

Coping with Exams

Tips for looking after your mental and physical
health before, during and after Exams

Remember, it's normal to feel anxious.

Feeling worried, stressed-out or panicky about your exams doesn't mean that there is something wrong with you and it definitely doesn't mean that you are going to fail. Most students report feeling overwhelmed at some point in the run up to their exams. This is completely normal.

You might be worried about whether you're revising enough or whether you're revising the right things. You might be asking yourself "with so much content to cover, where do I even start?"

Some stress can be useful in motivating you to work hard and focus on what you want to achieve but too much can start to have a negative impact on your performance.

If you feel nervous or panicky, you may find it hard to concentrate and you can start to lose confidence in your abilities.



So here are a few tips, techniques and online resources you can use to help make the process of exams and revision less stressful...

Preparing for your Exams

Make a realistic revision timetable and stick to it

To help you, try creating a free 'smart' study planner at www.getrevising.co.uk. You can input your exam dates, prioritise your subjects, build in rest breaks and add personal preferences – like whether you're a morning person or an evening person.

At the end of each day, try to spare 5 minutes to look at the subjects you have to revise for the next day

Use this time to plan what to do specifically in each session on your revision timetable. This can help you feel more in control and you won't have any dilemmas at the start of the day about what to work on next.

Take regular breaks

Revision sessions should ideally be no more than 50 minutes long, separated by 10 minute breaks. Try setting a timer on your phone to remind you to take breaks if you tend to forget.



Take steps to overcome problems

If you find you don't understand some of the material, ignoring the problem won't help. Instead, take action to address any gaps in your knowledge by asking your subject Teacher for support. There's no shame in asking for help- just don't leave it until the day before the exam!



If you struggle to identify what areas you need to focus on, try the **Gojimo App**. It gives you access to 40,000 free practice questions and helps you to track your progress, strengths and weaknesses so you know what topics to prioritise.

Make Sleep a Priority

Getting enough sleep can help you to improve your concentration and retain information. It might seem like a good idea to stay up late revising but this can be counter-productive. A good night's sleep before an exam will be more beneficial than a couple of hours anxiously reading through revision notes in the middle of the night when you're too tired to process the information anyway.



When you're revising in the evening

Try to eat early in the evening as it's difficult to fall asleep on a full stomach.

Decide in advance what time you're going to stop revising and don't push yourself to stay up any later.

Give yourself at least half an hour to 'wind down' and relax between revising and going to sleep.

Struggling to 'switch off'?

Focus on your breathing. Take deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth. Close their eyes and count to 4 when as you breathe in, and to 7 as you breathe out. Try listening to calming music or 'white noise' to help you get to sleep.



Don't be tempted to stay up scrolling through your phone. You might think the distraction is helpful, but taking a break from your phone at night, by putting it on Silent or moving it away from your bed can help you to relax, get a good night's sleep and feel refreshed in the morning. Visit www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness for more advice on overcoming sleep problems.

Food for Thought

There is evidence that what we eat can affect how we cope emotionally, as well as our physical health. Eating regular, balanced meals can improve your mood, give you more energy and help you to think more clearly.

Eat regular meals

If your blood sugar drops it can make you feel tired, irritable and low. Eating regularly and choosing foods that release energy slowly will help to keep your sugar levels steady. Slow-release energy foods include: pasta, rice, oats, wholegrain bread and cereals, nuts and seeds.



Stay hydrated

If you don't drink enough, you may find it difficult to concentrate or think clearly. It's recommended that you drink between 6–8 glasses of water a day.

Get enough protein

Protein contains amino acids, which make up the chemicals your brain needs to regulate your thoughts and feelings. It also helps keep you feeling fuller for longer. Protein is found in: lean meat, fish, eggs, cheese, legumes (peas, beans and lentils), soya products, nuts and seeds.

Don't skip breakfast

If you're nervous you may not feel like eating much the morning before an exam, but it's harder to concentrate, think clearly and recall information on an empty stomach. Low blood sugar can also make you feel more panicky so try to have something, even if it's just a piece of fruit or a cereal bar, within half an hour of getting up in the morning.

