



Help young people beat exam stress

by Michael Grose



Now that we are coming to the pointy end of the year many young people will start to experience the stress that comes with impending examinations. Young people respond differently to the pressure that exams present. Some will see an exam as challenge that they need to rise to; some will be nervous because they haven't done enough work; and many will experience real stress as they see exams as THAT time of the year that determines their future.

The notion of exams, particularly final-year exams, as life-defining events can be very real for students who've spent 13 years of schooling leading to this single moment in time. At least that's how many see it. So as much as possible we need to help young people take a realistic view of examinations and remind them that they shouldn't pin all their hopes on one option. As generations of young people have found, life after finishing school doesn't always take the path they imagined when they were secondary students. Parents also need to keep our options open and be flexible about potential future pathways for our young people.

However, no matter how rational parents and students manage to be, exam stress can be very real. So let's look at some ways you can help your young person manage their stress and prepare well for their coming examinations.

1. Help them study smarter

Your young person's teachers have more than likely spent time helping them to develop smart study habits so you might want to check in and follow the teachers' advice. However you can also pass on some of these smart study tips: *Minimise the clutter around workspaces. For each study period, plan what you want to cover. Use mind maps and other aids to assist memory and organise thoughts. Take regular five-minute breaks to refresh. List issues you are unsure about and ask for help at school.*

2. Develop a relaxation strategy

Your young person needs to take regular breaks from the pressure and resultant stress of pending examinations, which is code for rest and relaxation. In a perfect world your young person would have already established a healthy relaxation habit that recharges and replenishes his or her batteries but importantly allows them to take a break from the pressure and grind of work. If not, it's never too late to encourage your young person to exercise each day, relax to music or even practise meditation and mindfulness to clear their mind of mental clutter.



3. Make sure they look after themselves

Good physical health affects exam performance as well as wellbeing. So make sure your young person gets 30

minutes of exercise each day, eats regular healthy meals and takes care of their sleep. Having enough sleep is extremely important to wellbeing and exam performance. These sleep tips may help: *Set a routine of going to bed and waking up at regular times. Aim for between seven and nine hours of sleep each night. Take 10 minutes time out before bed to process the day and put thoughts aside. Drink warm mild or chamomile tea to help relaxation. Play gentle, slow music to slow your heart beat down before bed.*

4. Steer clear of stimulants

It's tempting for a young person to turn to stimulants such as cigarettes, caffeine, NoDoz, alcohol, marijuana, dexamphetamine and other drugs to lift study performance. Reinforce to your young person that these short-term fixes inevitably lead to poor performance in the longer term.

5. Make sure they don't drop out of the family

Keep your young person connected to the family at this stage by expecting them to join you for family meals, help out at home and not to spend all their time in their bedrooms. Meal times can be therapeutic as they provide the opportunity for the student to talk. They're also a good chance for parents to keep an eye on their young person's wellbeing and mental health.



And on the day of the first exam....

If you're a veteran of young people's exams then you'll probably know how a low key, matter-of-fact, the-sun-will-rise-tomorrow approach will help. If you are new to the exam game as a parent then you can help your young person to be calm and positive by taking this approach yourself. Kids of all ages take their cues from their parents, particularly so when they are under stress.

Also encourage your young person to organise what they need the night before, to focus on relaxation techniques such as deep breathing to deal with the butterflies, and to steer clear of speaking to nervous and anxious friends on the morning of the exam to minimise their own anxiety.

Make sure you also do a little reality check yourself to make sure your expectations are in line with your young person's interests and abilities so that they don't leave home with the added burden of excessive parental expectation. The pressure to succeed that many young people place on themselves is often high enough as it is.

And of course, hearing "I love you no matter what..." should be the last words that your young people hears from you before he or she heads off to their exams.



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