

Supporting Students with Managing Exam Stress

What is exam stress?

Most students experience some level of anxiety during an exam. However, when anxiety becomes consuming and affects their exam performance it becomes a problem.

The effects of exam anxiety include:

- Having difficulty reading and understanding the questions on the exam paper.
- Having difficulty organising your thoughts.
- Having difficulty retrieving key words and concepts when answering essay questions.
- Doing poorly on an exam even though you know the material.
- Mental Blocking:
Going blank on questions.
Remembering the correct answers as soon as the exam is over.

What causes exam stress?

Stress is a feeling that's created when we react to particular events. It's the body's way of rising to a challenge and preparing to meet a tough situation. The events that provoke stress cover a whole range of situations – everything from outright physical danger to taking exams. Working properly, the body's stress response enhances a person's ability to perform well under pressure. But the stress response can also cause problems when it overreacts or fails to turn off and reset itself properly.

Common Symptoms of Stress:

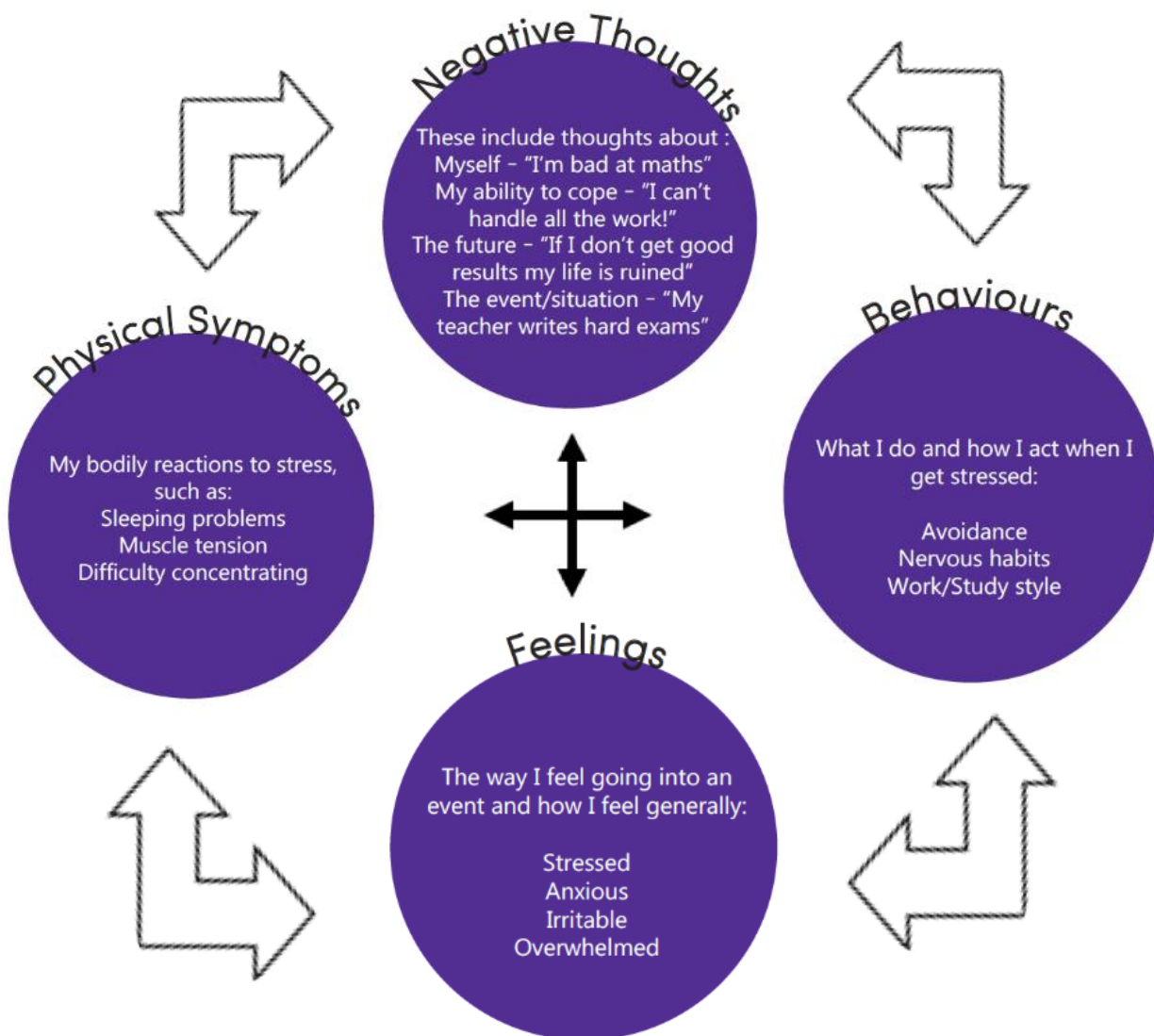
- Racing heart
- Shakiness
- Difficulty breathing (hyperventilating)
- Smothering or choking sensations
- Butterflies or knots in the stomach
- Hot flushes
- Dry mouth
- Sweaty hands / feet and body
- Tightness in jaw
- Headaches, stomach aches
- Lump in the throat or constricted feelings in the chest

