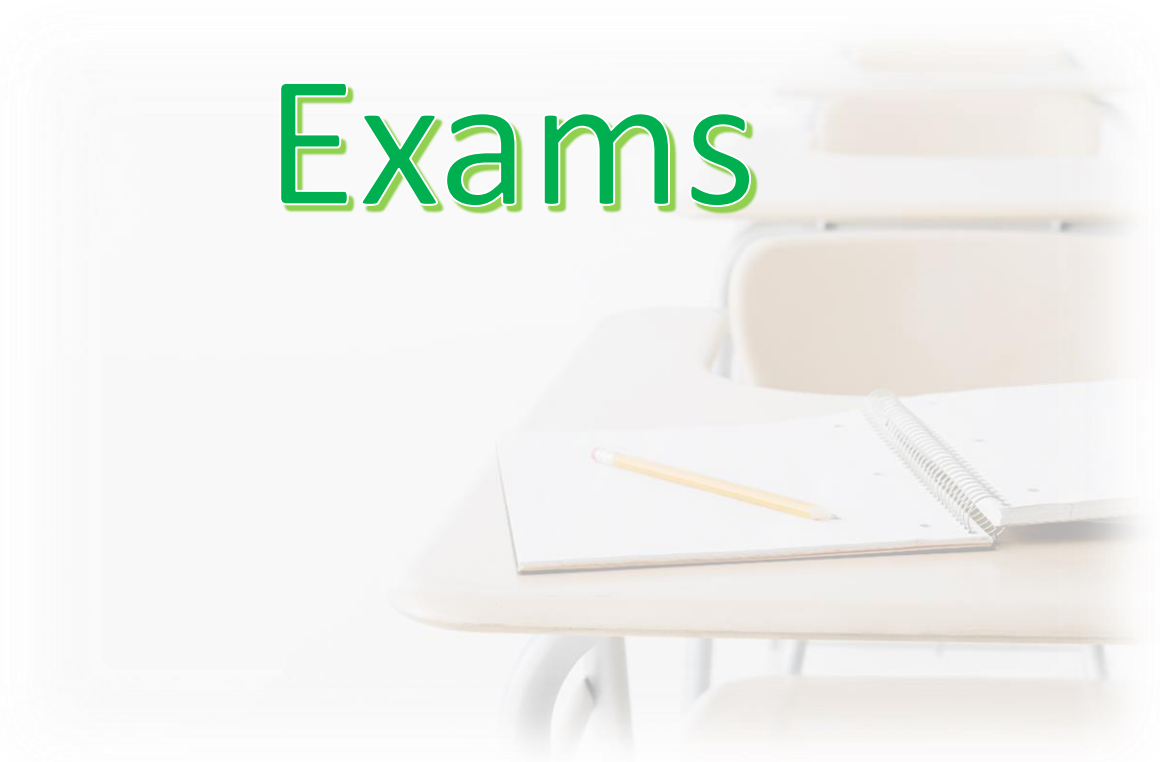


Supporting Your Mental Health During Exams



The Mental Health Support Team (MHST) are an early intervention mental health team within Oxfordshire Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

In 2024 we surveyed young people in Oxfordshire Schools to find out more about how exam stress impacts you and the kinds of support you would find helpful.

This leaflet brings together information on the topics you identified you would like to know more about in regards to exam stress, and some ideas from other young people on what they find helps them.

You do not need to read the whole leaflet, and can skip to sections that are helpful to you below:

Contents:	Page Number:
The Impact of Exam Stress.....	3
Brain Health.....	4
Wellbeing.....	5
Anxiety.....	6-9
Low mood.....	10-11
Sleep.....	12
Sharing what helps (tips from other young people).....	13
Building a coping toolkit.....	14
Where to get further information and support.....	15

Exam Stress



It's normal to experience some stress around exams. Stress is our body responding to the pressures of being tested and wanting to do our best, and a certain amount of stress can even be helpful for our focus and performance.

However, with the added stress of exams on top of all the other pressures you have as a young person, it's understandable that it may impact your mental health and wellbeing.

Signs of stress look different for everyone but you may notice physical symptoms, changes to your emotions or to your behaviour.

