How to support your pupils' mental health this exam season

School types: All · School phases: All

Help your pupils to manage exam stress this summer with these tips on practical strategies to use in school, recommended relaxation techniques and advice on how best to support parents.

Contents

1. [Take practical steps in school](https://schoolleaders.thekeysupport.com/pupils-and-parents/pupil-health-and-wellbeing/pupil-wellbeing/assessment-periods-supporting-pupils-mental-health-and-wellbeing/?utm_campaign=News+Briefing&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--887AmcOcNAp5__NKVJjGHH_LUl1Yz_J77HsuVXh3n-VaCPx3b7YKmZLa87o7JqTyAYEOn_kqoC6UJd3OQP-SOMmBuJ5JuqG9_c4Wxr9vcUEsCCrA&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=70815858&utm_content=70815858#section-0)
2. [Boost positivity](https://schoolleaders.thekeysupport.com/pupils-and-parents/pupil-health-and-wellbeing/pupil-wellbeing/assessment-periods-supporting-pupils-mental-health-and-wellbeing/?utm_campaign=News+Briefing&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--887AmcOcNAp5__NKVJjGHH_LUl1Yz_J77HsuVXh3n-VaCPx3b7YKmZLa87o7JqTyAYEOn_kqoC6UJd3OQP-SOMmBuJ5JuqG9_c4Wxr9vcUEsCCrA&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=70815858&utm_content=70815858#section-1)
3. [Teach relaxation techniques](https://schoolleaders.thekeysupport.com/pupils-and-parents/pupil-health-and-wellbeing/pupil-wellbeing/assessment-periods-supporting-pupils-mental-health-and-wellbeing/?utm_campaign=News+Briefing&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--887AmcOcNAp5__NKVJjGHH_LUl1Yz_J77HsuVXh3n-VaCPx3b7YKmZLa87o7JqTyAYEOn_kqoC6UJd3OQP-SOMmBuJ5JuqG9_c4Wxr9vcUEsCCrA&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=70815858&utm_content=70815858#section-2)
4. [Support parents](https://schoolleaders.thekeysupport.com/pupils-and-parents/pupil-health-and-wellbeing/pupil-wellbeing/assessment-periods-supporting-pupils-mental-health-and-wellbeing/?utm_campaign=News+Briefing&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--887AmcOcNAp5__NKVJjGHH_LUl1Yz_J77HsuVXh3n-VaCPx3b7YKmZLa87o7JqTyAYEOn_kqoC6UJd3OQP-SOMmBuJ5JuqG9_c4Wxr9vcUEsCCrA&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=70815858&utm_content=70815858#section-3)

This article draws together advice from Dr Fiona Pienaar, director of clinical services at mental health charity Place2Be, and our associate education experts Trevor Bailey, Brenda McHugh and Jenny Moss.

Take practical steps in school

**Understanding more about stress**

To read up on **symptoms and causes of stress**, take a look at the website of [The Mix](http://www.themix.org.uk/work-and-study/study-and-exam-tips/exam-stress-1241.html), a charity supporting young people with issues ranging from mental health to managing money.

To make sure you're aware of **which pupils need the most support**, read our article on [tools for monitoring pupils' wellbeing](https://schoolleaders.thekeysupport.com/pupils-and-parents/pupil-health-and-wellbeing/pupil-wellbeing/monitoring-pupils-wellbeing-tools/?marker=content-body).

**Direct pupils to resources that can help them**

Make pupils aware of independent sources of support and advice. Share these links and add them to your website, to equip pupils to use smart exam strategies, manage stress and make good lifestyle choices during the exam period:

[Exam stress and pressure, Childlinehttps://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/school-college-and-work/school-college/exam-stress/](https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/school-college-and-work/school-college/exam-stress/)

[Exam stress, BBC Advicehttp://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1HsY1X8ySjKBMVXPVCbP4qH/exam-stress](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1HsY1X8ySjKBMVXPVCbP4qH/exam-stress)

[Exam stress, Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)https://www.thecalmzone.net/help/get-help/exam-stress/?gclid=CJ2A4\_yIzcECFSPItAodU3wAEA](https://www.thecalmzone.net/help/get-help/exam-stress/?gclid=CJ2A4_yIzcECFSPItAodU3wAEA)

[Exam stress, Student Mindshttp://www.studentminds.org.uk/examstress.html](http://www.studentminds.org.uk/examstress.html)

Break exam/revision workload into manageable chunks

Work with pupils to do this, or model how to create a plan independently. Encourage pupils to set aside some dedicated time for relaxing too.

