategies to deal with ruminations:

- Write the thoughts down and put them somewhere out of sight, or rip them up.
- Identify the circling thoughts and create an image based on them, what does your rumination look like. Where would you like to put your image, stick it on the wall or screw it up and bin it?

YOUR AIM IS TO GET YOUR WORRY OUT OF CIRCLING AROUND YOUR HEAD AND OUT INTO THE WORLD. RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT BY IDENTIFYING AND STATING YOUR RUMINATIONS YOU CAN IMPROVE YOUR FEELING OF WELLBEING.

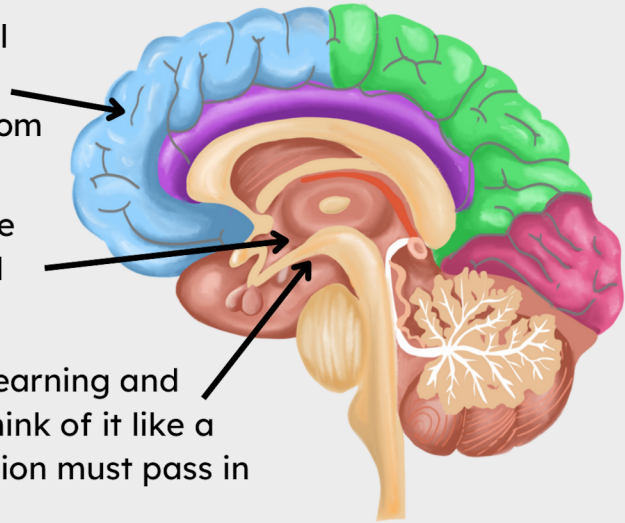
" I GET TO THE EXAM AND MY MIND JUST GOES **BLANK!** "

There is a reason for this

Prefrontal Cortex - The cool, calm rational part of your brain. Working memory, impulse control, decision making come from the PFC.

Hypothalamus - Think of this as the bridge between your emotions and your physical sensations

Hippocampus - This is important for the learning and retrieval of facts and concepts. We can think of it like a memory 'door' through which all information must pass in order to enter and exit the brain.



WHAT HAPPENS?



Studying at home in a comfortable place means your Hypothalamus slows down the production and release of key stress hormones.

= Hippocampus and Prefrontal cortex happily working away

When you are preparing for an exam in a setting that is predictable and relatively low-stakes, you are able to engage in cold cognition. This is the term given to logical and rational thinking processes.



Sitting in the exam hall (a perceived threat) means the hypothalamus stimulates the generation of several key stress hormones. This stops your working memory so whatever you were thinking about is now gone.

= These stress hormones also enter the Hippocampus which stops us being able to access old memories too.

However, when you enter a somewhat unpredictable and high-stakes exam situation, you enter hot cognition. This is the term given to non-logical and emotionally driven thinking processes. Hot cognition is typically triggered in response to a clear threat or otherwise highly stressful situation.

WHAT HELPS?

Try preparing yourself for the exam environment so you can get used to it

- Try not to revise in your bed or somewhere you associate with sleeping or relaxing.
- Try sitting at a table.
- Try not to have distractions like music or TV playing.

For general exam stress and anxiety you can try:

- Relaxation techniques
- Grounding techniques
- Breathing techniques
- Positive self talk
- Distractions

BREATHE



- Try not to talk to other people about the exam before hand.
- Being comfortable, make sure you go to the toilet and remember that needing to go to the toilet is a physical symptom of anxiety and you don't always need to go.
- Try not to compare yourself to others in the exam.
- Try to avoid putting pressure on yourself to be perfect. No one can be perfect, all you can do is your best!

WELLBEING TIPS FOR EXAM SELF-CARE



There is plenty of advice out there about study techniques but what you do when you are not revising is just as important as when you are.

Here are some 5-minute top tips to build self-care into the non-working parts of your day.

Try a grounding technique. These types of exercises help to take your focus away from overwhelming worries or unpleasant physical feelings by bringing your attention back to the present moment. These are also perfect for stress just before the exams themselves. Here are three simple activities to try:

Look around, name:

5 things you can see



4 things you can touch



3 things you can hear



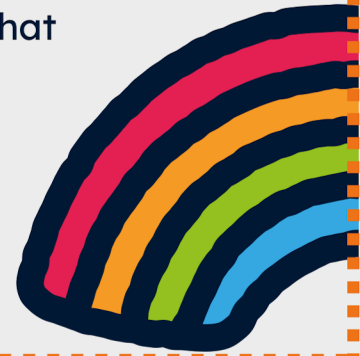
2 things you can smell



1 thing you can taste



Choose a colour. Then look around, noticing everything you see that is that colour.



