

TEENAGERS, GCSE EXAM PRESSURES AND COPING WITH STRESS

School students and teenagers face pressures and stress just like adults. GCSE exams can place a lot of pressure on students and understanding the pressures faced by students and knowing how to deal with it will help you cope better with your GCSE 9-1 exams.

We all deal with stress at some point in our lives, but not all stress is bad stress. Stress in moderation can make you more aware of your surroundings, and help keep you focussed and enable you do to get more work completed.

There is no dispute that all exams are stressful. It does not matter if it is a practical exam, like a driving test or a written exam, it is going to be a stressful time. For young people who are about to take their GCSE exams, it has got to be the most stressful time that they have ever experienced to date, and equally, it is a traumatic time for parents who are supporting very stressful teenagers during this period.

Being a teenager is hard enough, but add GCSE exams into the equation, and without support and planning, the pre-exam situation can become quite volatile.

The pressure to succeed in the exams can be overwhelming, as careers will depend on the results. This type of pressure can often be seen as a threat and will put the student into fight or flight mode. As many teenagers will not have experienced this type or level stress before they do not have any past experiences or coping strategies to draw on can make things very difficult.

Additionally, other difficulties may be present such anxiety; panic attacks; depression, which may be the result of Asperger's; ADHD; ADD; OCD or Dyslexia problems, extra levels of support may be needed.

The stress that young people experience prior to taking their GCSE exams is further intensified by uncontrollable stressors such as allergies and weather. The late spring/early summer can be a disaster for students that have Hayfever or Asthma as pollen counts are high. Generally, antihistamines can reduce symptoms, but they can also reduce concentration and cause drowsiness. Not the most ideal situation either way. Advice is to have a chat with your GP, at the earliest opportunity, as they may be able to suggest a medication that is more suitable.

During the revision and exam period, the weather usually warmer and its much nicer to be outside than revising indoors, missing all the fun. These factors alone can cause a lack of motivation to revise (as there is always tomorrow), which in turn will cause stress; anxiety, and lethargy.

Let's start talking about stress

We all tend to use the terms; pressure; stress and anxiety as if they are interchangeable, but they are not.



- **Pressure** is a feeling of being coerced into doing something.
- **Stress** is a response to a threat, challenge or psychological barrier.
- **Anxiety** is the result of persistent worry and fear about a situation, which can cause intense feelings of fear which can result in panic attacks.

What can stress do to you?

Physical effects of stress

It can make your heart beat faster, which in turn will cause profuse sweating. • Can cause difficulty in breathing, which will result in shortness of breath

Production of hormones may increase. The tenseness in the muscles may increase and a burst of energy experienced.

Essentially the body is preparing its self for a fight or flight situation.

Psychological effects of stress

- Mood swings; irritability; resentment; angry outbursts.
- Feelings of being unable to cope; feelings of powerlessness; low self-esteem; low self-worth.
- Cause feelings of isolation; not wanting to socialise.
- Anxiety: depression: panic attacks; lack of interest in activities; experience an intense feeling of unhappiness.

Essentially, stress can make you forget everything that you have learned in the past two years; render you unable to string a sentence together let alone write an answer in an exam. It can also affect your ability to organise your time and will affect your ability to cope. All these stress effects can result in a tendency to put things, such as revision for an exam.

