

Managing Exam Stress

© **White Swan Foundation 2020**

No part of this publication can be reproduced, used, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, without prior permission of the organization.

Read more about mental health, visit www.whiteswanfoundation.org

Write to us at connect@whiteswanfoundation.org

Subscribe to the White Swan Foundation newsletter.
www.whiteswanfoundation.org/newsletter

Credits

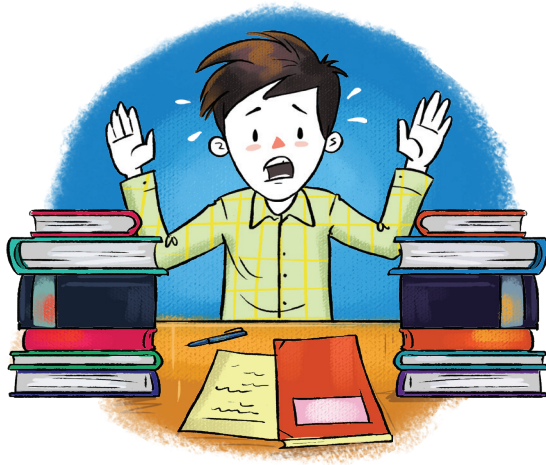
This ebook has been reviewed by Radhika S D'Costa, school counselor at Mallya Aditi International, Bangalore

Illustrations by Aniruddha Lele, Tootifrooticomics

Table of contents

Chapter A - Understanding exam stress	
When stress pushes you	1
Worksheet	3
Chapter B - Seeking help	
Introduction	4
Worksheet	6
Ways to seek help - Talk to someone about it	7
Worksheet	8
Ways to seek help - Call a helpline	9
Chapter C - Managing stress with planning	
Goal setting	12
Studying techniques	14
Worksheet	16
Manage your time during exams	17
Procrastination	19
Worksheet	20
Chapter D - De-stress	
All work and no play	21
Breathing exercises to de-stress yourself	23
Wackiest things students do	25
Worksheet	26
When you are in the exam hall	27

Understanding exam stress

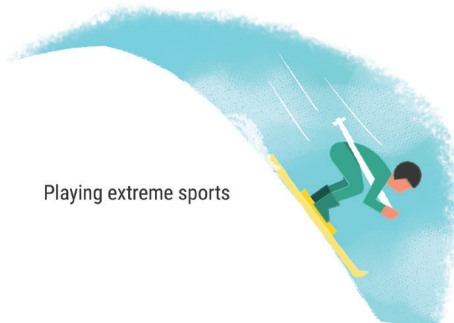


When stress pushes you

Do you feel stressed and anxious before exams? Who doesn't, right? A little bit of anxiety can help you push yourself to perform better in exams. A certain amount of stress, when it is within limits, helps you assess yourself to see how much you have learnt about a concept. If you realize that you don't know enough about a particular topic, being aware of it helps you put in more effort, motivates you to learn more, and also be creative in finding new methods to learn.

When stress works for you

Playing extreme sports



When stress becomes harmful



Occasional stress can -

- Help you assess situations and motivate you to take action.
- Help in fight or flight response.
- Push the body to adapt to it.



S = stress

Chronic stress can -

- Change neural pathways in the brain as it is constantly trying to cope.
- Cause mental illnesses like depression or anxiety in the long run.

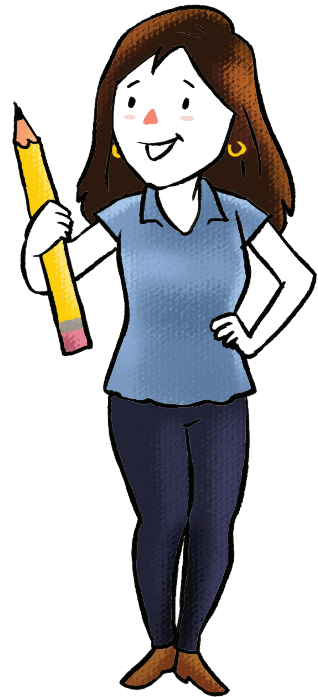
Myth: Exams are meant for scoring marks.

Fact: The idea behind learning something new is to be able to apply it in our lives. Subjects like science and maths are forms of knowledge that we learn, and exams help you assess how much you know or understand about the topic.



