

Teacher & Learner guide

SUPPORTING LEARNERS WITH EXAM STRESS



PAIGE HARRISON



Exam season is here, and I understand you may have some students who are feeling anxious or just uneasy about what's ahead. Remember though, it's not just students who get stressed, it's teachers too.

Acknowledging that this is a stressful time for everyone concerned is the first step; learning how to manage and deal with the stress is the next.

To help during this challenging time, I've put together a short guide with tips and resources, to help yourselves and your learners to keep calm during the exam period.

Apologies in advance that the teacher guide is quite text heavy!

They may forget what you said but they will not
forget how you made them feel.

Advice to Keep Your Students Calm and Focused as Exam Season Approaches

Stress may start to creep upon your students and yourselves as you prepare for their exams and during the exam period. With emphasis put on good scores, students start to feel the pressure, and this can have a negative effect on their study and test-taking skills, even if they worked hard all year long.

As a teacher, you give your students the skills and knowledge they need to be able to test successfully, however, it's helpful to keep them calm and focused during this time to.

Display Model Behaviour

Students will look to you and how you act regularly. It is important to stay positive and relaxed (as much as you can) during, what feels, like a manic time. So, it's important you bring that positive energy into the classroom with you. To help keep your fuel tank full, you need to ensure you're prioritising your own needs. When you're feeling good, you emulate that to your students, and having positive energy around them at a time that is very difficult will be extremely helpful for them and you (see 12 stress relief tips for teachers to support you with this).

**PUT ON
YOUR
OWN
OXYGEN
MASK
FIRST.**

Teach Time Management Skills



Now is the perfect time to discuss the importance of time management, as students can feel overwhelmed with all the work involved this time of year. Give time to work on things during class so their nights aren't filled with homework and studying but explain that they should use the time wisely to work on projects to help reduce homework load. An idea could be to encourage learners to create a schedule (with breaks included!) to help them stay focused on one task at a time (a schedule for students is attached to this learner guide to use as an example).

Talk About Healthy Habits

Establishing healthy habits allows the mind to focus better, so tell your students how to get into the habit of going to bed at a decent hour to help our minds rest and how a healthy diet can also boost our brain function and mood (sleep diary included in the learner guide). Breakfast is especially important in order to fuel our bodies to take on the day. Consider having some fruit in the classroom to snack on first thing and even have a snack with your students to encourage them (this goes back to being a model for your students).



Give yourself some credit for how far you've come.

Encourage Students to Speak Up

It's a sad reality that many students don't feel like they can speak up about how they're feeling during this stressful time. Not speaking up about how you're feeling can have a negative effect and cause many to feel even worse about the situation, so let your students know that it's ok to talk about their struggles.

Let them know they can come speak to you privately, but you can also open up a forum discussion for everyone to share together how they are feeling about exam time (a great site to support you with this is Padlet). If you see a student who may particularly need a bit of encouragement, then don't wait for them to come to you; have a conversation with them about their feelings. It may help them, but they also may not want to talk about it at all. It is just good to know that there is someone there who cares and wants the best for them.

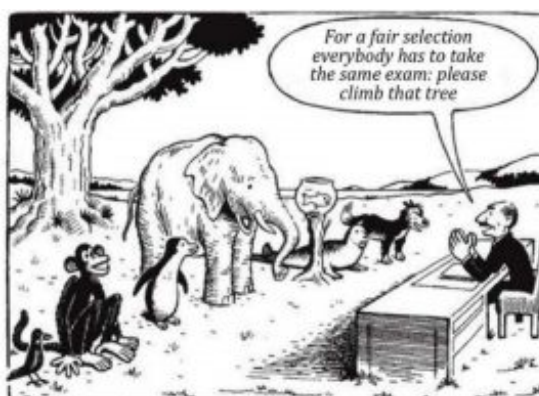


Don't Add to the Pressure

Students know how important exams are but repeating it will only add to the pressure. They are most likely already putting the pressure on themselves about it and may be getting extra stress from home about it too. It's sometimes not helpful to keep repeating about the importance of the exam, because they are already fully aware of this. If you can, make lessons leading up to the exams fun and light-hearted to help reduce stress. Try not to make a big deal out of mistakes as doing so will only make them feel worse, and could trigger feelings such as them 'not feeling good enough,' or increase the likelihood of them becoming unmotivated and have feelings of helplessness.