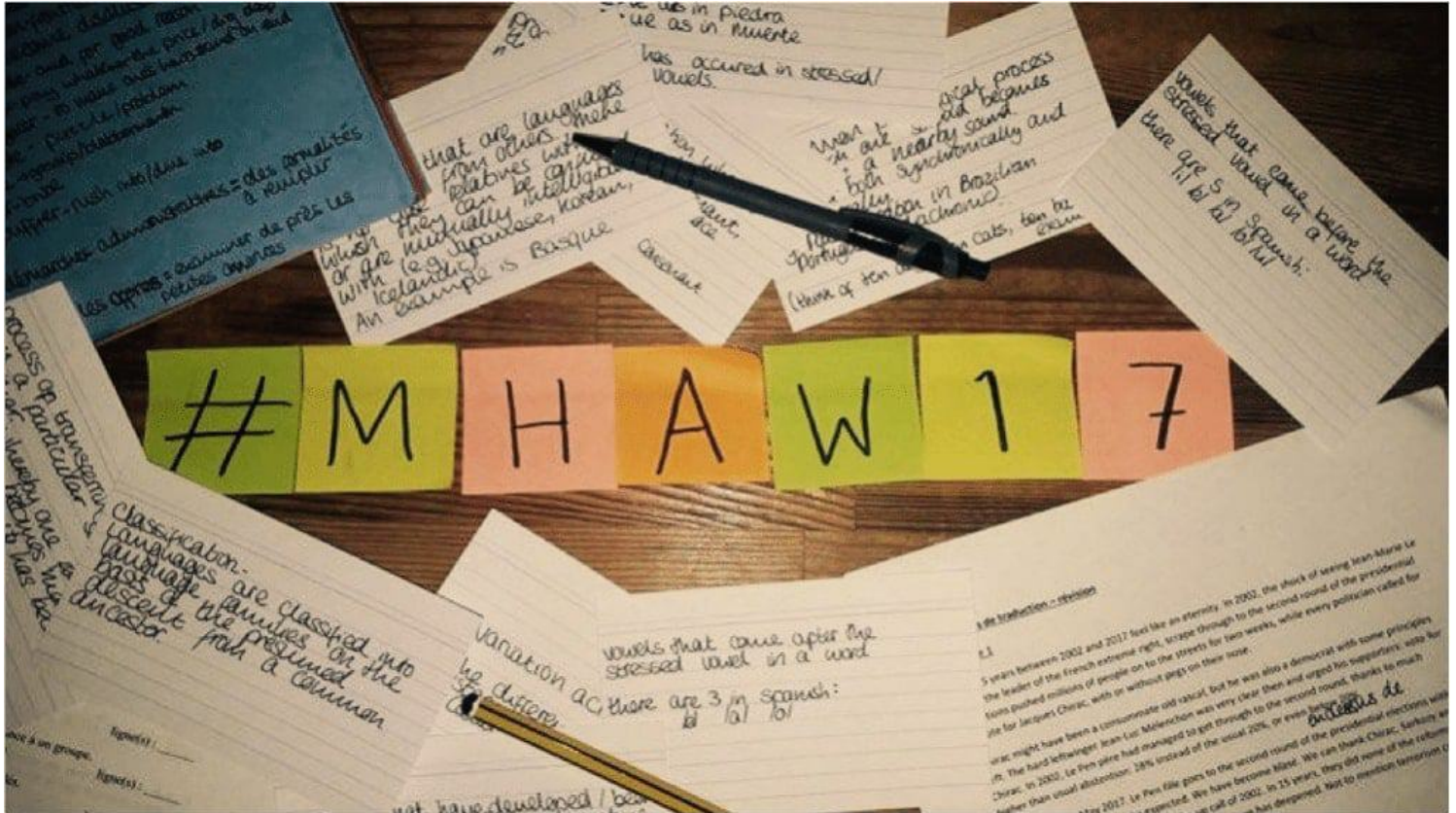
Not everyone will experience the same symptoms or the same intensity of symptoms. One of the best ways to deal with stress is by being proactive.

Preparing for the exams

If you are prepared for your exams, then it may help to reduce your stress and anxiety.

The chances are that you will have several exams and often there may be two exams in one day, or they may be several days apart. Start your preparation by working out a timetable. Make sure that you have all the information on all of your exams. You will need dates, times and locations. Then recheck all of your information.

At this point, you may be able to have an overall view of when all of your exams take place. You may have to prioritise your revision in some cases. Where there is more than one exam for a subject area, it may cause a bit of a problem with your schedule, as you may not be able to ultimately draw a line under one subject and move on to the next.



Next, on your timetable add any important dates, such as medical appointments, birthdays and family celebrations. Ideally, schedule in any club or activity that you do on a regular basis. By paying attention to your normal activities, it gives you the chance to have some time away from revision, which is a good de-stressor.

Spend some time looking at past exam papers. Read through the questions carefully and jot down a few notes as answers, anything that you are not sure of you can look up the answer or talk over with your teacher. Sometimes working like this can be very productive as you are proactive as opposed to just looking through notes that you have previously made.

