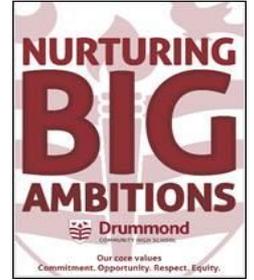


Dealing with Exam Stress



Exams. Even the most confident students will find the pressures of exams can have an impact on our overall wellbeing and we all feel the pressures of exams in different ways. Some people may notice that they are prone to mood swings. Some people may be aware that they can become quiet and withdrawn. Some people can feel outright fear. What is important is to remember that it is completely **normal** to feel exam stress, in fact stress

can be quite helpful in terms of motivating us to do well. However, sometimes that stress can take over and we can find ourselves feeling completely overwhelmed.

We feel increasing stress when we feel that we may not be in control of a situation. When it comes to exams, we must accept that there are some things we cannot control – we cannot pick and choose the questions, for example. However, we can take control of how we prepare for exams and how we look after our own emotional health and here is some advice on how to do just that:

1. Be Prepared

Do you know what format the exam takes and how the marks are allocated? If not, then now is the time to double check! Ask your teacher. Look at the SQA website. Use past papers as part of your revision. Different subjects will have different demands, papers are weighted differently and the time you have for each paper will vary. Also, make sure you know what you are supposed to have learned and that you have all your notes, books and essays to hand. Some of you may need to put all your notes into some order first – all those loose sheets of paper in school bags should be in folders!

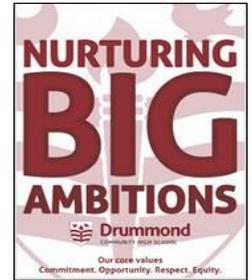
2. Make a Plan

Check the dates for your exams and work out how much time you have to revise for each subject. Often making a timetable can really help to deal with exam stress. Another technique that will help is to break your study time down into manageable chunks. You will not be able to revise and remember an entire year's worth of content in one night, so plan to spend 40 minutes on one topic and then move on to look at something else. Vary the timetable so you don't get bored. You might need to spend more time on some subjects than others. You can always update the plan, if necessary, as you go along. Once it is written, it does not have to be stuck to like a school timetable, it can be adapted depending on how your studying is progressing.

3. Know when and where you study best

Work when you are most alert. We all have slightly different body clocks – are you a night owl or a dawn lark? Everyone has different revision styles – maybe you like to sit at a tidy

library desk or under the duvet with your laptop. Wherever you feel calm and in control is the best place for dealing with exam stress. Some people may find it hard to work at home so remember that you can still come into school during exam leave!



4. Take a break

Studies done by psychologists show that most people can only concentrate properly for about 45 minutes at a time. Also, neuroscientists tell us that the longer we try and focus on one thing, the less our brains can deal with it effectively. Take breaks to stay refreshed. Instead of cramming in more revision or, indeed, stressing over how to deal with exam stress, the best thing might simply be to do something completely different: go for a walk; watch an episode of *Riverdale*; catch up on the day's news...

5. Eat well

Yeah, teenagers are often told that they should eat a better diet. After all, we see you having lunches of doughnuts, crisps, chocolate... However, keeping your blood sugar levels steady so that you don't have energy dips during the day and can sleep well at night is a vital way of dealing with exam stress. You should do your best to avoid lots of processed, sugary foods like cereal, biscuits, sweets and chocolate. Instead, think about increasing the amounts of lean protein like chicken, salmon or eggs. Also eating plenty of vegetables and carbs that release their energy slowly like wholegrain bread, rice and pasta will keep energy levels steady. Pulses like chickpeas and lentils are great for vegetarians (and others), since they contain both protein and slow-release carbs. If you are so nervous before an exam that you can't eat, then don't worry, your body will catch up later – but do make sure that you drink lots.

6. Drink lots

Hydration is key to surviving exam stress. Make sure that you drink plenty of water to feel alert. Juices or sugary drinks can make you feel shaky and mess up your energy levels. Caffeinated tea and coffee may perk you up, but stick to about three cups a day, and to avoid problems sleeping, drink your last one in the late afternoon. Energy drinks should always be avoided!

7. Exercise

This is one of the best ways to help alleviate any stressful feelings. Anything from walking the dog to going for a swim, run or bike ride helps reduce physical tension that can lead to aches and pains, and releases natural feel-good brain chemicals. If you can't get motivated, arrange to do something active with friends – you are more likely to do something when it is arranged in advance.



8. Have Plenty of Sleep

Having a broken sleep the night before an exam is understandable, but our brains are only able to cope with lack of sleep for a day or two. Worrying about not being able to sleep only makes matters worse but there are many things you can do to help yourself to switch off. For example, a hot bath and having somewhere dedicated just to sleeping (and not to watching TV or going on a computer, phone or tablet) will help. If you really can't get to sleep, do something repetitive like a jigsaw or ironing (imagine the brownie points from mum!). Teenagers generally need 8 to 10 hours a night of sleep, so set yourself a sleep routine: going to bed at the same time and waking up at the same time will help. Exam leave is not a time for you to be staying up all night and sleeping all day!

If you really, really can't sleep, don't panic. Sheer adrenaline will help you get through most exams the next day better than you might expect.

9. Relaxation

If you are really stressed and starting to feel anxious, find a calm, quiet space and try breathing deeply in and out for a few minutes, focusing your mind on something pleasant, like a beautiful place with happy memories – anything that helps you wind down. Ten minutes a day of mindfulness can help you regulate your physical reactions to stress (try using an app or the calm website to help you develop mindfulness techniques).

10. Talk to Someone

Remember, you are not alone. A number of your friends will also be feeling stressed and worried about the exams. You may have older siblings who have been through the process. Your parents/guardians have also been there. Sometimes just talking about how we are feeling and having someone to listen to our worries can be a real help. We are social creatures after all, and it is too easy to isolate ourselves when we are worried.

11. Reward Yourself

You should build small 'reward' times into your revision timetable. Studying can seem never ending so make sure that you can recognise all the work you have done and give yourself goals to work towards. You should also plan a way of celebrating once the exams are all over – after all, if you have done your very best then you deserve it!

12. Keep it in Perspective

If you feel you have really messed up an exam, there's nothing you can do until you get the results. Worrying about it won't help – and may reduce your chances of doing well in other exams you are taking. Think about what you could do about a disappointing result – that will help you feel in control.

And remember that, yes, it's great to do well in exams. But remember that exams aren't the only thing that will help you succeed in life. Employers will be equally interested in other things, like your attitude, work-rate or ability to get on with others. Many people, famous and otherwise, who did badly at exams have gone on to do well in adult life – and vice-versa.