**We asked young people in
Oxfordshire schools about exam
stress**

"It makes my anxiety so much worse, I feel panicky and worried"

"It impacts my sleep schedule, I'm more tired but find it hard to sleep"

"It makes me not want to do the things I usually like doing, like seeing friends"

**How does Exam
stress impact
you?**

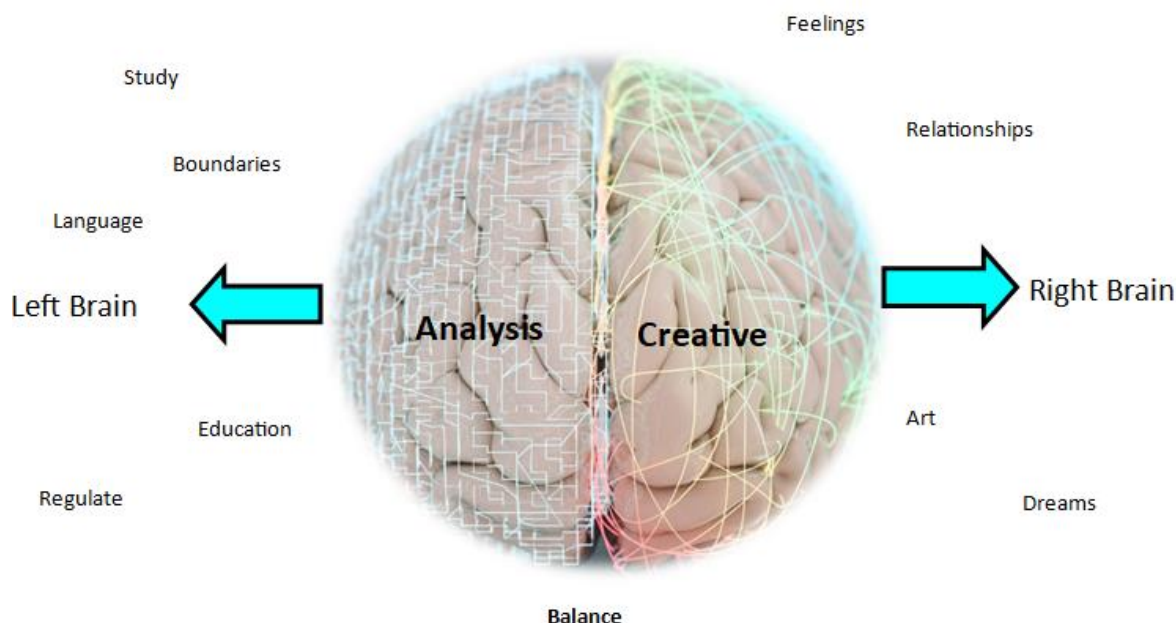
"It affects my mental health, I feel angry and demotivated"

"I am dizzy and nauseous, I feel sick and I have lost my appetite"

"I keep thinking about failing, I feel a lot of pressure and I can't concentrate"

Brain Health

Psychoeducation involves learning about and knowing our mental health and wellbeing. It's similar to PE, where you learn about how your physical body works, how to look after it and the effects of different stresses or difficulties - but instead you apply this to the mind.



You can support all these areas of your brain during exam season by stimulating the areas that make you happy and lift your mood. For example: going out with friends, taking movement breaks to regulate your emotions, asking for help and setting your own boundaries and communicating them to the adults around you.

Did you know? Your brain will continue to develop until your mid-20s.

During your teenage years emotions are close to the surface because teen brains are wired to experience feelings. Intense emotions are a sign of brain growth. The parts of the brain that help us to think ahead, make decisions and behave less impulsively are last to develop, so its understandable you may find these things hard at times.

Brain growth is shaped by the lessons offered at home, by friends and community role models, and in school. In the meantime, talking about your feelings and learning coping techniques like the ones in this leaflet can help you manage the difficult emotions you may experience about exams.

Wellbeing



When our brain is focussed on exams and revision, it can be easy to push our other wants and needs to one side. However, **it is especially important that we actively look after ourselves during exams, as this keeps our brain functioning well and protects our mental health.** If you neglect your basic needs your brain will not be able to focus properly on anything else, so try to prioritise drinking enough water, eating nourishing foods, being comfortable and well rested.

