Managing Exam Stress

Parents can find exams just as stressful as their child!

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Student survey - issues impacting on their EHWB

Which, if any, of the issues below are having a significant impact on your mental health?

- Low mood or depression
- Anxiety
- Self-harming behaviour
- Alcohol
- Drug use
- Body image
- Eating difficulties
- Sleep difficulties
- Toiletting difficulties
- Behaviour difficulties
- Poses risk to others
- Attachment issues
- Family stress
- Friendship difficulties
- Gender identity
- Academic pressure or exam stress
- Difficulties with social media
- Bullying
- Traumatic experiences
- Being hurt emotionally
- Being hurt physically
- Bereavement, grief or loss
- Learning disability (e.g. Dyslexia)
- Attention difficulties or hyperactivity
- Other (please specify)

159 responses
Results of EHWB survey

The top 6 issues students stated as having a significant impact on their mental health:

- Academic/exam pressure
- Anxiety
- Friendship issues
- Sleep difficulties
- Low mood
- Family stress

Common comments/requests by students:

- People to ask ‘how are things?’
- Greater signposting
- More support in school
**Support networks:**

- PSHE curriculum.
- Staff support – Form Tutor, Year Manager, Staff Healthy Minds Champions, SEN, MHWB & Resilience Support Worker.
- Supporting your child with exams (managing exam stress) – parents information evening with CAMHS support.
- Signposting information (web site – supporting learning).
- Useful links – local services and support groups – Sheffield MH guide.
- Mental health and wellbeing parent support group.
Healthy Minds Champions 2017-18
Working together as a team

**Students** are responsible for maintaining good attendance and actively engaging in lessons and their learning. Also seeking help and guidance when needed.

**School** will deliver the curriculum and stretch and challenge students in their learning so they are well prepared for exams as well offering guidance and support.

**Parents** are there to reassure their child but also challenge them when they are overconfident and give them a gentle nudge in the right direction when needed.
**Ever had that feeling? (exam stress)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical sensations:</th>
<th>Psychological sensations:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- nausea (feeling sick)</td>
<td>- feeling tense, nervous and on edge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- tense muscles and headaches</td>
<td>- having a sense of dread, or fearing the worst</td>
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<tr>
<td>- pins and needles</td>
<td>- feeling like the world is speeding up or slowing down</td>
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<tr>
<td>- feeling light headed or dizzy</td>
<td>- feeling like other people can see you’re anxious and are looking at you</td>
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<td>- faster breathing</td>
<td>- feeling your mind is really busy with thoughts</td>
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<td>- sweating or hot flushes</td>
<td>- dwelling on negative experiences, or thinking over a situation again and again (this is called rumination)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- a fast, thumping or irregular heart beat</td>
<td>- feeling restless and not being able to concentrate</td>
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<tr>
<td>- raised blood pressure</td>
<td>- feeling numb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- difficulty sleeping</td>
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<tr>
<td>- needing the toilet more frequently, or less frequently</td>
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<tr>
<td>- churning in the pit of your stomach</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- experiencing panic attacks</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Helping children to access their thinking brain

The reptilian brain is good for survival but lousy for exam success!
Is anxiety and worry helpful?

As with everything in life... A little bit of stress is good for you!
When we’re overwhelmed with stress or worry, our thought processes can:

- Be defensive
- Can only think about oneself
- Can only think about the here and now
- Be critical and judgemental
- Remember disasters and predict catastrophe
- Make us lose focus
- Make our brains feel like a jumble
Why does your brain offer such suggestions at such an unhelpful time?

Because the older part of our brain is trying to keep you safe. It relies on:

• **Overestimation of danger** – it’s going to be a catastrophe!
• Fast **generalisation** - worst scenarios!
• **Reading others minds** – everyone thinks...

What we actually need is the **logical rational** part of our brains to function so we can think rationally and decide what to do.
Parents role
Be there
to offer
reassurance
and tackle self
deception
Adolescent Brain: What’s happening?
Remodelling: Puberty encourages the brain to undergo a large structural change.
EXECUTIVE FUNCTION

- Activation
- Action
- Memory
- Focus
- Emotion
- Effort

CREDIT: HTTP://COGX.INFO (DR. BROWN)
Brain developments during adolescence (12 – 20 yrs.)

