

GETTING EXAM READY

TIPS FOR SCHOOLS

It's normal for students to feel stressed when preparing for exams (especially big exams). A bit of stress aids success by increasing motivation, but at high levels it can reduce academic performance.

Research suggests that around 1 in 5 senior school students will experience very high levels of stress during the exam period. This sheet is designed to help schools offer support to students in preparing for exams by recognising when stress is too much—and if it is, how to reduce it.



When pre-exam stress is normal

- * It's short term (such as a few days or weeks around the exam, but subsides once exams are over)
- * Students can still motivate themselves by other things
- * Students feel fatigued, but only until exams are over
- * Students feel butterflies or shaky right before an exam



When it's too much

- * The shakiness and nervousness doesn't go away
- * Students are unable to study or sleep properly
- * Students feel nauseous, depressed or constantly worried about not doing well or failing
- * Students appear to be overwhelmed and panicked

REMEMBER— It's normal for students to feel stressed when preparing for exams, but if it gets too much they should seek help.

Have you seen this in a student?

If you notice a student showing any of these signs, there are things you can do to help. First, simply talk to them, for example: "How do you feel about your exams?" Listen to what they have to say and give them time to say it without interjecting. Also try going through the tip sheet for students together. If you still have concerns, seek help from a school counsellor and talk to the student's parents.

IN A NUTSHELL

Stress is the activation of our 'flight-or-fight' response—a natural part of our sympathetic nervous system designed to prepare us to deal with threat or danger. If we suddenly feel unsafe or under attack, the flight-or-fight system increases our heart rate (which activates

blood flow to our muscles to help us either run or fight), stimulates our sweat glands (to cool the body) and heightens our senses (to increase alertness).

At first it can be hard to see how this is relevant to exams. But when people think of exams as threatening (worrying they won't do well) the flight-or-fight response is activated. Although it isn't helpful to have a racing

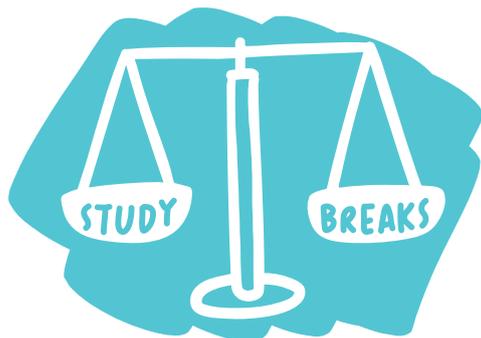
heart or to sweat in an exam situation, the increased mental alertness and motivation that stress brings may be helpful.

When stress is too high or goes on for too long, the symptoms actually hinder performance. Therefore the key for educators is not to want to eliminate stress altogether, but to aim to keep it at moderate levels.

TIPS FOR SCHOOLS

MANAGING STRESS LEADING UP TO EXAMS

For most students there are ways to manage stress (see the tip sheet for students). There are also many things that teachers and schools can do to help students (and themselves) coming up to an exam period.



* Take care of yourself

Teaching is a very demanding job, so it's important to be mindful of your own stress level, and the impact it can have on your students. Many of the tips and resources on this sheet apply just as much to teachers as they do to students, so use them to help manage your own stress.



* Encourage balance between study and breaks

Students who study too much are prone to experiencing burnout. Try to encourage sensible boundaries around study habits, and communicate this to students and parents.

* Exercise decreases stress

Vigorous exercise like running or swimming uses up excess adrenaline and stress hormone (cortisol). Perhaps organise some voluntary stress-reduction exercise sessions for senior students during lunchtime.

* Take the pressure down

Research tells us that one of the things that is associated with severe distress in senior students is perceived pressure from parents and teachers.

In particular, pressure to excel from teachers has been shown to be associated with increased stress in vulnerable students, reducing their academic performance. So rather than pushing a 'need to achieve' a certain standard, or tying a student's future to their current academic performance, aim to support and encourage them at whatever stage they're at.

* Remember the bigger picture

It's important that teachers, parents and students alike acknowledge that exam results matter, but they're not the 'be all and end all'. Some students get too focused on the outcome of the exams, and catastrophise about not doing well.