List three things that stress you out about exams

(You can print this page and work on the sheets as you read along)



We'll discuss how you can seek help to manage your stress later in the book.

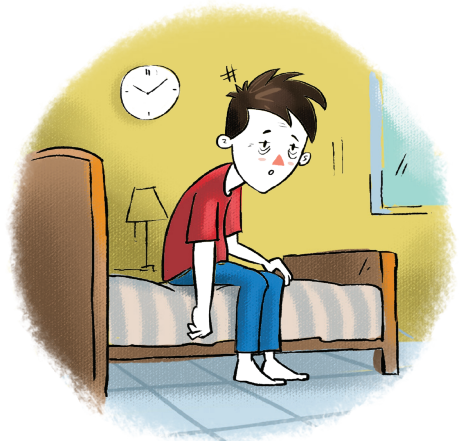
Seeking help



Feeling a little anxious about exams can motivate you to perform better. But if it gets overwhelming, you need to seek help. These are a few signs that will help you recognize if you are feeling extremely stressed. If you see one or more of these signs for over a few weeks, then it may be time to seek help.

Physical signs

- Tightness in muscles
- Unexplained headaches
- Insomnia
- Nausea
- Increased heart rate
- Lack of appetite
- Frequent urination
- Upset stomach





Emotional signs

- Mood swings that are out of the ordinary
- Worry
- Panic attacks
- Frustration
- Feeling discouraged
- Feeling deeply sad
- Hopelessness
- Irritability

Thoughts and behavioral signs

- Becoming fidgety
- Trouble concentrating
- Negative self-talk like “I won’t remember anything in the hall”
- Avoiding challenging situations
- Blanking out



Myth: I should not feel anxious at all before exams.

Fact: A little bit of anxiety helps you assess your preparation and motivates you to learn more. If your anxiety is distracting you from studying and if you are getting thoughts like: “I don’t know what questions will appear in the exam”, “What if I’m not able to answer questions?”, “What if I forget topics that I studied?”, then you may need to talk to someone. (Turn to page 10 to know how)



List out some signs that describe how you are feeling. If you find it difficult to recognize what you are going through, take the help of your elder sibling or parent/guardian and write them down.

The next thing to note is how often and for how long you have been experiencing the signs you've made a list of. You can also ask your parent/guardian or an elder sibling for help. We'll discuss ways to seek help in the pages ahead.

Ways to seek help - Talk to someone about it



Talking to someone will help you:

Learn from others' experiences: Talking to a parent or an elder sibling can help because it is likely that they have faced a similar situation at some point in their lives. They may share ways in which they coped and managed exam stress. You could also talk to a senior you trust in your school or college.

Find perspective: Your parent or sibling can be a neutral listener who helps you set a new perspective of the situation, and spell out your strengths for you. They can help you see the positives and negatives more objectively at a time where your anxieties don't allow you to see the situation with clarity.

Find clarity in your thoughts: On the days before an exam, you may feel confused and anxious and unable to put a finger on why you're feeling this way. Having a space to talk about the emotions you're experiencing will help you sort through your thoughts.

Feel relaxed: Talking to someone relieves the burden of stress you are feeling and makes you feel lighter. It's a great way to release tension. If you are talking to a friend, you might learn that you are not alone in feeling this way.



Name three people who you can talk to about your exam stress

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

How are you feeling about your upcoming exams? (Putting down your thoughts in a journal is another way to see your problems in an objective manner and will help in reducing the tension.)

If there is mental health support available, take it. Don't hesitate to approach your campus counselor for help. With them you can discuss your fears, or work together to find ways to cope with your stress. If your campus does not have a counselor, you can call the helpline numbers provided on page 10.

Ways to seek help - Call a helpline



Helplines - what are they?

A helpline is a free service that provides emotional support and information to anyone in distress. It is a space where you can discuss your problems without being judged. Most helplines offer support via telephone, but some also offer online guidance through email or apps.

When to call a helpline

You can call a helpline not just when you are in a crisis, but also when you need general information or clarity on a situation you are facing. This can include talking about something that is bothering you. You can also call the helpline on behalf of someone else.