Look after your gut

Students often report stomach-aches, feeling sick or problems with digestion in the run up to exams because your gut can reflect how you are feeling emotionally. Gut-friendly foods include fruits, vegetables and wholegrains, beans, pulses, live yoghurt and other probiotics. If you think exam nerves are causing you 'tummy trouble' then try some relaxation exercises



like the ones in this booklet or download the **SAM (Self-help for Anxiety Management)** App for strategies to help you manage your worries.

How NOT to deal with exam worries

Don't bury your head in the sand

If you're really worried about your exams, you might be tempted to pretend they're not happening. You might have convinced yourself that you're so far behind there's no point in trying to catch up but there is always a solution. Don't just give up in subjects you find hard or dislike, instead talk to your Teacher or Form Tutor.

Don't stop making time for fun and relaxation

It might feel like you don't have time for it's impossible to focus without giving your brain a rest by doing other activities, so don't deny yourself time spent doing the things you enjoy. It's all about balance.

Try not to compare yourself to others

Find a revision method that works for *you* and stick to it. If other people are using different revision methods, that doesn't mean you're doing it wrong.

Don't overdo the caffeine

Coffee or energy drinks might help you stay awake for another hour but they can also exacerbate the physical symptoms of anxiety and cause sleep problems.



Try not to dwell on an exam once it's over

Do you really need to know what your friend wrote for Question 7? There's nothing you can do about it now, and worrying won't change your mark so don't get drawn into conversations (either outside the exam room or later online) that will make you doubt yourself.

Coping with Negative Thoughts

When you're waiting to go into your exam and your negative thoughts start to spiral...

Remind yourself feelings of worry or panic are temporary

Although unpleasant, these feelings will pass. Remember, waiting to go into an exam is usually worse than the reality of the exam itself!

Train your brain to challenge negative thoughts

Try to replace them with more balanced, realistic thoughts instead. You could replace "I can't do this" with "I have done this before, so I can do it again". Remember *thoughts are not facts*. It's quite normal to have the thought "I'm going to fail" before an exam, but that doesn't mean it's true.



Ask yourself "have I felt like this before and if so, what helped?"

This will remind you that you have survived stressful situations before and that you have the strategies to cope.

Be a 'Self-Scientist'

Observe and explain physical sensations to yourself as mere natural bodily reactions to stress e.g. "I'm feeling a bit dizzy because panicking leads to constriction of the blood flow to my brain. It's not dangerous, it doesn't mean I'm going to faint and it will pass".



Download **Catch It** – a free App that teaches you how to manage negative thoughts and how to look at problems differently

Before Your Exam

Students often find that waiting to go into the exam room is worse than the exam itself. This simple *Mini Muscle Relaxation* exercise can help to calm your nerves while you're waiting to go into the exam room.

Take a moment to inhale deeply, shrug your shoulders, then relax and let your shoulders drop. Notice the contrast between squeezing and releasing, before and after

Ball your hands into fists, feeling the tension all the way from your fingers up to your arms, then release, again allowing the relaxation to flow back into the muscles.

Next tighten your stomach muscles. Squeeze and release, feeling the tension drain away.

Stretch your toes and flex your calves, then your thighs for a moment. Release and notice as the relaxation flows in, washing away the tension.

Clench your jaw and neck (if you're alone you can squeeze your eyes shut at the same time), then release.

Take a few breaths now to notice the difference in your body.

Take one last deep breath before you walk confidently into your exam.



Download the free **Calm** App for more Mindfulness meditations, breathing techniques and calming exercises like the one above.

During Your Exam

If you find yourself getting flustered during your exam it might feel like your mind has gone blank- but don't panic! You haven't really forgotten everything you've learned, that's just your exam nerves making it hard to think clearly. These quick and easy **Mindfulness** exercises can help you to calm down and focus on what you need to do.

Controlled Breathing

Take a deep breath in through your nose and hold it for the count of 5.

Very slowly, let the breath out through your mouth. As you release the breath, think to yourself "relax". Notice how your ribcage rises on the in breath, and falls on the out breath.

