

Helping Teens Cope with Exam Stress & Pressure



With Dr Maryhan, Clinical Psychologist

While most exams naturally trigger stress in teenagers, certain factors and beliefs can dial up the pressure levels.

These may include feeling unprepared through lack of revision or procrastination, coupled with fears of failure and/or catastrophic thoughts regarding poor results. Stress levels typically peak during the exam period when there is intense preparation, revision, and grade-related worries, but they can still cause a significant impact on a students' mental and emotional well-being. As parents and carers, it's not always easy to know how best to support young people through these times.

1.

Exam Stress vs. Anxiety: Understanding the difference

Exam stress is typically confined to the period surrounding exams. It involves the pressure of preparation, revising, and the performance anxiety related to achieving good grades. Unlike general anxiety, which is pervasive and affects various aspects of life, exam stress is situation-specific and time-bound.

2.

How Burnout can affect Teenagers

Burnout isn't just an adult issue but something that young people can experience too. It manifests as physical and emotional exhaustion due to prolonged stress, leading to a state where the teen feels completely depleted. Recognising the signs of burnout early and implementing strategies to prevent it is crucial for maintaining well-being.

3.

Effective Revision Techniques: Learning vs. Revising

A common mistake during exam preparation is the confusion between learning and revising. Effective revision should involve revisiting already understood material rather than attempting to learn new concepts in a compressed time frame. This approach reduces stress and enhances the efficiency of study sessions. Discuss revision with you teen and make sure they feel confident that they already understand the information they're revising.

4.

Gender and Revision: Is there a difference?

When it comes to revision, consider different needs for boys and girls. Generally speaking, girls are more likely to conform to societal norms when it comes to studying, often focusing on meticulous presentation rather than effective learning consolidation. Conversely, boys can be more physically active and may struggle with extended periods of stationary revision. It's important to tailor study techniques to all tendencies and individual preferences, and find out what effective revision means for your teenager rather than simply revising for hours at a time.

Tips for Parents & Carers



Create a Conducive Study Environment: Ensure your teen has a quiet, comfortable and well-lit place to study. If their usual study spot isn't ideal, consider alternative locations within the home or even outside, like libraries or quiet cafes.



Enforce Device-Free Time: Limit distractions by enforcing periods where electronic devices are put away. This helps students focus on revision without the constant interruptions from social media and other online activities.



Establish Boundaries and Balance: While studying is important, it is crucial to maintain a balanced routine. Encourage regular breaks, physical activity, and socialising. This not only prevents burnout but also keeps their mind fresh.



Help maintain healthy habits - this can be challenging during stressful periods, but it's crucial for optimal brain function and overall well-being to maintain habits such as proper nutrition, hydration and adequate sleep.



Avoid Micromanaging: Allow your child to take ownership of their revision and how they do it. While it's important to show interest and support, constant oversight can lead to increased stress and dependency.



Discourage Over-Elaborate Revision Timetables: While having a plan is good, overly detailed timetables can be daunting and difficult to follow. Encourage a more flexible approach that allows for adjustments as needed.



Manage Your Own Stress: Children often pick up on their parents' anxieties. Managing your own stress and maintaining a calm demeanour can help create a more relaxed home environment conducive to studying.



Avoid Nagging: Constant reminders about studying can increase stress for both the parent and the child. Instead, have open discussions about their schedule and how they plan to manage their workload.



Celebrate Efforts, Not Just Outcomes: Praise your child for their effort and dedication rather than just the outcomes of their exams. This reinforces the value of hard work and persistence, regardless of the results.



Remember that these are your children's exams. They are no reflection on you as a parent. That's not to say “wash your hands of it and do nothing” but remember that there are incredibly successful people in all walks of life who don't follow the same blueprint of what we expect. So just remember that they're your child. It's not the end of the world.



Dr Maryhan



There are many sessions on the [Let's all Talk Mental Health hub](#) for you to view on related issues, including the talks linked below.



[Teenagers & Sleep: How much is Enough?](#)



[Building Foundations for Mentally Healthy Minds](#)

This factsheet is for advice purposes. Please remember that we're not offering medical or clinical health services specific to your situation. If you need help, please contact your GP or other healthcare professionals – don't wait to get help if you or your young one needs it.