Provide a calm space

Allocate a room in school that pupils can use to relax during exam periods.

Tell students where stress comes from

Put aside an assembly or personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education session to go into more detail about managing stress.

Talk about stress as a physical symptom - this normalises it, which can make it feel less overwhelming. Explain that when stress reaches a certain intensity, it can lead to heightened physical and psychological awareness. This normally enables us to perform well under pressure, but it can overreact or fail to reset properly and this can make us feel nervous.

**Be a good example**

Talk openly about how you cope with your own stressful situations, so pupils have a positive role model for managing their emotions and time. This might include having a relaxing bath, or writing a week-by-week plan to manage your workload.

**Look at what other schools do**

[The Key’s 2017 State of Education survey](https://stateofed.thekeysupport.com/#quote), completed by more than 1,000 of our school leader members, found that schools are:

* Running revision groups during assessment periods
* Organising peer-mentoring activities
* Nominating staff as mentors to support pupils
* Offering counselling services

**Help pupils unwind after exams**

For primary school pupils, run wind-down activities such as art or sport

With older pupils, discourage them from discussing questions in great detail

Boost positivity

Balance your approach between boosting self-esteem and enabling pupils to be practical about their preparations.

"You are more than your results"

If a pupil is struggling, talk about what they are good at and enjoy. While exam results are important and everyone wants pupils to do the best they can, [boosting pupils' self-esteem](https://schoolleaders.thekeysupport.com/pupils-and-parents/pupil-health-and-wellbeing/pupil-wellbeing/boosting-children2019s-self-esteem/?marker=content-body) will help them to feel good, and achieve their best.

**Address negative thinking**

A [factsheet on supporting pupils with exam stress](http://www.clapton.hackney.sch.uk/parents/student-wellbeing/managing-exam-stress/), from Clapton Girls' Academy, suggests using this technique to help overcome negative thinking:

Identify negative thoughts, and how these thoughts make the pupil feel

Think about how these thoughts and feelings link to behaviours and physical symptoms

Go back to the original thought and "test the reality" by suggesting different ways of thinking about the situation

**Take a practical and realistic approach**

Emphasise to pupils that:

* They can only do their best in exams
* They will be able to do their best if they have prepared well

Encourage pupils to support one another

The chances are that pupils in the same class or year group are feeling exactly the same way about exams, so if pupils talk to one another they'll feel less isolated.

**Teach relaxation techniques**

**Breathing exercise**

Guide students through slow, deep breathing.

You can count out loud to guide the speed of their breathing. The in-breath should be shorter than the out-breath; try counting in for 3 and out for 5.

This often works best in groups rather than as a whole class.

**Guided imagery**

Ask pupils to close their eyes and think about a safe place they have been where they have felt totally relaxed.

Tell them to identify details about what the place looks and feels like, and focus on these, while breathing calmly.

This practice is sometimes used as part of [mindfulness](https://schoolleaders.thekeysupport.com/pupils-and-parents/pupil-health-and-wellbeing/pupil-wellbeing/implementing-mindfulness-schools/?marker=content-body).

**Support parents**

Provide wellbeing guidance

* When a parent is anxious about their child's exams, the child is more likely to become stressed.
* Run a workshop, or update your school website or newsletter, to include guidance for parents on:
* Talking about exams – what to say, and what not to say, when talking to their child
* Lifestyle tips – you could cover tips about the right approach to diet, exercise and sleep
* Keeping home life calm – managing sibling behaviour is a common issue
* Maintaining wellbeing during times of stress – this could be delivered by someone with training in psychology
* You could also consider setting up a peer-mentoring group for parents, or a school helpline, to help with implementing these strategies.

The NHS has published [information for parents](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/coping-with-exam-stress/) on supporting their child during exams, which you could use in your workshop, or refer parents to. This also includes information about when anxiety reaches the level where parents should take their child to a GP.

**Run an information session on exams**

Host an information session to explain to parents how you'll run the exams and what the results mean. (You could incorporate this in sessions explaining how the assessment system works.)

To help you plan, read our articles on providing information to parents about [Key Stage (KS) 1 and KS2 SATs results](https://schoolleaders.thekeysupport.com/pupils-and-parents/engaging-parents-and-carers/information-and-guidance-for-parents/primary-scaled-scored-information-parents/?marker=content-body) and [progress 8](https://schoolleaders.thekeysupport.com/pupils-and-parents/engaging-parents-and-carers/information-and-guidance-for-parents/progress-8-information-parents/?marker=content-body).

**Sources**

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