Ask your teachers what revision they are covering in class. You can always suggest if you feel that there is something that you don't feel confident about and need extra instruction. Ask your friends if they would like to be a study buddy. This may be a great idea, as working together can mean that it is easier to stay on task and you may cover more and remember more when you talk about the content of your course.

If you have had classroom support from a learning support assistant, then they may help you to devise your revision timetable. Additionally, if you have had support then, you may be sitting your

exam in a separate room from the rest of your class. Check with your support to see if this is happening.

Once you have your timetable, try to fit in 1½ – 2 hours of active revision every night. Make sure that you leave time to relax and do other activities such as meeting friends or activities such as swimming. When setting your revision targets, be realistic about when you can achieve within the time you have allocated.

Stress-busting ideas that will lower revision and exam stress.

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- Take some time to just breathe. This is one of the great stress busters because you can do it anywhere and not draw attention to yourself. Find somewhere to just sit quietly and concentrate on your breathing. Breathe in for the count of four. Hold your breath for the count of four, then slowly release your breath for the count of four. Repeat this five times. Note how your breathing and heart rate have slowed down and you feel less stressed.



- Visualise. Visualisation works well when you need to unwind. Choose a scene that you enjoy such as the beach; you could also download some background music or sounds that will enable you to sit comfortably and relax for 10 -15 minutes. Almost as good as a power nap.
- Engage in active problem solving. When you are devising your revision timetable you are actually problem solving. Problem-solving is useful for diverting your attention as you are switching tasks which in effect is a mental break from revision. Try Sudoku or even a limited time on a game like candy crush. The secret is to not get too involved with the game and use it as an incentive to complete your study task.
- Break large tasks down into smaller more manageable tasks, so you can get a sense of achievement.
- Schedule in rest breaks when you are revising. Set the alarm on your phone. This helps you to

organise your revision in useful chunks, rather than tackle hours at a time that will result in more stress. By taking regular breaks, no matter how short, it will help you to digest more of the work. Get up and move around, take in a change of scenery for a few minutes before returning to study.

- Some people study better when they have no background noise to distract them or they may study better when they are listening to their favourite music.

Many of the stress-busting tips that you use to help you through GCSE exams will pave the way to see you through any exams in the future.

The day before the exam

The best advice is not to think that you can cram a two-year course into an all-night study the night before the exam. Your brain will need time to process the information, and you need to be familiar with the course content so you can apply that information to the questions in the exam paper.



Prepare everything that you need for the following day, and this includes setting your alarm and planning what you are going to wear and how you are getting to the exam. Always have a Plan A and a Plan B, just in case of traffic jams; change of room for the exam; or a pen that won't work. Leave nothing to chance.

Do's and don't to reduce stress levels

- Do take some time out for yourself. Time for yourself should include both relaxation and some form of physical exercise. Both relaxation and exercise will help you to clear your head in preparation for the exam.
- If you do need to revise the day before the exam, then set a study time limit and stick to it. If odd questions pop up in your head, then look up the answers, but don't spend all evening doing this.

- Plan a quiet evening, read a book that is unrelated to your course or watch a favourite TV program. Stay away from caffeine or any other stimulants especially alcohol.
- Ideally, do not use your phone; tablet or computer for at least 90 minutes before going to bed. However, pick out some relaxing music that soothes you to sleep. Several apps can provide soothing music of your choice.
- Have a fan in your bedroom. Not only does a fan keep the bedroom cool, which helps promote sound sleep, but it circulates the air and provides white noise which can help you go to sleep quicker and stay asleep longer.
- Advice is to have a light bedtime snack of a milky drink or a turkey sandwich. Both turkey and milk contain tryptophan, an essential amino acid which can aid sleep.

If you find that you cannot sleep then, try some relaxation exercises that are based around the principle of tensing all of your muscles and then releasing the tension one group at a time. If you feel that you are getting tense, then use this technique that you can use in everyday situations. Fully tense your back and shoulder muscles for several seconds and then relax.