If you are unable to find support in an adult you know, a helpline may be an option. However, if you have thoughts of suicide, reach out to a trusted adult immediately.

What to expect when you call a helpline

When you call the helpline, you will be connected to a counselor (or a trained professional) who will have a fair understanding of the problems you encounter (like feeling stressed about the exam, having low confidence). The expert listens to you and helps you structure your thoughts. To facilitate this, the counselor may ask you some basic questions such as your age and details of the problem you are experiencing. Then the counselor will listen to you, without intrusion or judgment. Based on the information you provide, they will help you understand your issue or refer you to an expert.

Will the information shared be confidential?

All helpline conversations take place on the condition of anonymity. What you share will remain confidential, unless the circumstance calls for a breach of confidentiality (like when a caller poses a threat to themselves or others). It might be helpful to first clarify the confidentiality agreement with the helpline operator before proceeding with the call.

Call for help

Helplines you can call if you're feeling overly anxious during exams

CBSE (nationwide) - Call 1800 11 8004 (toll free),

Timing: 12 pm - 4 pm everyday. Available till March 31.

Fortis School Mental Health Program (nationwide) - Call 08376804102.

Timing: 9 am - 5 pm everyday.

iCall Helpline (nationwide) - Call 022 25521111

Timing: 8 am - 10pm Monday to Saturday

You can also check if your state runs a helpline

Managing stress with planning



Yes, it can seem like there is too much to study and too little time to study. One way to manage the stress of exams is to create a realistic plan. Planning can help you gain confidence in your abilities and knowledge, and also help you feel less stressed.

This section will give you tips and ideas on how you can plan well, set goals and manage time better. We'll also delve deeper into why you need to include sports, or physical exercise as part of your exam preparation. Becoming aware of what causes your anxiety will help reduce stress levels. Once you are in a better, less anxious state, you can manage preparing for the exam better, and do justice to the topic you are learning. The first step to planning is setting goals.

Myth: Sleep is a waste of time. I should spend every hour studying.

Fact: Sleep is when your mind repairs itself and assimilates what you have studied. Lack of quality sleep leads to brain fatigue. No matter what you have learnt, if you want it to assimilate, you need to sleep well.

Goal-setting



Why do you need goals?

Many people have an idea of where they want to be, or what they want to do in the future. Having this goal provides a clear vision that motivates them to take the required steps to achieve it. To this end, it is important that you set out specific goals and work out realistic steps to achieve them. Goal setting helps you break down vast amounts of information, stay focused and feel encouraged when you meet them.

How can you set goals?

Everyone is different in their approach towards studying and learning. If the syllabus seems challenging to cover, you can divide it into smaller tasks. Goal setting depends on -

- Time required for preparation
- Study goals decided and planned based on time available
- Breaking down the goals into specific, measurable, realistic and time-bound tasks
- Motivation and confidence to achieve the set tasks and goals

Goals need to be set based on how easy or difficult you find a particular subject. While setting goals, it is vital to include time for relaxation and socializing. It is also preferable to keep your goals flexible to ensure that if for some reason you miss a day of study, you can make up for it at a later date.

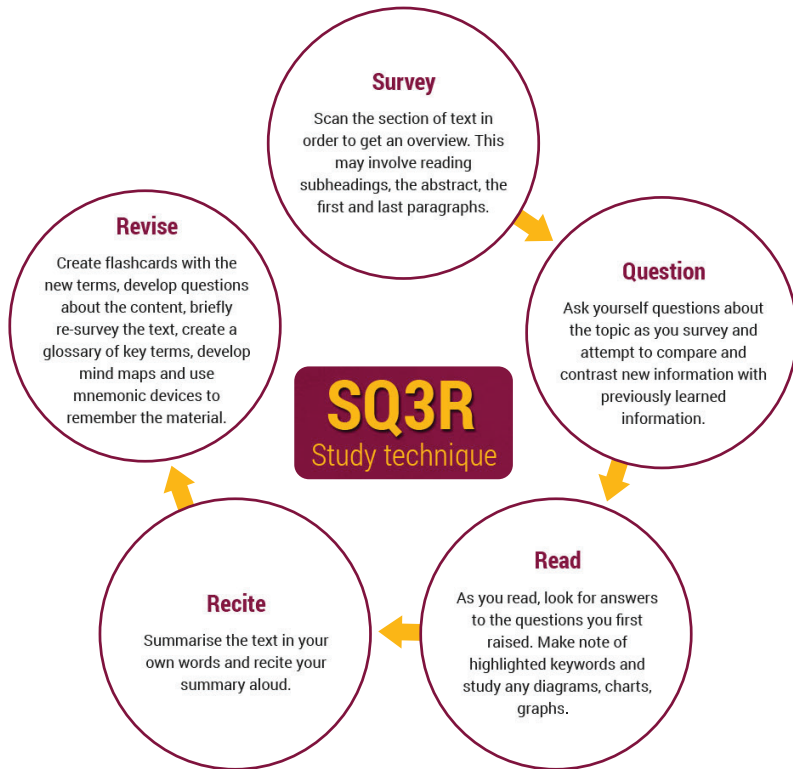
Three types of goals: Depending on the amount of time needed for achieving particular goals for your exams, divide them into three types -

