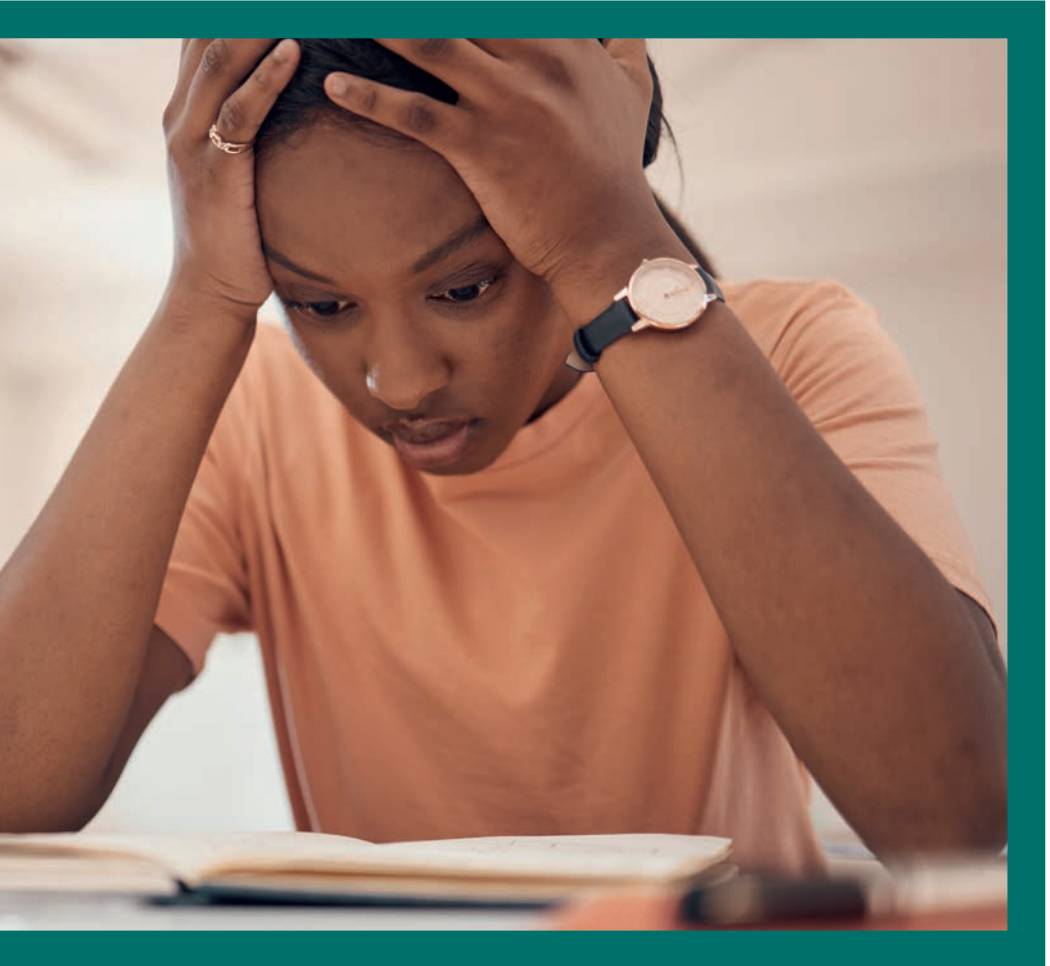


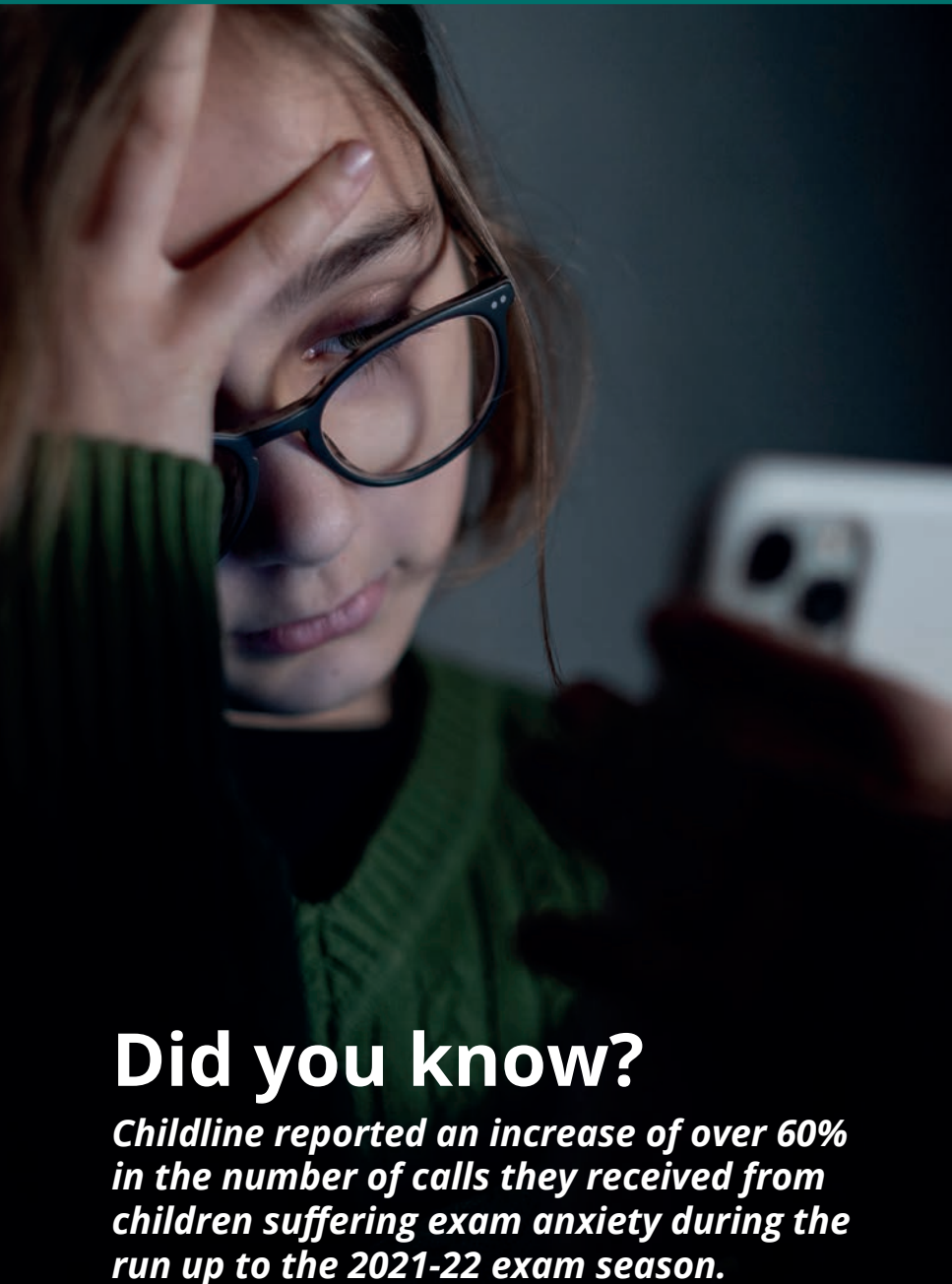


JM Mental Health

Independent Child and
Adolescent Psychiatry



**Supporting your
child during exams**



Did you know?

Childline reported an increase of over 60% in the number of calls they received from children suffering exam anxiety during the run up to the 2021-22 exam season.

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Introduction

Exam season is a stressful and worrying time for young people and their families. Preparing for and sitting exams (not forgetting waiting for the results) can make even the most well-prepared pupil feel overwhelmed and anxious.

Stress is a natural reaction to feeling under pressure or threat, of not being able to control or manage a situation. It's not necessarily a 'bad' thing. It can help us focus, meet deadlines and rise to challenges - like exams.

Nevertheless, experiencing exam stress is difficult for many. And if feelings of stress become too much to manage, this can affect a young person's mental health and can also make existing mental health problems feel harder to cope with.