Once you have gone to bed and found that you really cannot sleep, then get up and go to another room, sit with the family and watch some TV. Try not to watch TV in your room as you need to make your bedroom the place to sleep. Far better that you have a few hours of sound sleep, than a whole night of tossing and turning getting more stressed as you cannot sleep.

On the day of the exam

- Get up a little earlier than usual. Allow yourself time to prepare for the day mentally. Although you got everything ready the night before, odd things tend to go missing, so you need to give yourself some 'just in case' time.
- Give yourself a motivational talk. Imagine success. Don't worry about what you think you don't know, be positive and think about what you do know.
- Have breakfast. Even if you don't usually have breakfast, eat something that is rich in protein and makes sure that you are hydrated as fluids, in particular, water helps reduce stress.
- Arrive in plenty of time preferably a little early, so you do not have to rush or stress about the time. Feel, calm and confident, and ready to do your best.



GCSE exam coping strategies in a nutshell

Academically

- Set a realistic revision timetable
- Don't be afraid to ask for help – ask your teacher; study buddy or parent.
- Look at past exam papers – familiarise yourself with the way that the questions are formed.

Personally

- Get quality sleep
- Get motivated / visualise success
- Get relaxed/ learn relaxation techniques

Organisationally

- Use your study and revision time carefully.
- Think ahead to what you will need for your exam, e.g., pencil pens, etc
- Plan the time that you will need to leave home to get to your exam

Advice for parents and carers

There are some specific actions that you can take to support your teenage during this very stressful time.

Be aware of the signs of stress that your teenager may be experiencing, which may include:

- Constantly being tense; low mood and irritable (could be due to sleep. They may even express a feeling of hopelessness regarding the future.
- Complaining of headaches or stomach pains, which do not seem to have any apparent cause.

- A change in eating habits; they may lose interest in food or may eat far more than they usually do.
- They take less exercise than usual, or they withdraw from contact with their friends and peer group. Encourage physical activities such as swimming as can help clear their minds and reduce stress.

Encourage them to:

- Talk about their exams and revision. Encourage them to have a study buddy so they can share their worries and also keep things in perspective.
- Ask if they need some help to plot out a pre-exam timetable. Share some of your own strategies that have worked for you, but don't force your ideas on to them.
- Encourage them to eat a balanced diet that is based on healthy snacks and low on sugars; caffeine and fats. A diet that is high in sugar; caffeine and fats can cause hyperactivity and irritability, which can prevent restful sleep.
- Encourage good sleep patterns, and this will help the cognitive process and concentration. Teenagers need more sleep than most adults realise, usually, they need between 8 and 10 hours a night.
- Discourage cramming the night before an exam as it can prevent sleep.

Help them to study

- Don't nag them to study and then complain when they are in their room all day. If they share a room with a sibling, make sure that they have a quiet space to study with few interruptions or distractions, Ease up on the household tasks that they usually take responsibility for. Be aware that most teenagers feel that most of their stress at exam time comes from their parents.
- Encourage positive thoughts about their goals in life and help them relate the work that they are doing now to those goals. Praise them for the study that they have completed and helped them to feel confident. Avoid criticism as that can deflate any work that you have already done on raising their self-esteem. If they want to talk, listen with both ears.
- Let them know that it's OK to feel nervous. Reassure them that if they don't get the result they need, then there is a possibility that they can sit the exam again at a later date. When they have taken the exam to encourage them to share with you the parts that went well and any difficulties they may have experienced. Encourage them to look at what went well and not to dwell on what did not go so well. This is a useful technique that helps draw a line under one exam and get in the mindset for the next exam.

Make time for treats

- Treats do not have to be expensive. Make their favourite meal or plan an end of exam treat such as having a few friends over for a meal. Little things will help your teenager know that they will feel less stressed once the exams have finished.
- If you find that after the exams are finished that your teenager is still stressed with a very low mood that interferes with their everyday activities, then it may be an idea to seek support from your GP.

Further Information

We advise contacting any of the following organisations if you or someone you care about needs further information and support:

[Young Minds](#): is a charity dealing with mental health issues for teenagers or young people.

[Mind](#): is a national charity dealing with all types of mental health issues.