Long term goals	Short term goals	Mini goals
<p>Consists of the overall outcome that you want to achieve after you finish your education – set around three to five years into the future.</p> <p>For example - Getting into a college of your choice, setting up your own business.</p>	<p>Outcomes you would like to achieve over the next year, upto completion of your course – can be steps that lead to your big goal.</p> <p>For example - Achieving distinction in all subjects in the exam.</p>	<p>Steps you take to achieve your short term goals in a week or end of the term.</p> <p>For example - Having a plan ready for your essay by the end of tomorrow.</p>

Myth: If I push myself more, I'm sure I can do better.

Fact: Beyond a point, such a push can be counterproductive. If you continue taking expectations of people around you to perform well in exams and making them your own, you won't focus on understanding or learning the concepts in the subject. This is where preparation becomes a source of stress, and then anxiety that negatively affects your performance in the exam.

Studying techniques



You can apply this method when you are studying individual topics of a chapter. This method can help you understand concepts better. You do not need to use all the techniques mentioned in the book, find out which technique works for you and apply it.

SMART

Study technique

S

Study only a **specific** area or topic to begin with. For example, section three from the history lesson.

M

Can you **measure** how much you have studied? Establish a criteria for measuring progress. For example, how much will I cover today? How will I know I have mastered the topic?

A

Are you willing to do what it takes to achieve your goal? Set goals that are **achievable** and realistic.

R

Reward yourself when the goal is achieved. For example, 30 minutes of your favorite TV show might help you stay motivated and hit the books again with more vigour.

T

The goal you have set must be **time-bound**. Have a deadline and stick to it.



An example that summarizes the SMART technique: "I have to complete section 2.1 of the history lesson, which means I need to finish two pages in 40 minutes. I feel this is an achievable goal, after I'm done with this I'm going to have a slice of blueberry cheesecake - I've been craving for it."



Using the study techniques, take two subjects and plan your specific goals based on short-term goals and mini-goals.

Subject 1

Subject 2

Manage your time during exams



As the date of the exams get closer, it may feel like there is too much to study and too little time. This is where time management comes to your rescue. Planning your time helps you think about the preparation strategically. Later on, even if you have to alter your study plans - having previously defined your tasks and activities will benefit you.

It's common to overestimate or underestimate the amount of time that a particular task might take. It is a good idea to plan this keeping in mind how much time you take for your routine tasks. To get started, keep a diary for a week and keep an hourly log of how you've spent the day.