It can be a rocky time but there are things that you can do to help your child get through this exam period.



Causes of exam stress

Everyone is different and we all experience stress differently. For young people facing exams, the causes of exam stress might include:

- Feeling unprepared for exams, such as leaving revision too late
- Worrying about how they will perform during the exam
- Pressure from others, like parents, carers or teachers
- Pressure to get certain grades
- Comparing themselves to others
- Worrying about the future (eg getting into university or getting a job)
- Coping with life changes, such as moving from secondary school
- Having difficulties at home or in relationships with family, friends or partners
- Having caring responsibilities for a family member
- Coping with physical or mental health problems
- Having missed out on time in school because of Covid

Signs of exam stress

Exam stress can affect how a young person feels, thinks and behaves. Fear of failure, of letting themselves or others down, doubting their abilities and comparing themselves (negatively) to others can take its toll.

Your child might experience different signs of stress before, during and after their exams. They may:

- worry a lot
- feel overwhelmed or tense
- not sleep well
- feel exhausted
- be irritable, frustrated or angry
- lose interest in food or eat more than normal
- not enjoy activities they previously enjoyed
- feel negative, bored or fed up
- feel hopeless about the future
- isolate themselves

Their stress might manifest itself physically, such as:

- headaches, dizziness and stomach pains
- feeling sick
- changes in breathing (such as breathing very quickly)
- sweating a lot

How to support your child

Nobody, especially a teenager, likes the feeling that they are being monitored but, watching for any behavioural changes (eg changed eating patterns, problems sleeping, being more irritable) will help you keep an eye on how they are coping.

Supporting your child to balance stamina and motivation during the exam season is key. Revising non-stop can be harmful. They need to understand that if they're relaxed, rested and calm, they will absorb more than when they are stressed, overtired and anxious. So even something as simple as having a tea break or taking a quick walk can help.

There is a huge benefit in having lots of de-stressing activities for your children before, and during, the exam period. For all teenagers, having something to look forward to, imminently and long-term, is important, mental and physical wellbeing has a major role in maintaining balance and focus.



Diet

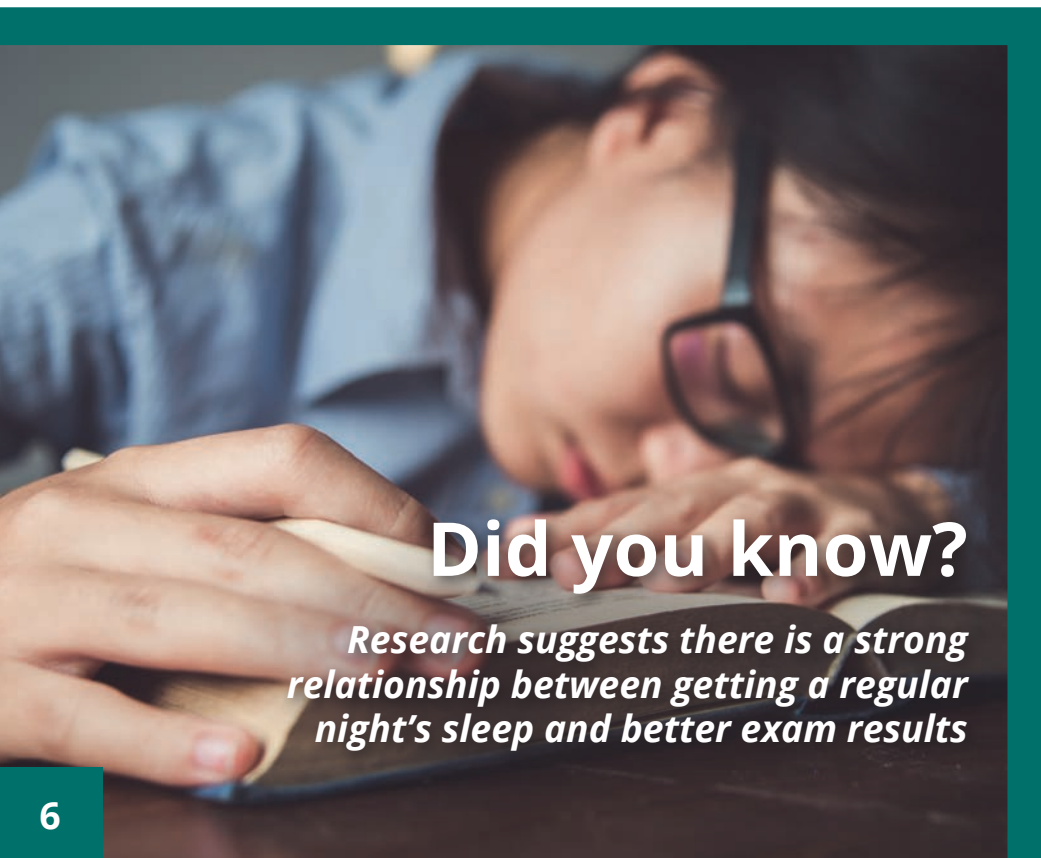
A balanced diet is crucial for your child's health during their revision as well as helping them feel well on the day of an exam:

