

Supporting your child through exam stress

This article was written by a Qwell mental health writer and contains mentions of the following: exams, stress, relaxation, pressure

It's coming up to that time of the year that many students dread: exam season. Whether it's coursework, assessments, or exams, this can be a really overwhelming period for students, and many are understandably stressed.

As a parent, it's natural for you to want to make this time easier for your teen. And whilst you don't need to be a science whiz or an English tutor, there are some things that you can do to support, encourage, and motivate your child during this time.



How does exam stress manifest?

Exams and assessments have a level of uncertainty around them. For many people, these tests might be (or feel like) the way to unlock new opportunities or career paths, so carry a lot of weight. Many also feel pressure from outside sources, such as family or society, to do well and highly achieve. Exams can also clash with other life stressors, making this time extra challenging.

Stress is a natural response to this uncertainty and pressure, and it can actually be helpful. The stress response can improve oxygen flow to the brain, which can result in increased focus, energy, and awareness. This level of stress can often be a good motivator for those going through exams, encouraging young people to meet deadlines or prepare.

However, some levels of stress can also be harmful: for example, if someone experiences a bout of extreme stress, or if someone experiences prolonged stress (also known as chronic stress). Here are some of the signs and symptoms of unhelpful stress to look out for in your teen:

- Tiredness
- Irritability or trouble focusing
- Headaches or frequent illness
- Expressing negative thoughts
- Withdrawing from regular activities such as socialising
- Changes in sleeping or eating patterns

How to support your child during exam season

1) Ask, don't assume

Every person responds to and experiences stress differently, and there is no-one-size-fits-all solution. For instance, some teens might need a good hug and someone to talk to, whereas others might need some space and flexibility with other responsibilities.

Don't be afraid to ask your child what support they would like.

It's also important to not assume that the stress they are feeling is down to exams. Whilst exams may contribute, there can often be overriding

factors making stress harder to handle. Make sure you take some time to ask how they are doing, allowing your child space to talk about whatever is on their mind, whether it's exams or not. Just knowing that you are there to listen and that there is a safe space to talk (whenever they are ready) can often help with breaking down stress in others.

2) Be their biggest supporter, not their coach

You understandably want to give your child the best chances and ensure that they fulfil their potential.

While this is great, it can often be easy to slip into the trap of telling your child how you think they should be preparing - for instance, how, when, or where you think they should be revising. Everyone has different methods of working, and if your child works better alongside others, later in the evening, with music, or by doing flow diagrams, then try to encourage and trust them to do this, even if it's not how you would approach work.

You can still be there to provide logistical support if they want it, such as helping set up a revision schedule or providing lifts to the library, but try to practise allowing your child to be autonomous and independent. Pressuring or bribing into certain ways of working is unlikely to lead to your child to be fully focused or highly motivated. In fact, it can actually make them feel much more overwhelmed, with research showing that parental pressure is a leading cause of stress around exam season.

If you are worried about your teen's working levels, try to gently encourage them by enhancing their intrinsic motivation - talk to them about their goals, ask what they enjoy studying the most, and chat about why their exams are meaningful to them. This, coupled with understanding and working through any worries or barriers to studying, can really motivate students to put in the time and effort - however works for them.

3) Give practical support

One of the most helpful ways a parent can support their child is by ensuring they have everything they need to feel prepared and to optimise the conditions for learning. The exam season can often be a time where it can be easy to neglect basic

healthy habits, so having you on hand to support this can be really useful.

This could involve:

- Providing snacks and meals
- Being flexible with any other responsibilities, such as chores or clubs
- Making time for treats and breaks
- Encouraging a good sleep routine
- Suggesting a walk outside
- Providing lifts, if you can
- Supporting their preferred working environment the best you can

Some of these tips will vary depending on the age of your child. For instance, younger children may need more support with food and sleep, whereas older children may not want this input. Be sure to ask your child if you're unsure!

4) Keep yourself calm

Exam season can be an unsettling time for the whole family, not just the person going through it. You might have some of your own worries or feel stressed on behalf of your child, and that's really understandable.

However, children often mirror the behaviour of their parents. If you display that you are concerned or distressed about their exams or work, it reinforces any worries your child might have, and they will be more likely to feel that way, too.

Instead, having a calm and reassuring approach and letting your child know that you'll be there for them no matter what can really help to boost their confidence and self-esteem. They're also likely to feel more comfortable coming to you for advice in the event that something does go wrong, or when they need support with something. For some tips on keeping yourself calm, take a look at how grounding can help you.

5) Work to develop relaxation techniques

Especially before exams, your child might need some support with relaxing and handling their nerves. Feeling calm and composed (with a little bit of helpful stress) can help your child perform at the best of their ability, whereas feeling very overwhelmed during the exam can make it difficult

to concentrate and think clearly. How your child calms their nerves before an exam is ultimately down to their individual preference. You could suggest:

- Adopting some breathing techniques
- Listening to music, a podcast, or a grounding meditation
- "Brain dumping" their worries and thoughts, or knowledge on the assessed subject, to help organise thoughts, declutter their mind, and help with overthinking
- Developing an exam morning routine to ensure they are prepared
- Moving or getting outside

After an exam or big assessment, it can also be a great stress reliever to chat and debrief with your child (if they want to do this). Discussing the exam and their feelings towards it can help settle any worries and provide reassurance. When they are ready, try to move on from talking about it, as it is no longer in their control. Some people really benefit from taking a break after an exam to do something nice and totally unrelated to working.

6) Contact professional support if needed

Whilst stress is normal around exam season, do not hesitate to reach out for professional support if you are concerned about your child's stress levels. You might want to encourage them to visit the GP, or signpost them to Kooth, a digital mental health platform where they can access 1:1 support, self-help resources, and many articles and podcasts.

*All names are pseudonyms used to protect anonymity.

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