While it is helpful for students to have academic goals to work towards, there are many pathways to various careers. For students who are worrying about the impact of their exam results on their future, try to talk to them positively about the future, remind them about life after the exams, and that there are many post-school options (work, TAFE, alternative uni pathways, Educational Access Schemes, gap year etc).

EXTRA RESOURCES



Websites

ReachOut.com

Information, support and resources about mental health issues for young people

Headspace.org.au

A non-profit organisation for youth mental health

BeyondBlue.org.au

Helping with issues related to depression, suicide, anxiety and other mental illnesses



Apps

Calm

Soothing visual backgrounds and a range of meditations

Stop, Breathe & Think

Develop the skills to stop everything and just be still

Smiling Mind

Equipping young people with integral skills to thrive in life



Helplines

(available 24/7)

Lifeline

Call 13 11 14

Kids Helpline

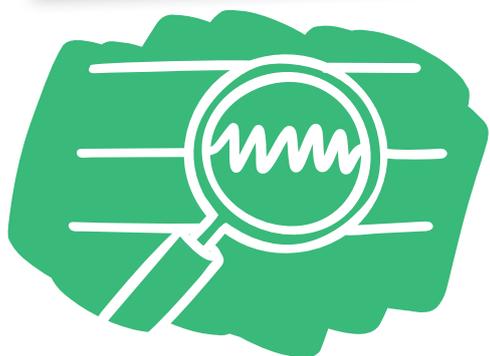
Call 1800 55 1800

GETTING EXAM READY

EXTRA STRATEGIES

TIPS FOR SCHOOLS

As well as the advice contained on the 'getting exam ready' tip sheet, there are more specific strategies to identify and assist students who are struggling with stress associated with exams and assessments.



Identifying exam stress early

Worrying about exams is not usually a new thing that develops in senior school. Generally, students who worry about major exams tend to worry about minor assessments too (this might include speech tasks, performance tasks, written exams, as well as home-based projects and assignments).

Because the students who are likely to be distressed about major exams in senior school are usually the same students who worried about exams and assessments in earlier grades, it's possible to identify them and help them learn management strategies long before they reach major exams. As the old saying goes, 'prevention is better than cure'.

Exam stress in the classroom

Learning to cope with exams is an important life skill that teachers help students develop. With sufficient time, students can learn to overcome anxiety associated with exams and other assessment tasks. Teachers have an important role to play in managing this stress.

Prevention strategies

Fortunately, there are various mental health strategies that can help students to be less fearful of exams and performance situations. School counsellors and psychologists are equipped to help students learn these strategies, so they should be involved as early as possible. The two strategies with the most evidence for reducing stress and anxiety in students are: cognitive behavioural therapy (learning how to consciously change anxious thinking); and practising mock exams.

Developing confidence

Rather than facilitating avoidance (staying away from feared things), provide opportunities for students to practise 'mock' exams or assessments. A fear of exams can be approached like any other fear—for example, to overcome a fear of heights we can practise being in a high place until we're able to feel calmer, then as we feel more comfortable, we can move higher or closer to the edge until we can look over. The more time we spend facing a fear, the more we learn that it's not as bad as we originally thought. Yes, it does take some time—but it works.

Practising exams

Teachers can assist students with high anxiety to overcome fear by setting up practice exams to do at home (or at lunchtime) using questions from past papers. The key is to use a timer, as in an actual exam (although some

concessions can be made, such as allowing students to sit where they feel most at ease). You can also 'mark' the exam so that it feels as realistic as possible for the student. The more practice exams they do, the more they will learn to manage their anxiety.



Performance-based assessments

In assessment conditions, it can be helpful to allow students with high anxiety to only speak or perform to a small group of peers instead of the whole class—however this won't help them learn to manage their fears properly over the long term. Negotiate any flexibility collaboratively with the student, so they're not unduly distressed—but also try to encourage them to work towards overcoming their fear if they are ready to do so. One strategy could be to grade them on their performance in front of a small group, but then invite them to repeat it (ungraded) in front of a larger group. As students become more confident, the audience may be increased.