- Eat breakfast every day: it is proven to improve concentration and memory throughout the morning
- Breakfasts that have a low GI (eg porridge, muesli, breakfast bars) are ideal because energy is released more slowly which provides a firm foundation for the rest of the day
- Avoid high-fat, high-sugar and high-caffeine food, such as sweets, chocolate, burgers and chips – they can make young people hyperactive, moody and irritable
- Avoid energy drinks as these contain large amounts of sugar and can cause sharp spikes in blood sugar levels, causing them to lose focus
- Remind them to drink enough fluids (preferably not energy drinks or lots of coffee) – dehydration can affect energy and focus

Sleep

Teenagers need a minimum of 9 hours sleep a night. Good sleep improves thinking and concentration and benefits your child far more than cramming all night before an exam.

- Allow half an hour or so for your child to wind down after studying, watching TV or using a computer before going to bed
- Relaxation techniques, such as focussing on breathing slowly or shoulder rolling, can reduce stress or help your child sleep if they are finding it difficult to unwind
- Stick to a set bed time and a fixed wake-up time every day, including weekends. Our bodies thrive on routine so having set sleep/wake times means that the brain and body are ready to go in the morning



Did you know?

Research suggests there is a strong relationship between getting a regular night's sleep and better exam results



Manage phone use

Switch off phones (and any electronic device) at night for a restful sleep. Put them away at least half an hour before bed and either switch off or put on silent to avoid checking on them through the night.

In order to work efficiently during the day, young people need to put their phone to one side to allow them to focus. Rather than trying to ban their phones outright, you could suggest:

- they put the phone in another room, work for shorter periods effectively - instead of longer periods with their phone
- alternatively, suggest they take one minute (timed) to close all websites and apps, silence their phone and set an alarm for 15 minutes. Then put the phone to one side, screen-down. When the alarm rings they get one minute to check in, then they should repeat the process. Ideally, your child should increase their focus time until they can do 30 minutes or more.

Exercise

Tempting as it is to stay indoors chained to their books and computers, it is hugely beneficial for your child to get outside at least once a day.

Exercise can help boost energy levels, clear the mind and relieve stress. It does not matter what it is – walking, cycling, swimming, football and dancing are all effective. Activities that involve other people are also very helpful.

Did you know?

A 2022 study found exercising for 20 minutes a few times a week reduces test anxiety levels; while a 2016 study found that exercise taken four hours after learning can help us retain information



Talk

It is normal to feel anxious at exam time and sometimes young people need to be reminded of that. The key is putting those nerves to positive use.

- Encourage them to talk about their concerns. Help your child face their fears, rather than avoiding them
- Reassure them that their feelings are valid and that you are there to support them
- Encourage them to practice positive self-talk and focus on their strengths and achievements. Get them to celebrate their progress and successes
- Encourage them to think about what they know and the time they've already put into studying to help them feel more confident
- Before they go in for a test or exam, be reassuring and positive. Let them know that failing is not the end of the world. If things don't go well, there will be other options and opportunities.
- After each exam, encourage your child to talk it through with you. Discuss the parts that went well rather than focusing on the questions they found difficult. Then move on and focus on the next test, rather than dwelling on things that cannot be changed.