The 5 Ways to Wellbeing

Research has identified five simple things that, when practised regularly, can build resilience, boost wellbeing and offer some protection from developing mental health problems. Sometimes when we are focussing on exams, we might find we are neglecting some of these areas.

Connect: Spending time with others & feeling connection

Take Notice: Being present & mindful in the moment

Be Active: Find ways to move your body every day

Give: Acts of giving and kindness to others

Keep Learning: Challenging yourself to learn new things

The Stress Bucket:

A stress bucket is a way of describing our ability to cope with stress. Worries, stressors and pressures fill up our buckets with water. As they get full and overflow we become overwhelmed and things feel “too much”

During exam season our buckets are already full with the stresses of exams, so it is extra important to pay attention to and begin to notice the signs in yourself when your bucket is getting too full. For example, you may be snappy, tearful or feel unable to concentrate. Emotions may spill over and you may behave in ways you wouldn't usually.



What do you notice in yourself when your bucket is getting full?

When you notice these signs it is important to give yourself permission to stop, let out some water and relieve some stress. This can be as simple as taking a pause, taking some deep breaths, or doing something you love that relaxes you.

Remember, there are some situations you can't fix on your own, it's ok to ask for help!

Anxiety



Anxiety is our body's inbuilt protection system that developed long ago when humans were first on the earth. When our brain senses danger it releases chemicals that get our body ready to attack (fight), run away (flight) or hide (freeze). This can create some odd sensations in our bodies. Unfortunately, the brain hasn't adapted much to the things that cause us fear in our modern lives. This fear response is very useful if you encountered an aggressive bear, but not so useful when sat in an exam hall!

Feeling some anxiety around exams is totally normal, but if it is impacting your daily life or making it harder to revise or sit exams, coping strategies may be useful.

What do you notice in your body when you are anxious? (examples)

Racing Heart Sweaty palms
Feeling sick
Needing the toilet Tense muscles
Shaky hands and legs Headache
Dry mouth

Remember: These body sensations are uncomfortable, but they are not dangerous and will pass!

What does your fear response look like at exam time? (examples)

Fight: Getting angry at teachers, lashing out at other, tense muscles
Flight: Wanting to run out of the exam hall, avoiding revision
Freeze: Feeling stuck and unable to write

Facing your fears!

Anxiety can understandably make us want to avoid the things that scare us. However, the more we avoid the more our fear builds up. Making small steps towards doing the things we are avoiding, or getting used to environments that cause our fear response, can help our brain learn we are safe and gradually lessen our anxiety symptoms.

Some ideas:

- If you are avoiding revision, start with just doing 5 minutes
- Practice sitting at an exam desk
- Spending time in the exam hall or sitting in a silent classroom
- Practising completing tests under time pressure.

If a step feels like too much break it down and start smaller!



Anxiety

Worry and Unhelpful Thoughts

Worries and unhelpful thoughts are normal, but they can be exhausting, take up time in your day and prevent you from concentrating on revision. It can be really hard to separate sometimes, but remember you are not your thoughts and thoughts are not facts. If worries are impacting you around exam time, try the tips below.

Catch an unhelpful thought:

Ask yourself:

- Is this a helpful thought?
- Is there any evidence the thought is true?
- Have I confused a thought with a fact?
- What would I tell a friend who had this thought?

Reduce time spent worrying:

Give yourself 10-15 mins “worry time” a day where you properly think about your worries. At other times, jot the worry down and reassure yourself you will look at it later, then try and distract yourself by doing something that keeps your brain busy

Manage your worries:

If you are worrying because you have a problem that needs sorting (e.g. you don't know where to start with your maths revision) try thinking about your options and writing out a plan to sort things out.

Sometime worries about exams lie outside our control (e.g. will a certain question come up on the exam, what will my grade be?) Your brain might want to spend a lot of time thinking about these, but ultimately, you have no control over it right now. So try and accept uncertainty, let the worry go and give your brain something else to do to distract it e.g. music, exercise, drawing, reading

Positive self talk:

The way we talk to ourselves matters. Would we say that to a friend? Try to talk to yourself encouragingly and remember your strengths. **You are much more than just your exam results!**






Anxiety

Relaxation strategies:

Grounding

A great tool to use when we feel ourselves running on our emotional/anxious brain, and unable to think properly or focus on anything else, is grounding. Grounding is a technique that helps keep you in the present and helps reorient you to the here-and-now and to reality.