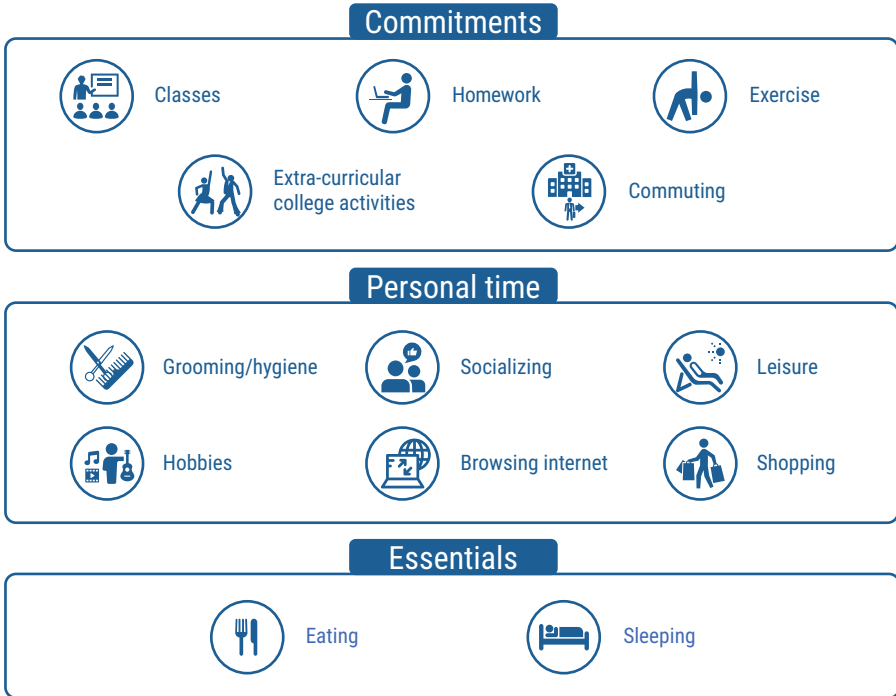
ABC categorization

As a student, if you categorically divide your syllabus or exam-related work, you will be able to make optimum use of your time and study effectively. Ask yourself which tasks are really important for you, which ones can wait, and what can be left until the next day or the weekend? Categorize your commitments as per these groups:

Absolutely urgent (high importance)	Better do it soon (medium importance)	Can wait (low importance)
--	--	------------------------------

Making a time management plan

Normally, a time management plan includes all the activities that a person performs in a day, such as:



Follow a similar method for studying; plan your list of subjects and chapters beforehand, so you know what you will take up on a particular day. One way to do this is to make a to-do list. On it, prioritize your subjects or chapters as per the ABC approach, indicate the task's priority level by assigning 'A', 'B', or 'C' for each task. This will help you work out what should be done first. Breaking up a large task into small ones makes it easier to finish, as does being specific in your plan about the task's details.

Procrastination

We have all been in a situation where we put off our studies for the last minute. Why do we find excuses, or allow ourselves to be distracted?

Quite often, how much we think about the difficulty in starting or continuing a task is worse than the task itself. For a student, it can be overwhelming to look at a large syllabus in front of them. Getting started is often the hardest part. The best way to counter procrastination is to take the first step, no matter how small it is.



Tips to beat procrastination:

- Identify the probable cause for procrastination.
- If you are unable to concentrate, take steps to ensure your study space is distraction-free. Make sure your room is gadget-free, as your attention can get divided.
- Get started on an assignment/studying for a test the day that it is announced.
- Start with a topic that you have been avoiding and complete a portion of that topic. Reward yourself when you complete it, so that you are motivated to continue.
- Break down the task into smaller, achievable units; instead of something that doesn't hold your attention.
- Remember, it is easier to complete the more difficult tasks when you are alert. Begin studying or revising with the difficult chapters, then move to the easier portions.



Create your own timetable below using the time management plan

A - High priority

B - Medium priority

C- Low-priority

De-stress

Your everyday life will probably involve various activities aside from school or college - like playing sports, spending time with your friends or pursuing a hobby. Exam time doesn't mean that you must stop all of this and focus only on your studies. It is recommended that you don't give up all aspects of leisure and fun during preparation time. While exams are an important part of your school or college life, your life does not revolve around it.



All work and no play...

You've probably heard this line several times already, but it does hold an important lesson and reminder – regular physical activity boosts mental wellbeing.

Regular exercise strengthens your immune system and helps you cope with daily stresses. Here are some of the other emotional benefits of exercise:

- Completing an exercise goal like walking two rounds in a park or playing football for half an hour gives you a sense of achievement and confidence.

- Engaging in a physical activity takes your mind off the stress of exams.
- Exercise refreshes and energizes you, which makes you more productive and efficient. It enhances mood and improves focus.
- Outdoor physical activity increases the possibility of social interaction which can help improve your mood.
- Plan your day in such a way that you can spend some time on some physical activity.

