

## **Supporting students during exam time**

End of year or end of course exams can lead to great stress for students - and those who live with them! The words stress and pressure 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 become negative, and depending on how the individual perceives it and reacts to it, it can lead to the development of stress. This document offers information and ideas on how to help your child or young person manage exam stress.

### **What is exam stress?**

For some people, the increased pressure around exam time may lead to them experiencing stress symptoms much more readily than others. Stress can be defined as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed on them'. It varies from person to person and in many ways a stress response is a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or that upset your balance in some way. However, we do know that prolonged stress can lead to illness, both mental and physical.

### **What causes exam stress?**

Exam stress is a natural reaction to pressure caused by a number of factors including:

- Inability to accept failure or uncertainty
- Pessimism or negative self-talk
- Unrealistic expectations (either of the student or the parents)
- Unpreparedness
- Life transitions
- Family issues and/or relationship difficulties
- Financial problems
- Performance anxiety.

### **What are the known impacts of exam stress?**

When a person is stressed over something, their body reacts accordingly. If adequate approaches for managing extreme exam stress aren't developed it can have negative results including lower grades than anticipated or required. Over the long term, various physical health problems such as digestive problems, eczema, as well as mental health issues such as anxiety or depression could develop.

## **What can you expect to see if your child has exam stress?**

Some people feel pressure and develop stress symptoms more than others. Stress responses can differ between males and females as well, with research showing females present internal symptoms and responses such as nausea, butterflies and feelings of inadequacy which can lead to sadness and depression. Males tend to externalise their anxiety and can become increasingly irritable or angry.

When someone is faced with increased pressure (in this case at exam 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 yelling or crying, swearing, hitting)
- Indecisiveness and/or confusion
- Problems with going to sleep or getting up in the morning
- Strongly beating heart, sweating
- Mild chest pains, back pains, nausea, trembling, shortness of breath
- Minor stomach upsets
- Possible skin breakouts
- Teeth grinding, nail biting and fidgeting
- Constipation or diarrhoea
- Going blank in the exam.

## **What influences a person's stress tolerance level?**

**Support network** - A young person experiencing exam stress will have a better response to stress if supported by parents or other caring adults.

**Sense of control** - Having a sense of control about what to expect on the day, what to learn and ways to systematically revise will assist a young person to manage their exam stress.

**Positive attitude and outlook** - Assist them to see the bright side, to laugh at themselves and to appreciate the positives in life. People who are resilient to stressors have an optimistic attitude.

**Preparation** - The more a young person prepares for a stressful situation, such as an exam, the easier it is to cope. A student's stress level is often influenced by the amount of preparation and planning they have put into studying towards a particular exam and how confident they feel about the material they are to be tested on.

## **What can parents and carers do about exam stress?**

One of the best things parents or carers can do if their child is experiencing exam stress is to try to be as supportive and tolerant as possible.

We've put together a list of strategies that may help young people to manage exam stress. We've also included some tips on how to help your child deal with stress on and after the exam day.

## **Effective study and learning habits**

Parents and carers can help reduce the exam stress of their child by helping them establish effective study and learning habits:

- Help your child find a quiet place to study without distractions. Make sure their table is uncluttered so they can focus better.
- Encourage your child to find out exactly what the test involves.
- 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 so 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.

## **Healthy sleeping and eating habits**

- Encourage your child to stick to a routine of going to bed at a reasonable time. They need to avoid late night TV shows or movies.
- Motivate them to eat regularly and make time to have fun and exercise.
- Help them to cut back on coffee or any other stimulants which they may be using, as these can increase agitation. Encourage them to drink lots of water instead.
- Remind them to take time out when they eat, rather than carrying on with study.
- Encourage them to eat fresh fruit, veggies, 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. It will bring a sudden sugar high which will fall away quickly, leaving a person feeling tired.

## **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 short story may help them unwind and sleep better.
- Encourage them to go out for a walk, run or do some other exercise they enjoy.
- Teach them relaxation techniques such as listening to some gentle music, getting them to lie down, closing their eyes and taking a deep breath while visualising a calming scene such as a deserted beach.
- Help your child to develop a positive mindset by encouraging them to visualise success - this can really help with self-confidence.
- Avoid rushing on the day of the exam by organising and packing everything they need to take with them the night before.

## **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:

- Eat a good and light breakfast - something that will sustain them and help them concentrate.
- Try to arrive at school or the exam venue early.
- Go to the toilet before the exam starts.
- Keep away from people who may agitate them before the test or may say unhelpful, anxiety-provoking comments.
- Try writing about their thoughts and feelings at least 10 minutes before the exam to free up brainpower from focusing on emotions, so they can focus on the test material instead.
- Take time to slow their breathing and relax when they first sit down in the exam room.
- Skim over the exam 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 - they need to understand and address what the question is really asking.
- Answer the questions they find easiest first to build their confidence, then as they relax more move on to more difficult ones.
- Don't worry about how long others are taking but keep an eye on the clock to ensure they have enough time to answer the more difficult questions.
- Re-read answers if possible and make any changes that are necessary - correct spelling, check workings.

## **Post-exam tip**

If your child is not able to do well in the exam and they feel very upset about it, reassure them that there is always a second chance and passing an exam is only part of the story. It may be helpful to take some time to discuss any problems they had so they can avoid them next time. Encourage them to move on from the exam that they have done as they can't change it and consider strategies for the next one.