One specific strategy is the 54321 senses – where we focus on our senses in the present moment, to distract us from the anxious thoughts/feelings.

 5	 4	 3	 2	 1
Name 5 things you can see	Name 4 things you can hear	Name 3 things you can touch	Name 2 things you can smell	Name 1 thing you can taste

This is one of many ways to bring yourself back into the moment, you could also describe an item in the room as if explaining to an alien, or name everything in the room that you can see that is red – whatever works for you!

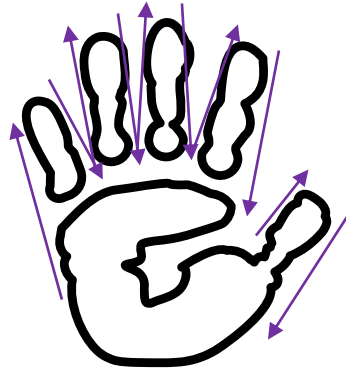
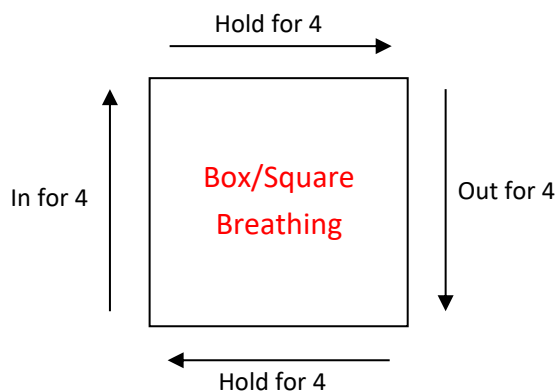
Breathing:



Breathing is an important strategy to use to trick our body into thinking that we are calm, which then supports us to calm down. Our mind interprets our heightened bodily sensations (e.g., faster breathing, faster heart rate, butterflies in tummy) and assumes that there is danger present, but would we be breathing slowly if there was a tiger attempting to attack us?

Some examples of breathing strategies we can use are on the following page:

Anxiety



Hand Breathing

Trace your hand slowly up and down your fingers, making sure to breathe in as you trace upwards, and out as you trace downwards

Muscle relaxation:

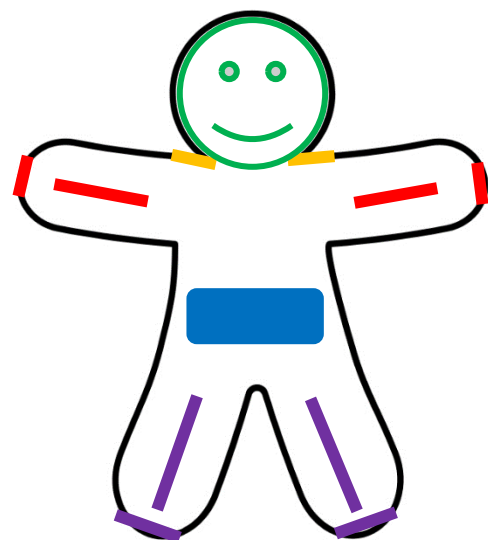
Our body tenses up when we feel stressed or anxious, so it is important for us to relax these muscles to calm ourselves down. It can also feel really nice to not feel as tight or tense.

Choose a muscle where you feel tight (e.g., shoulders or fists) and tense/squeeze them for 5 seconds as hard as you can, then release them. You should feel that your muscle feels more relaxed than before.

You can go through the whole body, either yourself or through a guided video (try searching 'Progressive Muscle Relaxation' on YouTube), or you can choose certain body parts.

Try:

- **Hands and arms** – Pretend you are squeezing a lemon in your hands, squeeze our fists tight. Hold for a few seconds and relax.
- **Neck and shoulders** – Pull your shoulders up towards your ears and push your head down, hold it nice and tight for a few seconds and release.
- **Jaw and face** – Bring our teeth together and wrinkle/scrunch up our noses, keep it like that a few seconds, and let go.
- **Stomach** – Squeeze and tense our stomach so its tight and tight, squeeze for a few seconds, and relax.
- **Legs and feet** – squeeze our legs and scrunch up our toes, like we are stood in sand.