- Emotional Spark
- Social engagement
- Novelty Seeking
- Creative exploration

The take home message:
'It is vital to keep the lines of connection and communication open'

Young people need a reliable relationship in their lives

Daniel J Siegel (2014) Brain Storm
| Emotional Spark          | • **Opportunity:** Filled with passion and desire.  
|                         | • **Risk:** Get upset quicker, feeling irritable, find it difficult to trust their own emotional state  
|                         | • **Impulsivity**—difficulty in regulating their emotion.  
|                         | • Difficulty in understanding the **emotional intent** of others  
|                         | • **Lack of awareness** of own emotion, where it’s coming from  
| **Social Engagement**   | • **Opportunity:** Learn social skills that can last a life time, develop friendships that can teach you how to be connected to other people,  
|                         | • **Risk:** Feeling pressured by peers to match what they have/ their items.  
|                         | • **Urgency to fit into a group**, association with other peers similar to themselves and creating safety in numbers.  
|                         | • **Decrease in communication** with parents/ teachers and a greater desire to build external relationships  
|                         | • Succumbing to peer pressure, greater importance of what peers think of them.  
| **Novelty Seeking**     | • **Opportunity:** Get you ready to try on the uncertainty, unfamiliar and uncomfortable and unsafe to prepare you to live independently  
|                         | • **Risk:** Risk and danger, being injured.  
|                         | • Sense of boredom, lack of engagement in activities perceived as being mundane.  
|                         | • A desire to explore and **experience new things**  
|                         | • Lack of emphasis on the consequences of their actions, despite knowing the **dangers**.  
| **Creative Exploration**| • **Opportunity:** Excitement of changing the world, adolescents display ingenuity, courage and creativity.  
|                         | • **Risk:** Feeling disorientated due to changes in perspectives.  
|                         | • May openly challenge those in authority (Parents/Teachers) when they feel they are doing something they do not agree with.  
|                         | • **Pushing boundaries** to see how far they can go, what the set limitations are in that individual/ particular environment.  
|                         | • **Shift in the perspective of others** (e.g. parents aren’t who they thought).
Emotional self-regulation = Being able to be rationale and access our thinking brains

Dys-regulation = Feeling overwhelmed and acting this out

Dys-regulation = Feeling overwhelmed and closing down

Processing of emotional self-regulation over time
‘Thinking brain’
- Calm
- Abstract and creative in your thinking
- Can think about the world, other people and their needs
- Can think about the future and past

‘Alarm System’
- Anger, anxiety, fear
- Reactive
- Can only think about yourself
- Can only think about the here and now

Autonomic system
- Terror
- Automatic
- Body Integrity – concern is for keeping your body safe
- Physical self – hunger, thirst, sleep, noise, heat
- Loss of sense of time
• STOP
Just pause for a moment
• TAKE A BREATH
  • Pay attention to your breathing as you breathe in and out
• OBSERVE
  • What are you reacting to?
  • What sensations do you notice in your body?
• PULL BACK – PUT IN SOME PERSPECTIVE
  • What’s the bigger picture? What’s going on?
• PRACTICE WHAT WORKS
  • What’s the best thing to do right now?
Breathing Techniques

When we are experiencing intense emotions, our breathing often becomes more rapid or we hold our breath. We can calm ourselves down by deliberately slowing and relaxing our breathing.

Almost immediately, blood pressure drops, your expression softens, and tension drains from your body.

- Breathe in slowly and steadily through your nose for a count of 4
- Pause for a count of 1
- Breathe out through your mouth for a count of 4 (slowly and steadily)
- Repeat this exercise for as long as you need. If your mind wanders whilst you do this exercise, bring your attention back to how it feels to breathe in and out.
Top tips for parents