How to help students manage exam stress

Challenging Thinking

Students often say exams are so difficult because of the expectations that are put on them. It is okay to have expectation to try your best. But it is only helpful to have realistic expectations.

Behaviour is affected by our thoughts and feelings. Thinking and talking about our thoughts and feelings is a VERY EFFECTIVE way of helping to overcome problems. Often we have unhelpful ways of thinking which leads to unpleasant feelings. We try to prevent or stop these unpleasant feelings by avoiding them and by avoiding difficult situations or challenges. This is the NEGATIVE TRAP.



You can help a student overcome their negative thinking by:

- Identifying negative thoughts.
- Identifying how these thoughts make the student feel.
- Thinking about how these thoughts and feelings make the student behave.
- Think about the original thought and 'test the reality' or suggest different ways of thinking about a situation or issue.

An example:

The Situation

You've had a bad day, feel fed up, so go out shopping. As you walk down the road, someone you know walks by and, apparently, ignores you. This starts a cascade of:

| | Unhelpful | Helpful |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Thoughts: | He/she ignored me - they don't like me | He/she looks a bit wrapped up in themselves - I wonder if there's something wrong? |
| Emotional feelings: | Low, sad and rejected | Concerned for the other person, positive |
| Physical: | Stomach cramps, low energy, feel sick | None - feel comfortable |
| Action: | Go home and avoid them | Get in touch to make sure they're OK |

The same situation has led to two very different results, depending on how you thought about the situation.

Mindfulness

There is a growing evidence base for Mindfulness practices which suggests that over time, mindfulness brings about long-term changes in mood and levels of happiness and wellbeing. Scientific studies have also shown that mindfulness not only prevents depression, but that it also positively affects the brain patterns. Other studies have shown that regular meditation improves memory, increases creativity and reaction times become faster.

Mindfulness is based on Buddhist philosophy, however it is not a religion, neither is any religious belief necessary to practise it.

For further information:

[*http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/mindfulness.aspx*](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/mindfulness.aspx)

Further Support

Information and support can be found at the following:

NHS

[*http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/Coping-with-exam-stress.aspx*](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/Coping-with-exam-stress.aspx)

Childline

0800 1111

[*https://www.childline.org.uk/Explore/SchoolCollege/Pages/exam-stress.aspx*](https://www.childline.org.uk/Explore/SchoolCollege/Pages/exam-stress.aspx)

Young Minds

[*http://www.youngminds.org.uk/for_parents/worried_about_your_child/schoolwork_exam_stress*](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/for_parents/worried_about_your_child/schoolwork_exam_stress)

How to prepare for exams

'Challenge' any unhelpful thinking

Challenge these thoughts the night before and write out your challenges to take with you on your way to the exam.

Don't get caught up in how you think other people are doing in the exam. Don't be put off because they are asking for more paper or because they appear to have finished the exam already. Some students write big, like extra paper for working or to lean on. Just because a student has finished doesn't necessarily mean they have done well.

Have good exam TECHNIQUE

- Use reading time effectively (that is actually read through all the paper).
- Plan your responses before answering - just a few key words to lay out the structure of your answer will make a big difference.
- Set yourself appropriate time limits for each section of the exam. It is bad for to get to the last question on your 2 hour exam with only 10 minutes to go to realise that it is worth 50% of the paper. Work out exactly how long each section deserves based on what each section is worth.

Example:

- 2 hour exam (120 minutes, plus 5 minutes reading time)
- 3 questions (1 worth 20% and 2 worth 40% each)
- Spend 24 minutes on the question worth 20% (20% of 120 mins = 24 mins)
- Spend 48 minutes on each of the questions worth 40% (40% of 120 mins= 48mins each)

If you decide to skip over a section or question - make sure you leave enough time to come back to it. It is better to write something, than nothing.
