

Emotional Health Service



Exam stress



What is stress?

It's something everyone experiences at times and happens when a person feels overwhelmed with the things that are happening in their lives. A good example is end of school exams.

How do you feel when you're stressed?

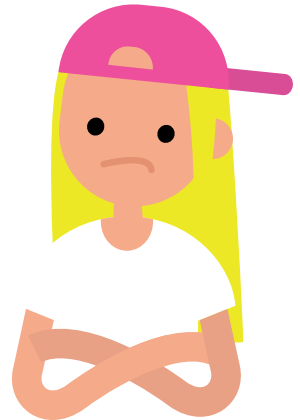
- Low, irritable, angry, panicky
- Tired and wanting to withdraw

What happens in your body?

- Your heart might race
- You could have stomach pains
- Feel dizzy
- Breathing could be rapid or shallow
- Headaches

What you think and what you do?

- Worry more than usual
- Expect the worse
- Compare yourself negatively with others
- Snap at family
- Eat too much or too little
- Avoid people and places



Some basic things you can do

Get enough sleep

Sleep is very important because - believe it or not - your brain revises for you if you have been revising consciously during the evening. It also increases your sense of wellbeing and is part of a healthy routine. Not enough sleep means we wake up less prepared to concentrate, make decisions, or engage fully in school and social activities. Young people need eight to ten hours of sleep a night.

Some sleep advice

Set your alarm and get up at the same time each morning (even on the weekend). Don't try to 'catch up' on sleep in the mornings. Generally try to stay away from napping, as it can lead to day-night flipping.

If you are unable to sleep after 20 minutes, get up and do something different, read, do some relaxation, have a warm milky drink or sit in a dim light and do something calming. When you are sleepy again, go back to bed.

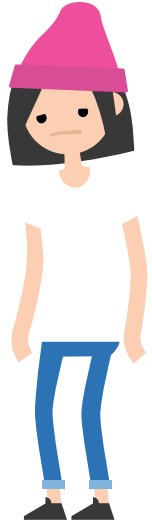
Drugs, alcohol and stress

Taking drugs or drinking alcohol changes the way we feel. It is sometimes used as a short term coping mechanism, but after the drug effects wear off, we are back to feeling the way we were before. Substances themselves also interact with our own body chemistry and may induce unwanted feelings or experiences.

Eat a healthy diet

Missing meals or eating a poor diet can affect your ability to concentrate or think clearly. It can also result in physical symptoms such as feeling light-headed, racing heart, weakness and can create sleep difficulties. Think of your body like a car engine you need fuel to make a car go.

Try to cut back on sugar, drink six to eight glasses of water a day and remember your five a day. Eat colourful foods and avoid caffeine. Try to just have a small amount in the morning (including coffee, tea, sugary drinks and chocolate). To avoid energy slumps, eat six small meals a day or three meals and two snacks.

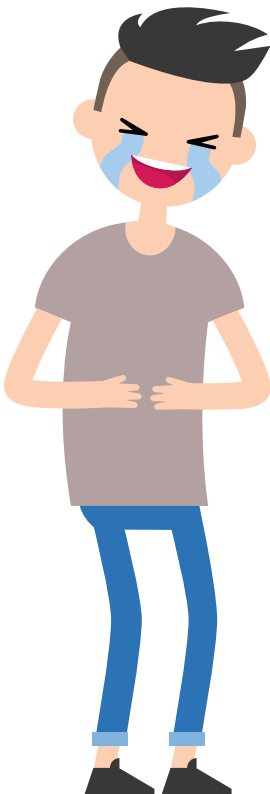


Exercise

Exercise is beneficial for our physical and mental health and can be as effective for low mood or depression as medication and therapy. When you exercise, your body releases helpful hormones called endorphins which are feel-good chemicals. It also improves concentration and sleep.

Stay in touch with family and friends

It is normal when you are under pressure, to want to avoid things that make you feel stressed. We all do it. It's not only you that can feel the stress of exams, but the adults around you can also become worried. Sometimes, it might feel as though you are dealing with their stress as well as your own. Try not to isolate yourself. Talk to someone you trust about how you are feeling and try some of the strategies in this leaflet. Remember exams are not the only way to be successful and the human race was around for a very long time before people started to sit exams.



What helps stress in your body?

Calm breathing

Place your hands gently on your tummy, fingers pointing towards each other. Breathe in gently through your nose. As you breathe in feel your tummy push outwards. Breathe naturally, no need to take a deep breath. Then, breathe out through your mouth and notice your tummy relax into your spine as you release your breath.

Now take another gentle breath in through your nose for one, two, three and hold, and out through your mouth, one, two, three and hold. And again this time for one, two, three, four, and hold, and out for one, two, three, four, and hold. You can continue the counting up to five or more if needed. Continue until you feel calm.

Progressive muscle relaxation

The purpose of this technique is to become familiar with the difference between feeling tense and relaxed. When you are stressed, you may stop noticing that you are always tense. This technique can also be helpful to relax your body before sleep. It involves working upwards from the toes or downwards from the head and gradually tensing and then relaxing muscle groups. At the end of the exercise you should feel your whole body relax.

Progressive muscle relaxation scripts can be recorded and then played back or downloaded from the internet. It's important, as with calm breathing, to practise regularly to encourage a good habit to be formed. See resources at the end of the leaflet.

Self-care

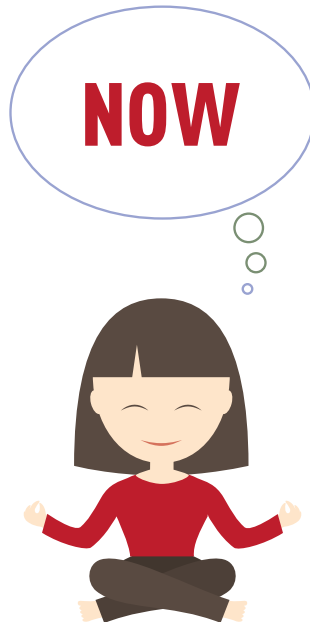
It's important when you are stressed to be kind to yourself and continue to do the things that give you pleasure in life, such as watching a favourite film, taking a relaxing bath, going out with friends. Think about what works for you.

Mindfulness

This is a way of staying in the present moment because our thoughts about the past and the future take us away from the present and can lead to lots of worrying thoughts, 'what if I fail my exams... I'll never get a job... I'll end up homeless'.

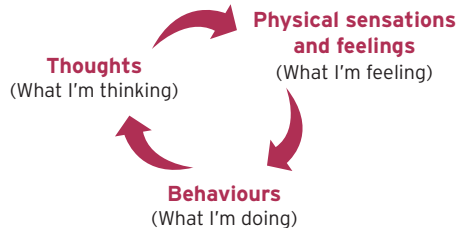
Start with moving your attention to your breath. It's no use trying to stop your thoughts, because the more you try to stop them, the more thoughts you will have. For example, think of a pink elephant for three minutes. Now stop thinking of a pink elephant.

Back to mindfulness: breathe calmly, noticing the breath in and out and let your worrying thoughts come and go without judging them. Now take your attention to your hands, notice their colour, the texture of your skin, do they feel warm or cold, look at your fingers, do you notice anything new? You can also move your attention to your environment or to a simple task such as washing some dishes. Now you're in the moment.



What helps you with stressful thoughts?

When people are under stress, their thoughts can become negative, self-critical and assume the worst. Working on more balanced thoughts will reduce those panicky, irritable feelings, raise your mood and make you more likely to do the things that make you feel good. It's creating a more positive or helpful cycle.



Balanced thoughts

What would you say to a friend if they were having stressful thoughts? What would a trusted person say to you? Are your thoughts fact or opinion? What is your evidence to prove they are true? Ask yourself such questions and think of a more balanced view of the situation. 'I've followed my revision plan, it worked last time. It's natural to feel nervous. I always feel better when I do some calm breathing'.

Also try not to compare yourself with your friends it often only leads to self-critical thoughts and will make you feel low.

Planning a revision timetable

Try to take time to make a plan, put tricky or disliked topics first thing in the day. Build in rewards and breaks to keep your motivation going and remembering to be kind to yourself. In reasonable sized chunks of revision, this is doable.

Revise away from distractions. Think about a place that works for you. Try again to be realistic about how much you can do. Working into the early hours won't be productive. Self-testing is proven as the best method of revision, so you could do this after preparing your notes.

You could also ask your teachers for subject-specific techniques for revising. Remember, this won't last forever. Good luck!

Resources

AfC Info

www.afcinfo.org.uk/emotionalhealthservice

Calm breathing audio, progressive muscle relaxation:

youth.anxietybc.com

Mindfulness, meditation and stress management:

Sam-app.org.uk

Stressheads:

www.themix.org.uk

Headspace meditation made simple:

www.headspace.com

The Moor Lane Centre

Moor Lane, Chessington, Surrey, KT9 2AA

T: 020 8487 5470

Opening hours:

Monday to Friday: 9.00am to 5.00pm