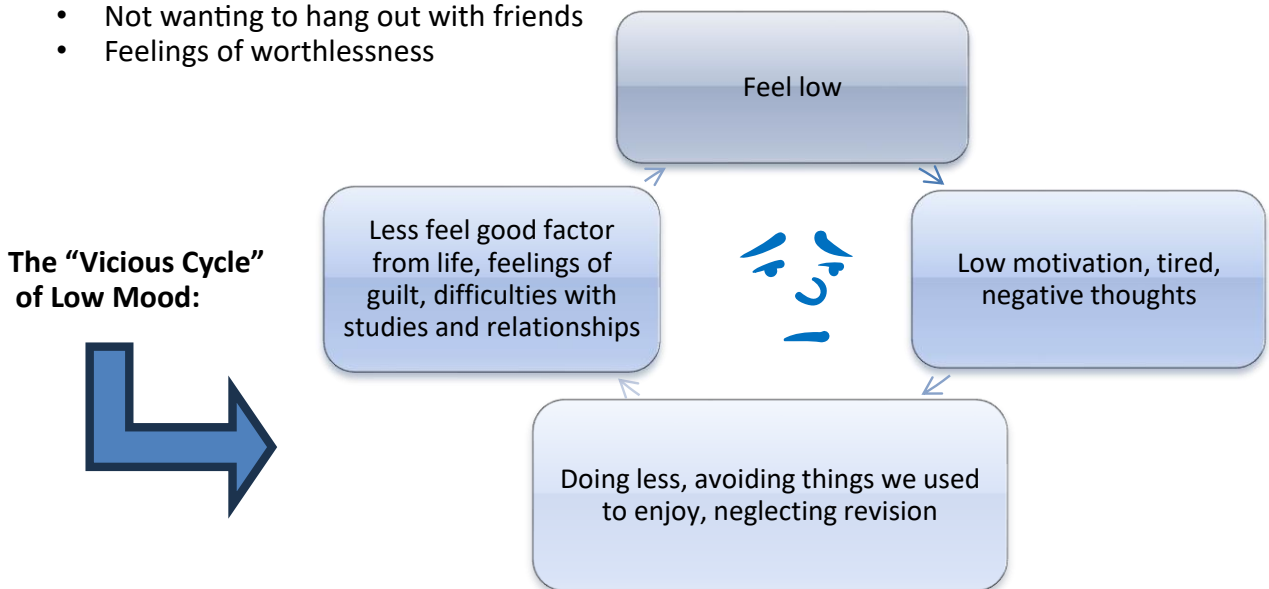


Low Mood

It's understandable that you may feel low at times during exam season. However, sometimes the way we react to these feelings may keep us stuck in a cycle

Signs of low mood can include:

- Feeling tired and lacking energy
- Change in eating or sleeping habits
- Losing interest in things you normally enjoy
- Getting easily bad-tempered or irritable
- Not wanting to hang out with friends
- Feelings of worthlessness



Breaking the cycle by doing more of what matters

Adding activities to our day that are meaningful to us can help to add more positive feelings back into our lives and break the cycle of low mood. It is good to have a balance of activities in our day that connect to our personal values and bring us a sense of:

Enjoyment



Achievement



Closeness to others



During exams you may find your balance of these three areas feels off, as revision may take up more of your time and you may see friends less, do less enjoyable activities and reduce time spent on hobbies that give you a sense of achievement.

Low Mood

Our values are like a compass that helps guide us in the direction of what matters to us in life. When adding in activities into your days, take some time to ensure they are meaningful by considering what your values are.

