Mental Health Support Team

Exam Stress Booklet for Parents / Carers

This booklet is designed to help when your young person is going through exams.

Exams can be a difficult and stressful time in your young person's life – in this guid you will find practical skills and strategies to help them through this period.

Making a Difference
Trust Honesty Respect Compassion Teamwork

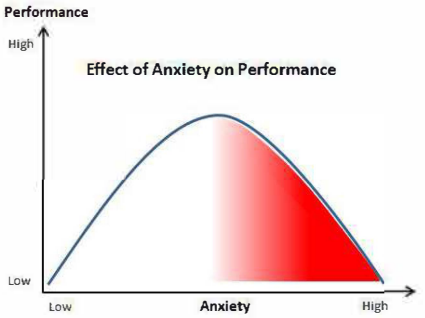
What is stress?

Anxiety and Stress are really normal things for people to experience, especially in high pressure times such as exam season.

Stress is your bodies response when feeling threatened or under pressure. It is the feeling of being overwhelmed or unable to cope with mental or emotional pressure. It is also our bodies response to danger – it is our way of keeping safe, and can release hormones which trigger our Fight, Flight or Freeze survival response.

Stress and anxiety can be really useful. It helps us to enhance our performance and to motivate us. But our anxiety response can be unhelpful if it gets too high and then can stop us from doing things and interfere with our daily life.
Our body can automatically go into the FFF survival state, where we either can confront the situation (Fight), avoid the situation (Flight), or disconnect (Freeze). Going through this can alter how the body feels too as it gets us ready to react – so your young person might be feeling sick, hot and sweaty, or have changes in their heart rate or breathing.
When your young person is experiencing stress, especially at exam times, it can be helpful to know what to look for and ways to support them.

Stress is normal and useful. We all feel stressed at times over different things.





This is what it can look like for our young people:

Physical symptoms of stress might include:

- Losing interest in activities
- Poor appetite
- Aches and pains
- Feeling rundown
- Headaches
- Constant tiredness
- Forgetfulness
- Increased heart rate
- Blurred vision

We might experience a range of emotions when we feel stressed:

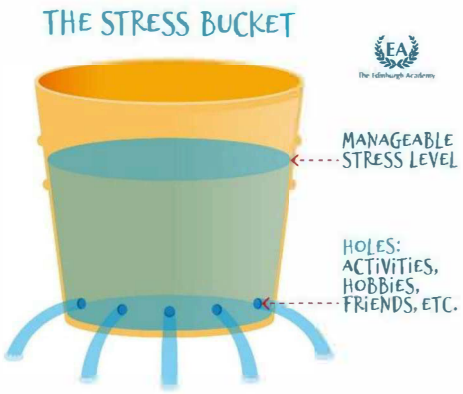
- Sad
- Frustrated
- Angry
- Irritable
- Guilty
- Overwhelmed
- Embarrassed
- Lonely

Behaviours that we might show when stressed include:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Impulsive behaviour
- Indecisive
- Overeating/undereating
- Withdrawing from friends/family
- Changes in how we spend our time, e.g., less exercise/hobbies

Stress Bucket

The Stress Bucket is a really helpful way to explain stress and stress management to your young person. Imagine you have a stress bucket inside your body which collects all your stress. Exams can be a major source of stress, filling up your bucket beyond a manageable level of stress, and maybe causing it to overflow.

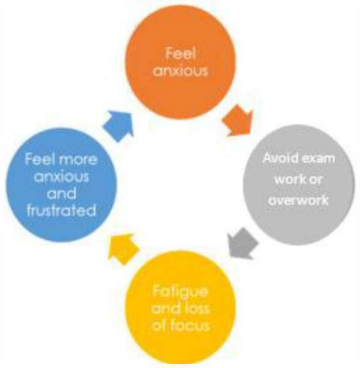


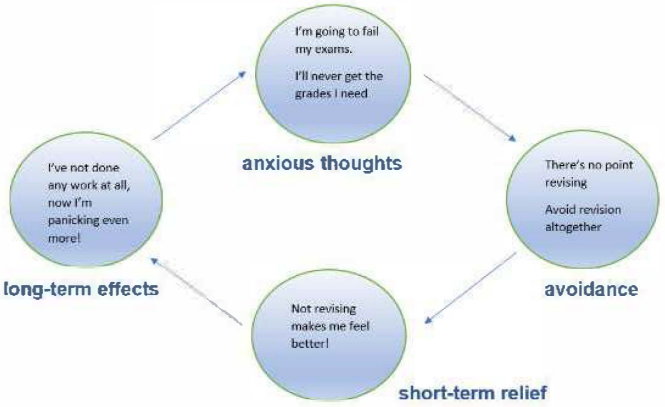
Use this space to make a stress bucket with your young person. What helps them? What fills their bucket up?



The Vicious Cycle

When we experience stress, we can fall into 'the vicious cycle' easily. It starts with our thoughts and feelings which in turn influence our behaviour and then reinforces our thoughts and feelings. For example, when we are under stress, we can feel anxious or have anxious thoughts. This might lead your young person to either avoid the thing making them anxious, or overwork to the point of burnout. These behaviors lead to fatigue and loss of focus, which then reinforces the anxious thoughts and feelings of anxiety and stress. This cycle is something that everyone can experience and is not always intentional. Our brains are wired this way, but knowing about the cycle means we can change it and have more positive behaviors which can then influence our thoughts and feelings to be more positive.