Hot Chocolate Breathing:

- Imagine you are holding a mug of hot chocolate (this also works with a real mug of hot chocolate).
- Breathe in through your nose to smell the hot chocolate. Count slowly 1,2,3,4,5.
- Breathe out through your mouth to blow on the hot chocolate to cool it. Count 1,2,3,4,5.
- Repeat until you feel calm.





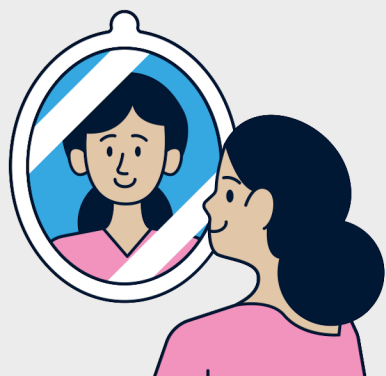
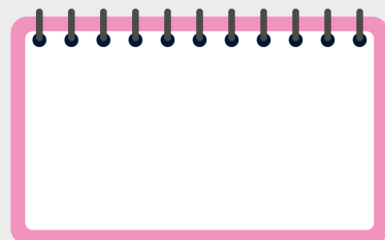
Something else that can help if we're feeling stressed or worried is to say positive statements to ourselves to boost our confidence and feelings of being able to cope in anxious situations.

Have a look at the examples below and see if any of them sound helpful, or use the blank lines underneath to create some of your own.

"I can do this!"

"I'm more capable than I think"

"This feeling won't last forever, and I can get through this"



"I can use my coping skills to help me feel calmer"

"I've worked really hard, and I'm proud of that"

"I might not feel like I can do it right now, but I know I can"

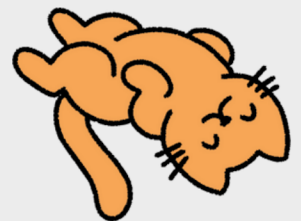


Try one of these 15-minute activities to look after yourself and give your mood a boost:

- Find a YouTube video which makes you smile.
- Do something creative such as drawing, doodling, or creating a mood board with pictures found online. You could even use this time to practise learning a new skill such as crochet or a new football trick.
- Go outside and take some deep breaths in the fresh air. Mindfully listen to the sounds of the birds or traffic and look out for flowers blooming or spot something you've not noticed before
- Make a hot drink but do not take it back to your desk with you. Enjoy it away from your study space and turn it into a quick mindfulness exercise - notice how the mug feels warm in your hands and how the liquid tastes as you take a sip. Try to come back to this if you feel your mind start about revision before the end of your break.



- Soothe yourself by singing loudly as if you don't have a care in the world.
- Take some time to cuddle a pet, a family member or blanket.



“To help manage my anxiety, I am trying to stay focused on my studies and talking to my mum about how I’m feeling. I have a dog and dogs are known to lower your heart rate and reduce stress levels- all pets are good for that. I am making sure I have plenty of breaks where I just cuddle my dog- particularly if I am really stressed!”

(Elliot, Year 11 student)



If you've got a bit more time, why not try one of these 60-minute wellbeing activities:



- Get outside in nature for a walk or sit in the park. Research shows that spending time outdoors can substantially increase creativity in students.
- Have a hot bath and make it special by using bath bombs. You could try a lavender scented shower gel as many people find this calming so that the smell lingers for a while.

- Prepare a comforting meal or bake something you enjoy.
- Use this time to try and connect with others, phone a friend, or talk to a family member. It is easy to feel isolated during the exam period so make time to connect with friends.



- Try some simple meditation or yoga- there are plenty of YouTube videos which can teach you how to do this. You may also find that this increases your productivity when you return to your studies.

- Listen to music which will either calm you down or raise your spirits.



- Take some time to tidy your study space. Cleanliness has been shown to improve concentration and decrease overall stress levels.
- Create a list of all the fun things you will have time to do once the exams are over!

"I am trying to make time to still do the things that make me feel happy like eating, dying my hair and doing my makeup. Going outside for a walk everyday so I am not stuck in my room all day really helps. I find doing art and reading my books helps me to switch off and relax. It is important to find something that makes you happy to focus on in this stressful time."

(Yasmin, 6th-former)

COMMON PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

1. There is no point in making a revision timetable because I will never stick to it.

When exams are approaching, we can often use up a lot of energy thinking about when we could be studying. Creating a revision timetable will help you to overcome feelings of being overwhelmed. It can provide you with something to focus on, resulting in using your time more productively. It is important however to be flexible when making a timetable so that it is easier to stick to. For example, if you have planned to revise for maths at 3pm but have found yourself watching an extra episode of Netflix, you can still push the remainder of your studies back an hour, so no sessions are missed. A timetable will also allow you to plan for regular breaks which will help with your productivity and overall wellbeing.

2. I do not have time to get 8 hours of sleep per night

Each day our brains become saturated with all the information we have learnt. Sleep helps us to soak up these new memories so that they will stay there for the long-term. It also helps to increase productivity, so you can learn more information the next day. So, getting plenty of sleep will really help you feel calmer and more prepared for your exams.



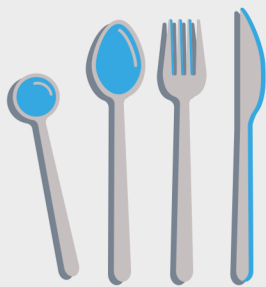
3. I lay awake each night worrying about exams making me too tired to revise during the day

Stress and anxiety can make sleep more difficult than usual. It is therefore important to maintain good sleep 'hygiene' to help us fall asleep. It can help to stick to a routine and get up at the same time each day regardless of how tired we feel. It is also important to avoid blue light from smart phones or TV for at least half an hour before bedtime as this stimulates the brain making it harder to fall asleep. Instead try and listen to music, a podcast or try some mediation. It will also help to avoid caffeine after 3pm as the stimulant effects of caffeine on the brain can last for at least six hours. Daytime naps can also make it harder to fall asleep at night time.

4. My friends are revising the same amount as me but seem to know much more than I do.

It can be stressful when you think that everyone is doing better than you, spending more time on revision than you, or just not feeling as anxious as you. But we are all different and that is ok. Remember, your friends' results are not guaranteed, life is unpredictable, and they are likely to be feeling just as stressed as you are without showing it!

5. I do not have time to eat regular meals or prepare healthy food



It can understandably be tempting to eat food at your desk to maximize study time, but you will work more effectively if you take time to eat meals away from your study space. Opting for healthy foods such as oily fish, lean meat, fruits, vegetables, nuts, eggs, leafy greens, tofu, peanut butter, and green tea will help you to feel more energetic, productive and help improve your overall wellbeing. However, do not forget to be kind to yourself during this time and enjoy a chocolate treat every now and again.

6. I am too tired to exercise after a day of revision

It is important to try and prioritize physical activity because this can help reduce stress levels, anxious thoughts, and help you to get a good night's sleep - which will help boost your brain power when it comes to remembering information. Try and find activities which you enjoy doing so that exercise becomes a fun break from revision, such as learning a TikTok dance, walking a pet or kicking a ball about. Aim for 15-30 minutes a day and see if this begins to help your mental well-being.



7. I feel guilty when I take study breaks

You are going through a very challenging period of your life and it's okay to feel stressed. It is really important however to be kind to yourself. Remember that this will not last forever, and you will get through it. Taking regular breaks helps to recharge your mental energy and prevent revision burnout.



FURTHER SUPPORT



Centre 33 provides a range of free services to support mental health and wellbeing for young people (up to 25 years old) across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. As well as mental health support, we can also help with areas such as housing, finances, sexual health, and young carers. For more information see our website: www.centre33.org.uk

Keep Your Head a mental health website for children and young people that provides quality information on keeping well, self-help, and support services. Further information can be found at www.keep-your-head.com

Kooth a free online emotional support and counselling service for young people aged 11-19. Services can be accessed up to 10pm in the evening. Further information can be found at www.kooth.com

Young Minds a mental health website for children and young people that provides quality information on keeping well, self-help, and support services. Further information can be found at www.youngminds.org.uk

You might also want to explore the following apps which offer a range of exercises that can help to reduce anxiety:

- Virtual hope box
- Mind shift
- Headspace
- Clear Fear
- Chill Panda



**REMEMBER -
THIS WILL NOT
LAST FOREVER!**