Avoid criticism

The pressure to get high grades in exams can be overwhelming for young people and it comes from all directions: school, peers, social media influences and so on. You obviously want your child to do well but it's important to avoid adding more pressure:

- Watch your language - using words like 'you must' can have a negative effect on their motivation
- Rather than nagging about revision, ask 'What revision plan were you thinking about today?' and 'Is there anything I can do to help you get that started?'
- Encourage your child to focus on realistic goals of their own, rather than compare themselves critically to their peers or to worry about expectations other people have of them
- Let them know that their best is good enough; they are not competing with someone else's best.

Be supportive

Now is not the time to worry about untidy bedrooms or household chores not getting done. When your child is revising all day, giving them some time off from any non-urgent commitments will give them more time to focus on themselves.

- Make sure your child has somewhere comfortable to study. This could be a school or public library if there isn't a suitable space at home
- Help them to plan a realistic revision timetable, which breaks the days and subjects down into manageable chunks. This not only reduces anxiety but increases their sense of control and confidence
- If there are topics your child finds particularly difficult, make sure their revision plan targets these
- Discuss different revision techniques and help your child to identify which suit them best (eg making flashcards, using highlighters and post it notes, watching online revision videos, talking questions through). Offer support by listening to a recap or testing them on what they have learned, if they find this is helpful.
- Know their exam timetable and what equipment they will need for each exam to prevent any last minute disasters; when they feel stressed and overwhelmed, things can slip their mind





Did you know?

Music not only reduces stress, it can help with revision. Research shows that having preferred background music dramatically helps end mind wandering and keeps motivation and focus.

Other support

How the school can help you:

- Speak to your child's teacher(s) about what revision techniques they recommend
- If a particular subject is proving difficult for your child, talk to the relevant teacher and explore whether they can provide additional help
- Find out if the school has learning mentors that can help with practical steps including revision timetables.
- If your child has additional learning or developmental needs, speak to the school SENCO and establish what specialist provision they can put in place.

If your child's anxiety is spiralling and you are worried that they may be experiencing depression or developing an anxiety disorder, discuss this with your GP. Early intervention can help prevent more serious mental health problems from developing.

Useful resources...

www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/help-your-child-beat-exam-stress/

NHS Help your child beat exam stress.

www.place2be.org.uk/our-services/services-for-schools/navigating-exam-season-free-resources/

Place2Be Navigating exam season: free resources.

www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/blog/how-to-help-your-child-manage-exam-stress/

Young Minds A parents' guide to helping your child manage exam stress.

www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/school-college-and-work/school-college/homework-revision/

Childline A free, confidential service for anyone under the age of 19.

Checklist for exam day:

		Notes
1.	Get everything ready the night before	
2.	Pack a bottle of water and tissues	
3.	Have a good breakfast for energy and to feel alert	
4.	Arrive in plenty of time	
5.	Don't worry about how anyone else is feeling; we're all different	
6.	Go to the loo before the exam	
7.	Practice slow breathing before the exam starts, letting your body relax, then refocus	
8.	Plan to do something pleasant and relaxing after the exam	

Daily revision planner:

	Today's Goal
7am	
8am	
9am	
10am	
11am	
12am	
1pm	
2pm	
3pm	
4pm	
5pm	
6pm	
7pm	
8pm	
9pm	



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Trust your instincts as a parent or carer

We understand that this is a very stressful time for everyone. We want to support you and work with you to improve the situation.

We make no judgements. We listen to you and your child. We make absolutely sure we understand what is going on. Remember, you are not alone. This is a safe place. We are here to support and care for you all.

If you have concerns about your child's moods and behaviour, then you need to act sooner rather than later. Please discuss any concerns with your clinician.

Dr Julia Moss
Founder of JM Mental Health



Helping children and teenagers and their families with mental health difficulties.

www.jmmentalhealth.co.uk