Use this space below to draw one out with your young person:

Containment

With our young people, parents / carers are in a prime position to support them through the exam period. Containing them and their emotions can make them feel safe. It is important to acknowledge the emotions our young people are feeling, and to be present when they are feeling big emotions.

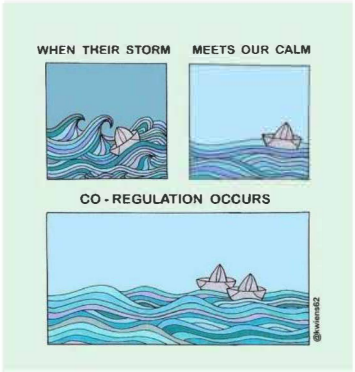
Routines and boundaries:

Boundaries and routines can feel like a challenge with young people, but the evidence says that it helps them to feel safe and secure.

Strategies that can help with boundaries:

- Understanding the underlying need but being consistent with what is and isn't acceptable behaviour.
- Responding not reacting.
- Stepping back and noticing unhelpful patterns.
- Co-regulating emotions.
- Modelling rupture and repair.

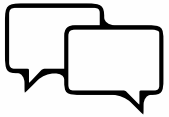
Modelling:



Young people pick up on how parents / carers react and respond to situations, which in turn influences their feelings and reactions. As parents / carers, you are in a good position to model how to respond to situations. It's normal experience big emotions, but the parent / carer can model that they can be tolerated.

Emotion regulation is important because our emotions are closely connected to how we think and feel. Our thoughts and feelings help us to decide how to respond to a situation and what actions to take. If we understand, co-regulate and help young people identify a strategy to adjust then young people will become happier, more attuned young people.

Top Tips



1. Talk Openly

- Ask how they're feeling about exams.
- Reassure them that it's normal to feel nervous.
- Avoid minimising their worries—listen and validate.



2. Help Them Plan

- **Support them in creating a realistic revision timetable.**
- Encourage regular breaks and balance with fun activities.
- Avoid last-minute cramming—it increases stress.



3. Promote Healthy Habits

- Ensure they get enough sleep, eat well, and stay hydrated.
- Encourage movement—walks, stretching, or sports.
- Limit screen time before bed.



4. Stay Positive

- Focus on effort, not just results.
- Remind them that exams don't define their worth.
- Celebrate small wins and progress.

It could also be really helpful to speak to school about a revision timetable so you can support your young person in making one. In a revision timetable, it is helpful to have regular time for breaks and looking after themselves too.

What top tip are you going to use?

Coping Strategies

Finding appropriate skills and strategies to help your young person when they are feeling under stress can be helpful in avoiding 'the vicious cycle', and allowing their stress bucket to empty.

Grounding

Grounding techniques are really helpful as they can tell our brain that we are safe. When we are feeling under stress, it is because our brain thinks we are not safe. By distracting our minds and reminding it of our surroundings, it can reduce the stress we experience.

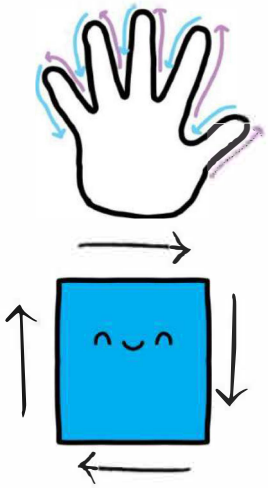
Some examples are using 54321 for your senses, or distraction with facts and things that are in the room:



Facts	Room Search
Think of some facts (e.g.): My age is... My name is... I am wearing... The weather is... I am in...	Think of a category and search the room for it. For example, look for: Everything that is a ... colour Everything that is a ... shape Things that feel of... Things made of ...

Breathing

Breathing techniques are a really easy and accessible way to calm down our nervous systems. It helps to reduce the physical sensations of our Fight, Flight, Freeze response and calm our brain. Breathing through your nose is helpful for calming the body and the mind.



Finger Breathing
Use your index finger to trace around the edges of the fingers on your opposite hand.
Count 1, 2, 3, 4 and breath in as you go up the first finger.
Count 1, 2, 3, 4 and breath out as you go down the finger.
Repeat until you have traced up and down all five fingers, breathing 1, 2, 3, 4 in and 1, 2, 3, 4 out each time.

Square Breathing
Imagine you're drawing a square with your finger in the air.
Breathe in while counting 1,2,3,4,5 as you draw the top line and then pause.
Breath out whilst counting 1,2,3,4,5 as you draw the line down the side and then pause.
Breathe in while counting 1,2,3,4,5 as you draw the bottom line and then pause.
Breath out whilst counting 1,2,3,4,5 as you draw the line up the side and then pause.

Daily Habits:

Promoting simple daily habits to look after your young person is so helpful for their general wellbeing.



Signposting

Find support online at:
Young Minds
Childline
Kooth
The Mix

In school:
Speak to your tutor, class teacher, or pastoral team

You can refer yourself to the Mental Health Support Team using this QR code: