

Counselling and Well-Being Service

Parents Guide to supporting Exam Stress

What is stress?

- Stress is one of the body's natural responses to something that is frightening or threatening
- It is something that we all experience from time to time
- Stress is not necessarily harmful: mild forms can motivate and energise us
- However, if our stress is too high then it can cause difficulties, including hindering your ability to prepare for and perform during exams

Stress Symptoms

You may see some of these signs of stress in your daughter:

- Anger
- Excessive Worries
- Depression
- Mood swings
- Anxiety
- Forgetfulness
- Tiredness
- Poor concentration
- Profuse sweating
- Lack of interest in studies despite efforts made
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns

How common is stress over exams?

- The ChildLine National Exam Stress Survey revealed that:
- 96% of students feel anxious about exams
- 59% of students feel pressure from family
- 64% of students would like more support with exams and exam stress

Exam anxiety and stress is NORMAL.

What causes stress?

- Unrealistic or unreasonable expectations
- Excessive competition
- Low self-esteem & self-worth
- Nagging, belittling, comparing
- Last minute preparation
- Lack of trust and friendship
- Conflict
- Life change

How you can help your daughter

Unfortunately, there is no magic wand that will remove the impact of stress on your daughter's life. Controlling stress is an active process which means that she will have to take steps to limit its impact. There are ways you can support her in that though and we are recommending six areas to focus on.

Step one – good food and drink

Encourage her to be careful about what she eats and drinks

- Keep good blood sugars level to avoid highs and lows of energy by eating slow-release foods like
 - Wholemeal rice/bread
 - Fruits & vegetables
 - Pasta
- Avoid sugar/caffeine
- Keep hydrated with 8 glasses of water daily

Step two – get enough sleep

Makes sure she gets 8 hours' sleep a night but ideally 9-9.5 hours for teenagers.

We have a leaflet for students with a number of ideas if they are having problems in this area.

We know many students when they get stressed end up cramming late into the early hours and some do this for weeks before exam period. This is not effective and can actually reduce how much information they learn.

Step three - exercise

Exercising is one of the quickest and most effective ways to de-stress. Even if your daughter isn't sporty, a short walk will help clear her head and perk her up.

Step four – breathing and relaxation

Stress can make you start breathing with quick, shallow breaths and make your heart beat faster than usual. If you notice this happen to your daughter, help her sit down somewhere comfortably. She may choose to do some of these breathing techniques.

- Place one hand on your stomach and check how quickly you are breathing. If it's one breath every couple of seconds, take a deep breath and start counting steadily. Breathe out slowly and try to get the last of the breath out on about five seconds. Carry on doing this until you are doing it naturally.
- 7/11 breathing. Breathe in for a count of 7 then breathe out for a count of 11. If you find that it's difficult to lengthen your breaths to a count of 11 or 7, then reduce the count to breathing in for 3 and out to 5, or whatever suits you best, as long as the out-breath is longer than the in-breath.

We have a separate leaflet for students on more breathing and relaxation techniques.

Step five – making time for fun

Your daughter has a lot of studying to do in the build up to exams, both in school and at home. She may also have additional chores and commitments to help around the house.

If you can help reduce the demands on her time as much as possible so she can plan her revision and allow herself some time for fun, then she will be more productive during this challenging time.

While she is revising 10 minutes breaks after a 30–45 minute study period will help her concentration. Having something planned as a fun activity each week will also help motivate her and give her something to look forward to.

Step six - study skills and planning

Help her plan her time effectively.

Think about the following:

- Where does her time go?
- 168 hours in the week – use them wisely
- Allocate time for essential tasks, sleep, meals, school time, travel time
- Schedule in time for study – including breaks
- Schedule time for HER e.g., relaxation, socialising, exercise
- Help her have an organised dedicated space to study and try and ensure she isn't disturbed
- She may find she is able to focus better at specific times of day or that music helps her
- Encourage her to set realistic goals, rather than trying to do 10 topics a day and being discouraged and disappointed