Want to convince your parents about exercise? Ask them to help you out in a way that works for the both of you. For instance, offer to pick up items listed on the grocery list and jog on the way to the market. It might also help to talk to them about the benefits of exercise and how it helps increase focus.

Myth: My exam results will decide what the rest of my life is like.

Fact: Exams only give a cross-sectional view of how much you know and how much you've learnt. The results are a way to get feedback, after which, there is time to improve upon what you have learnt, understand your strengths and areas that need improvement. Marks are not the sole determinants of what you will do in your life.

Breathing exercises to de-stress yourself

1. Choose a quiet spot. Rest your hand on your abdomen, relax your shoulders, inhale and exhale. Inhale through your nose slowly and feel your abdomen rise as you count from one to five.



RELAX. INHALE FOR 5 secs.

2. Pause and hold your breath to a count of five.



HOLD BREATH FOR 5 secs.

3. Exhale through your nose or mouth, to a count of five or longer. It is important you exhale fully. Once you have fully let the air out and your abdomen has flattened, take two breaths of inhalation and exhalation in your normal rhythm. Continue practicing for three to five minutes or up to ten cycles. As you progress, you'll notice that your exhalations are slightly longer than your inhalations. Let these variations be and continue with the exercise for up to five minutes.



EXHALE FOR 5 secs or LONGER.

Practice them regularly before they show results. This exercise increases oxygen supply to the brain and triggers body's natural relaxation response.

We all have our own exam rituals. What's yours?



Wear a 'lucky charm'



Don't shower or wash hair



Tie religious threads on wrist



Pray to their books



Break coconuts

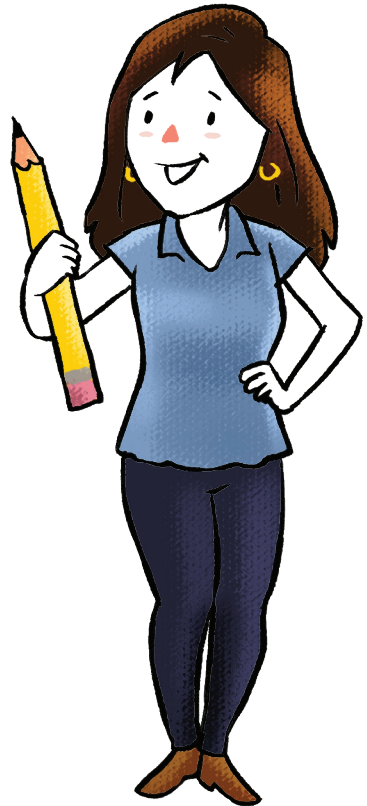


Sleep with books under their pillow



Develop a checklist for things you need to remember to carry to the exam hall - Your hall ticket if that's a requirement, writing pad, a set of pens or pencils and eraser, and ruler.

Things you need in the exam hall



Sleep at least seven hours before the night of an exam. It is essential for you to be able to feel relaxed and recall information. Eat a healthy breakfast before going for the exam. Avoid discussing on the morning of the exam with your peers as this adds to the stress.

When you are in the exam hall

In the exam hall, after you receive your exam sheet, examiners allow for ten minutes of reading time. Use this time to:

- Read the instructions on the question paper carefully.
- Identify mandatory questions and also find out how many questions you must answer in each section.
- As you read the question paper, the different sections in it - tick all the questions you plan to answer.
- If the question mentions specific requirements, such as word count, points to be answered, make sure you read these carefully so that you begin answering after knowing what to expect.
- Observe and regulate breathing if you feel anxious.
- Estimate the time needed to answer each question and the order in which you want to attempt them.
- When you start writing, focus on the task at hand, if your attention wanders, gently bring it back to the question you are answering at the time.
- Keep your answers relevant and precise.
- Avoid discussing answers after the exam is over. It can affect the review for the next exam.

All the best for your exams!

About White Swan Foundation

White Swan Foundation is a not-for-profit organization that is committed to delivering knowledge services on mental health and wellbeing. We aim to provide well-researched content to the public, which includes community leaders, adolescents, youth, teachers, parents, self-help groups, employees and others. We believe that with the right information on mental health, people will overcome their fears related to it and will be able to make informed decisions.

