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How to help your child cope with exam stress

The exam period is a stressful time. For young people sitting their SATs, GCSEs, A-levels or university exams, it's common to feel overwhelmed and anxious. And watching your child experiencing stress as they sit exams can be very hard too. However, there are steps you can take to help them cope.

Parents want their kids to do their best, but not to the detriment of their mental health. Stress – which often emerges from an intense pressure to succeed – has been linked to

[depression](#)

and

[anxiety](#)

, which can affect children's behaviour,

[sleep](#)

and eating habits and more

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In the last three years, the likelihood of young people having a [mental health](#) problem has increased by 50%. Now, five children in a classroom of 30 are likely to struggle with their mental health². With [stress](#), [anxiety](#) and [low mood](#) becoming increasingly common problems among young people, it's more important than ever to know how to support them as they go through stressful events like exams.

Look out for the signs of stress

Noticing the physical and mental warning signs of [stress](#) is the first step to helping and supporting your child. The physical warning signs of stress include aches and pains, [headaches](#), [sleeping](#) difficulties and [dizziness](#). Someone experiencing stress may also feel shaky or experience [stomach aches](#) or [diarrhoea](#).

Stress can also affect mood, emotions, and behaviour. Your child may be more irritable than usual, get upset easily or experience mood swings. They may also behave in ways that aren't usual for them, including withdrawing from friends.

Encourage your child to talk about stress and anxiety

Your child might not voluntarily talk about feeling stressed, so picking up on the cues is important. However, it's also good to encourage your [child](#) to talk about their feelings and to create an open, non-judgemental environment for them to speak up about things that are upsetting them. Let them know you're available to listen at any time.

Dr Sarah Hughes, chief executive of the mental health charity [Mind](#), said: "This generation has been under immense pressure at school in the last few years, and record numbers are struggling with their mental health. That's why it's so important to check in about how young people are feeling and to let them know they can also start the conversation."

Help your child relax

Although you want your child to do their best in their exams, it's important not to put too much pressure on them. Encourage them to take regular breaks from studying and help them maintain a balance between work and doing things they enjoy. This might mean being flexible about household chores and putting a film on instead of getting them to tidy their room.

Help your child with their revision, but also make time for fun activities and [exercise](#), which is known to reduce stress. Research by the University of Cambridge found that [mindfulness](#) techniques can also help students relieve stress and develop resilience while taking exams³.

Professor Peter Jones, also from the University of Cambridge's Department of Psychiatry, said: "The evidence is mounting that mindfulness training can help people cope with accumulative stress. It appears to be popular, feasible, acceptable and without stigma."

Remind your child that thoughts aren't facts

When we're stressed, it's common to experience negative thoughts. Often, these are distorted and don't reflect reality⁴. For example, a student may think they will fail all their exams if they take breaks from studying. This kind of thinking is sometimes known as catastrophising and can worsen stress, [anxiety](#) and low mood.

It can help to remind your child of their strengths and previous experiences of academic achievement – and that there is more to life than their grades. However, it's important not to dismiss their thoughts and feelings, even if they feel disproportionate to you as a parent.

Encourage your child to eat well

A balanced diet is always important, but it can help children feel well during exam periods. Where possible, make sure your child is eating full meals with plenty of [vegetables](#), fruit and fibre. Slow-release carbohydrates, such as porridge [oats](#), wholegrain bread or muesli, provide slow-release energy which will help your child stay full.

Seek professional help

If you are concerned about your child's health or they won't talk to you, it's important to reach out for professional help. At school, you can speak to their teacher, head of year, nurse or pastoral lead.

There are also charities which can offer support and advice if you are worried about your child's wellbeing, such as [Young Minds](#) or [Childline](#). You can also speak to your GP if your child is having [panic attacks](#) or is having [problems sleeping](#).

Further reading

1. [Yaribeghi et al: The impact of stress on body function: A review.](#)

2. [Children's Society: Children's mental health statistics.](#)
3. [Galante et al: A mindfulness-based intervention to increase resilience to stress in university students \(the Mindful Student Study\): a pragmatic randomised controlled trial.](#)
4. [Rood et al: Dimensions of negative thinking and the relations with symptoms of depression and anxiety in children and adolescents.](#)

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