Repeat two more times

Counting the Sounds

Lean back in your chair and close your eyes for just a moment. Now count the sounds you can hear in the room. If you struggle to notice all the sounds in the silence, start with the one nearest to you and work outwards. Do this for just a minute or two.

You can write the sounds down if it helps you to focus



The Five Senses Exercise

All you need to do is take some deep breaths and as you do, think about

5 things you can see- pick something that you don't normally notice, like a shadow or a small crack in the wall.

4 things you can feel- the texture of an item of clothing, the feel of the breeze on your skin, or the smooth surface of a table you are resting your hands on.

3 things you can hear- This can be the chirp of a bird, the hum of the central heating, or the faint sounds of traffic from a nearby road.

2 things you can smell- It might be the smell of your own or someone else's perfume, an air freshener or a floor that's recently been cleaned.

1 thing you can taste- Focus on one thing that you can taste right now, in this moment.

Tips for Boosting Your Resilience

Resilience is your ability to adapt to change and 'bounce back' when something stressful or unexpected happens.



Organise your Time

Make a list of things you need to do, arrange them in order of importance and focus on the most urgent first. Can you push back some non-urgent tasks until you're feeling less overwhelmed? Setting small, achievable goals can also make you feel in more control and give you an incentive to 'keep going' as you can see your achievements more easily.

Connect with Others

When you're going through a difficult time it can be tempting to hide away and isolate yourself. But spending time with other people can be a distraction from your worries. Chatting to friends about the things you find difficult can help you keep things in perspective, and you can do the same for them.

Practice Relaxation

If you know that a certain activity helps you feel more relaxed or positive, make sure you set aside time to do it. You can find [free Relaxation Podcasts](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/podcasts-and-videos/podcasts-for-your-wellbeing) at www.mentalhealth.org.uk/podcasts-and-videos/podcasts-for-your-wellbeing

Healthy Body, Healthy Mind

Eating well, sleeping well and being active will increase your ability to cope with difficult situations. If your workload starts to feel overwhelming you might want to go out for a walk or a bike ride, even just for a short time. There is evidence that spending time outdoors regularly can help you to feel calmer and happier.

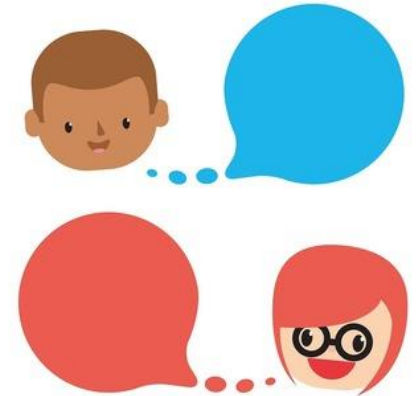
Be Kind to Yourself

Try not to beat yourself up if you make a mistake or don't achieve something you hoped for. Ask yourself "what would I say to a friend in this situation?" or think of a supportive person in your life and ask yourself "what *they* would say if they were here now?". It's often easier to be kind to others than it is to be kind to ourselves!

What if it all gets too much?

If you feel overwhelmed there are plenty of people you can talk to. Don't bottle it up!

In School, you can go to your Form Tutor, Head of Year, any of your Teachers, a member of the Student Support Team, staff at The Inclusion Centre, or any other adult you trust. They will listen without judgement and help you to access further support if you need it.



Outside of School, it's a good idea to tell your Parent, Carer or another trusted adult if you're struggling with exam pressures. If for any reason you don't feel able to do this, you can call **Childline** on **0800 1111**. You won't have to give your name and you can talk to them about anything that might be bothering you. To talk to a Childline counsellor via email or 1-2-1 chat visit



www.childline.org.uk or download '**For Me' The Childline App** which is available for free.

If worrying about exams is affecting your ability to eat, sleep or go about your normal daily activities then you should make an appointment with your **GP or Practice Nurse**. You do not need your Parent/Carer's permission to do this. You can also get advice from the School Nursing service by Texting their confidential **ChatHealth** line on **07507331525**