• Take your time to work out the best approach
• Support your child to adopt a calm, rational constructive approach
• Agree a reasonable plan for revision
• Give choices
• If your child is feeling overwhelmed help them to choose one ‘do-able’ activity for the day
• Feeling confident about the can do’s and taking small steps
• Acknowledge, acknowledge, acknowledge – let your child off load, process their feelings, feel heard and understood – You don’t need to rush in with advice or reassurance
• Think about your own stress levels and emotional regulation – notice if you or your child’s alarm system has been triggered
• Notice the tone of your voice when your are communicating and what you are communicating non verbally
• Start each day afresh
• Have fun
• Use ‘I’ not ‘you’
• Use ‘and’ not ‘but’
Useful resources

• Relaxation exercises from the mental health foundation
  
• https://soundcloud.com/mentalhealthfoundation/sets/wellbeing-podcasts


Sheffield CAMHS website for young people
www.epicfriends.co.uk
1. The will to win means nothing without the will to prepare  

Encourage them to be organised, prioritise learning and follow a realistic revision programme. Don’t leave things until the last minute.
2. Make learning part of the culture at home

Be interested in what your child is learning – conversations about the subject helps them to embed their learning - just listening attentively helps them to process what they have revised.

Pin up their revision and exam timetable on the noticeboard in the kitchen and work around it.
3. Support and encourage a work/life balance

Having something to look forward to is a great motivator. Promote getting out of the house for some exercise, a walk or to meet a friend. It will help to clear their mind so they don’t feel trapped in a cycle of revision.
4. Good nights sleep
Sleep helps to embed learning

1. Avoid caffeine.
2. No electronic screens 45 minutes before sleep.
4. Soothing, relaxing pre-sleep routine.
5. Go to sleep when you are tired.
6. Don’t check the clock.
7. Open the curtains in the morning.
8. Regular, consistent pattern (7 hours).
9. Avoid naps after 5pm.
10. Exercise earlier in the day.
5. Look out for them and notice when they are working hard

1. If they are looking overwhelmed encourage them to take a break and relax.
2. Remember exams are stressful! Avoid getting drawn into arguments or negativity.
3. Notice when they are working hard and make sure you tell them!
4. Always be calm and positive.

When a person is down in the world, an ounce of help is better than a pound of preaching.

Edward G. Bulwer-Lytton
6. Check in with and give time for your child to tell you how they are feeling

- People sitting exams are often tense and ratty and telling people how they feel avoids that ‘what’s wrong?’ ‘nothing!’ conversation.
- Encourage them to get out of the house for some exercise, a walk or to meet a friend. It will help to clear their mind so they don’t feel trapped in a cycle of revision.
- If you notice they are starting to feel overwhelmed encourage taking a break, time to relax and talking to someone.
7. Keep them well nourished

1. Eat a healthy balanced diet.
2. Keep hydrated.
3. Avoid excessive caffeine, especially late at night.
4. Eat breakfast in the morning before an exam.
5. Encourage them to look after themselves – remember exams are more of a marathon than a sprint.
8. Help put exams into perspective

Tell them:

‘You are not your exams. You are not your exam results. You are not your Nikes or your Xbox or your IPhone. Things that are important to you – seeing friends, spending time with family, enjoying hobbies and everything else that makes you YOU is the stuff that will keep you going.’

Fight Club
Key points to take with you

• **Remember the three brains** – the reptilian brain is good for survival but lousy for exam success. Encourage and remind them to use their thinking brain!
• Key is **emotional regulation** and avoiding getting to a point where they feel overwhelmed! (This will be different for each of us).
• Try the **mindfulness techniques** with them!
• **Give time to chat** about how they are feeling and what they are learning.
• **Practice** and **struggle** will help in the long run.
• We are continually shaping our minds and developing our brains.
• **Remember there is more to life than just exams!**
School Support

Focus is always on how to best support the student in terms of accessing learning, performing at their optimum in exams, supporting their EHWB and making the next steps in their life.

• Form Tutors
• Year Managers
• Staff Healthy Minds Champions
• Subject teachers
• SEN
• MHWB & Resilience Support Worker
• School website with links to advice, guidance and support
Top study/revision tips

• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVlvxHJdqI8
Mental Health and Wellbeing Parent Support Group

5:00 – 6:00pm Wednesday 7th March Tapton School for any parent

We are looking to set up a mental health and wellbeing parent support group to offer parents the chance to meet, chat, ask questions, share experiences and ideas.

If you are interested please let me know
srippin@taptonschool.co.uk