What matters to me? *



Hobbies/fun Things I do for fun in my own time	Education/work What I want to learn and achieve	Family My relationships with my family members
Physical health Taking care of my body	Everyday Stuff Daily things you need to do	Friends Who you spend time with what kind of friend you are
Looking after myself Taking care of my mind	The bigger picture Global issues, religion, spirituality	Important other(s) Things that matter to you in a relationship

Soothing Difficult Emotions:

Lot of people experience up and down emotions during exam time, but it can help to have a “self soothe” box on hand to help with difficult days. Fill your box with objects and ideas that can distract, soothe and regulate difficult feelings and get it ready for when you need it during exam time:

Ideas of Objects to include:

Paper and pens to draw, scrunch, tear, write; Bubbles (help to change breathing); A book; Play dough/tac; Fiddle toys; Something that smells nice; Printed out puzzles or colouring ; Music e.g. an old mp3 player, or a playlist of songs that help; Something comforting e.g a soft blanket or jumper; Something heavy like a bean bag; Old magazines; Lists of achievements or strengths; Wishes and goals; Something crafty to make ; Pamper kit, e.g. face mask, nail polish, candle; Photographs of happy things



**Table adapted from “Brief Behavioural Activation for Adolescent Depression” Laura Pass and Shirley Reynolds, Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2021*

Sleep

Many teenagers find sleep difficult, and this is made worse through exam season. As teenagers, you should be getting **8 – 10 hours sleep every night**, but are often ‘night owls’ (due to your biological body clock at this age) who struggle to fall asleep early but are then forced to wake up early for school. Alongside this, you have **101 things demanding your time** (e.g., revision, exercise, time with friends, social media, eating, hygiene), **a constant buzz of electronic devices** (which impacts sleep if you are on them right before you attempt to sleep)

Saying that, there are some top tips you can do to change your sleep schedule:

During the day	Take some exercise and get outside in the fresh air Avoid caffeinated drinks for at least 4 hours before bed Don't nap or sleep during the day
The hour before bed	Avoid stimulating, exciting or scary activities Turn off your phone, laptop and other digital devices Try building a quiet, calming activity into your night-time routine Unwind with a warm bath, hot shower or warm milky drink Try some relaxation exercises
Going to bed	A set bedtime will help to reset your body clock Go to bed when you feel tired and ready to sleep so that you fall asleep quickly Make sure your bedroom is dark, quiet and cool
In bed	To make a strong connection between bed and sleep, only use your bed for sleeping If you are still awake after 15 minutes get out of bed and engage in a quiet activity
In the morning	Get up at the agreed time, even if you haven't slept well

Important questions to ask yourself:

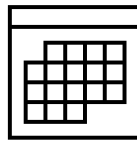
- **Could there be a reason your mind/body doesn't want to sleep?**
 - **What does your mind/body want to do instead?**

Remember you will revise much more effectively if well rested! If your mental health is impacting your sleep, try the relaxation strategies earlier in the pack.

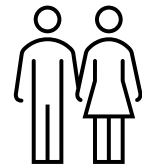
Sharing What Helps

We asked young people in Oxfordshire schools what helps them with exam stress.

Creating exam timetables is useful, and scheduling revision breaks



Spending time with my friends and family, talking to them about it helps



I find exercise is very helpful, I make time to go to the gym and play sport with friends

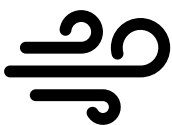


Listening to music or doing the things I love

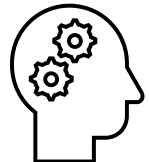


Doing a little bit of revision at a time, just starting because even a little puts you in a better position than doing nothing

I find breathing exercises helpful, remembering to do them can be hard though!



Mindfulness works, it helps me relax



My Exam Stress Toolkit



We are all different and what helps one person might not help someone else. What ideas and strategies would you like to note down, to remind you to use them during exams?

A large, empty rectangular box designed to look like a briefcase or toolbox. It has a handle on top and a latch in the center of the front flap. The interior of the box is completely blank, intended for the user to write down their own ideas and strategies.

Further information and Support



YOUNGMINDS

Website with information about young people's mental health and wellbeing

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/coping-with-life/exam-stress/>

CAMHS

Child and Adolescent
Mental Health Service

For self-help advice as well as information on how to get further support

<https://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/camhs/support/>



Free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging service for anyone who is struggling to cope.

<https://giveusashout.org/>

Other Helpful Links:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/groups/cd5exmm663et> Information on exams and revision

https://nicolamorgansbrain.substack.com/p/supporting-your-exam-students-new?mc_cid=7edd0683a2&mc_eid=87d1d85b4d – Information on the teenage brain

<https://www.pookyknightsmith.com/keynote-exams-supporting-your-child/> Information for parents on supporting children and young people with exams

If you are in need of urgent support, call 111 or 999 for emergency services