

Being prepared



What is stress?

Stress and anxiety is our natural response to threat or sense of emergency. When we feel under threat, our bodies go into a 'fight or flight' response. We become prepared to fight or to run away. The body responds by releasing adrenaline and cortisol, which gives us the surge of energy to act.

Why does it affect me during the exam period?

We all experience stress and a bit of stress can have a positive effect on us as it can sharpen concentration and performance and help to create the extra energy and focus to keep studying. However, too much stress, for too long, can be overwhelming and prevent us from studying effectively. If unaddressed, stress can affect our mental and physical health.

What are the signs?

Problems with short and long-term memory, the capacity to learn, concentrate and focus

Increased muscle tension

Increase in alertness to the slightest touch or sound

Problems with sleep

Increased heart and breathing rate



Keeping it in perspective

The good news is you can learn new ways to manage anxiety. The skills you find most helpful will vary depending on what triggers may be contributing to your high levels of anxiety.

Self-care strategies (the actions we take to look after ourselves) during this time can include getting adequate sleep, nutrition, exercise and implementing a few relaxation routines. These small steps can make a big difference to how we feel.

Bad habits, what doesn't help?

It is tempting when feeling stressed or anxious to resort to unhelpful coping strategies. Some of these might help in the short term but they are not ideal solutions and can become additional stressors.

Unhelpful coping strategies might include:

- using stimulants such as caffeine
- eating too much or eating unhealthy meals/snacks
- insufficient exercise
- over working and not taking breaks
- not getting enough sleep

Although it is tempting to focus solely on your exams, it's important you don't cut out all the enjoyment from your life. Your brain needs a rest so it's a good idea to do other activities and take some time out.

Self-care: what can help?

Coping strategies

Mental preparation

Sleep

It is recommended that we get around six to eight hours per night. Even if you cannot sleep, give your body a chance to rest. Try to avoid going on your mobile phone or electronic screen at least an hour before bedtime as it can interfere with sleep.

Study patterns

Take regular breaks from studying. Forcing yourself to sit at a desk for hours while your mind is wandering is not useful. If you get distracted, get up and take a short break.

If your mind is wandering repeatedly, try studying in very short bursts of time. Reduce the time to something that feels manageable, for example, 15 minutes at a time.

Study resources

Effective study resources can reduce your levels of anxiety and encourage you to feel more in control of your work. Check out the resources on the school website.

Physical preparation

Healthy eating

Try to eat at least one proper meal a day, which includes protein and vegetables. Paying extra attention to your diet and ensuring that it is balanced and protein rich will be of benefit. The positive effects of a good diet on mood, concentration and productivity are well documented.

Drink

It is important to maintain a good level of hydration. Try to drink around eight glasses of water per day. It may be helpful to take some water with you to the exam.

Caffeine

Limit your caffeine intake. If you are prone to anxiety, it can make it worse.

Exercise

Taking some form of daily exercise will help you to relax.

Meditation and mindfulness

The practice of meditation and mindfulness can be useful in helping you to focus on your breathing, bringing a sense of calm.



Breathing exercises

Breathing exercises can help you to calm down.

Try it yourself

1. Sit comfortably and upright in a chair with your feet on the ground and your hands placed loosely on the tops of your thighs. If it helps you to focus, close your eyes and picture yourself in a safe, relaxing place.
2. Pay some attention to your breathing to begin with. Breathe in through your nose slowly and deeply, pushing out your lower abdomen to a count of five. If it helps, put the palm of your hand on your abdomen and try to push it away as you breathe in.
3. Breathe out through your mouth slowly pulling your lower abdomen in (imagine aiming to get your abdomen to touch your spine) to a count of seven. If you have followed the suggestion above your hand should move inwards.
4. Repeat this exercise for around five minutes.

You could progressively try to increase the ratio/difference between inhalations and exhalations from 5:7 to 7:11. Once you have an effective technique, it can be particularly useful because you can do it anywhere, anytime; for instance, before, during and after your exam or assessment. It is recommended that you do the breathing exercises three times a day, every day. It is worth maintaining your practice over time. What you will find is that focussing on your breathing to bring about calm begins to happen automatically when you feel anxious.

Five ways to wellbeing

Evidence suggests there are five steps we can all take to improve our mental wellbeing

1

Keep learning

Do something new; be open to change

Try: Finding out something new about a friend. Doing a crossword or Sudoku. Learn a new word or skill.

2

Take notice

Be aware of the world around you

Try: Taking some time to enjoy the moment and the environment around you. Having a 'clear the clutter' day.

3

Keep active

Find a physical activity that suits your level of mobility and fitness

Try: Taking the stairs instead of the lift. Going for a walk at lunchtime.

4

Connect

With family and friends

Try: Talking to someone instead of sending a text. Speaking to someone new. Ask how someone's weekend was and really listen when they tell you.

5

Give

Research into actions for promoting happiness has shown that committing an act of kindness once a week over a six-week period is associated with an increase in wellbeing

Try: Doing something nice for a friend. Volunteer your time. Thank someone.





Getting ready

On the day of the exam

- Have a good but moderate breakfast and lunch, and don't drink too much caffeine.
- Accept that it is natural to feel a bit of stress before an exam.
- Try to do something relaxing for the last hour before the exam.
- Do not try to learn any new topics as this may impair your ability to remember those you have learned previously.
- You may find it helpful to review some prepared brief notes or prompt cards.
- Time your arrival at the exam room so that you don't need to wait outside with others who may increase your anxiety level.
- Give yourself time to settle prior to reading the exam questions and starting to write or beginning your presentation.
- Use the breathing exercises listed earlier.
- If you find even getting into the exam room a problem, ask a friend to walk there with you.
- Take time to read each question carefully.
- Plan your timing and write it down. Regularly check how much time you have left for the rest of the questions.
- Do not rush through the exam.

Tips to help with verbal tests assessments

- Make a plan of what you're going to say beforehand – try out model answers and practise.
- Listen carefully to questions and try to play back some of the words or phrases used in your answer.
- Don't rush to start talking; take a minute to think and, if you don't understand the question, ask for it to be repeated.
- Be careful not to speak too quickly or quietly.

How can I support others?

- By accepting that your friend is worried and listening to their concerns, without necessarily offering solutions or advice.
- If possible, encouraging them and/or helping them to prepare their ideal working environment.
- If appropriate, working together to prepare for assessments.
- Encouraging them to seek further guidance and help from resources available (detailed at the end of this guide).



After the exam

- Take time out to do things you enjoy and treat yourself after an exam before you start to revise for the next one.
- Try not to focus on what you did or did not do in the exam.
- Concentrate on preparing for the next exam in good time.
- Don't spend endless time criticising yourself for where you think you went wrong.

What do I do when the exams are finished?

Congratulate yourself for taking the exam!

Remember to look after yourself. Reflect on what went well and don't be too harsh on yourself.

Congratulations, the exam period is over. Time to do something you enjoy.