An image I love to use when working with clients is the one to the right, especially around exam times. More often than not, students who feel 'stupid,' or that they 'won't achieve nothing in life,' may have a history of not doing well academically or have been told regularly that they make mistakes and are not achieving what they should; or, it could be the complete opposite but still for that person this could bring up similar themes in how they're feeling. The image shows that whatever grade they achieve in their exam should not define them as a person, and just because they struggle in one area does not mean they cannot excel in another. It's raising awareness that everyone is different and unique in how they learn and perform. Not one size fits all.



Our Education System

"Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

- Albert Einstein

Don't forget to celebrate the small wins.

12 stress relief tips for teachers

1. Remember you're doing a good job

If the wellbeing and futures of pupils are the heart of what you're doing then you're doing a good job. Teacher guilt can form a large part of teacher stress. 'That lesson didn't go how I wanted it to.' 'I didn't deal with that situation in the best way possible.' 'I should be marking right now.' Sound familiar?

The fact that you're even having these reflections shows how much you care, but you're still human and it's ok for things not to go as you'd hoped. It's also ok to give yourself permission to take time off during evenings and on weekends. You can only do what you can do which includes self-preservation of your mental health.

2. Take care of your physical health

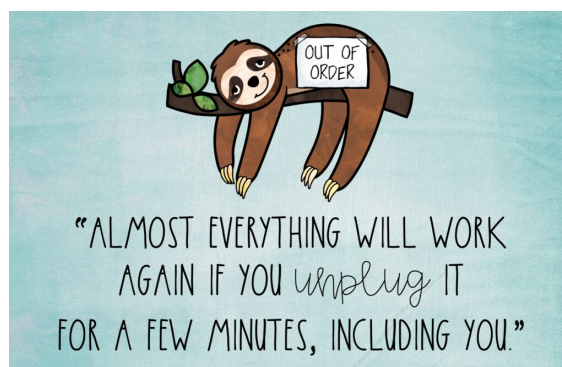
This doesn't mean hitting the gym every day or running miles and miles, unless that works for you. Find activities that you enjoy and make time for them. Head outdoors on the weekends and explore your local area.

Exercise is proven to be one of the very best stress relievers there is, reducing stress hormones and generally controlling your mood better. Dust off those running shoes or walking boots and get out there!

3. Try mindfulness

You don't need to commit lots of time to sessions of mindfulness, but that doesn't make it an easy practice. It requires a lot of concentration and when your mind is on Maths marking, English lesson planning etc. that can be a real challenge.

There are many benefits to mindfulness; for time-poor teachers, the biggest benefit is that it can be done anywhere, at any time. Next time you've had a stressful lesson and find yourself with an empty classroom and 5 minutes, have a go at a mindfulness exercise, or use the resource provided in this guide.



4. Two stars and no wish

It can be so tough to focus on the positive, but if you take the time to look for it by giving yourself two stars each day, you might see a change in your mindset. Consider writing down two things that went well; two things you were grateful for; or two things you're proud of. Once you make yourself responsible for writing two positive things down a day, you will start to notice and look for these things.



5. Sleep!

Alongside exercise and an improved diet (more on that next), getting a good night's sleep is another one of the best ways to reduce stress in the classroom or around exam times.

The science behind it, shows that prolonged stress is correlated with hyperactivity, decreased sleep duration and reduced Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep – which is basically the deep sleep that's so important for you to recharge your batteries.

There are plenty of things you can do to aid better sleep – exercise, turning off your tech and eating well are just three. Whatever you need to do, it could be the key to reducing your overall stress levels.

6. Eat the right foods, and avoid the wrong ones

Things like improving your diet, sleep and exercising might not be specific to teaching, but they are universal tenants of stress relief that will help anyone to reduce the amount of stress in their lives.

Obviously, drinking coffee or alcohol and eating stodgy, carb-filled meals before bed are a definite no. In general, research suggests you should eat less saturated fats and sugar and eat more fibre.

In general, a healthy diet leads to a healthy mind and body. Throw in some exercise and a good night's rest, and you've got a recipe for some seriously reduced stress levels.

7. Don't be afraid to talk about it

Sometimes, all it takes is a sounding board or pair of ears to listen to how your day has gone. Bottling up your problems and pushing them downwards is certain to lead to prolonged stress, so don't be afraid to chat through your issues with colleagues.

Hopefully, your workplace and team are encouraging that dialogue and doing their best to help. If nothing else, a conversation about the stress you're currently under might lead to someone else chipping in to help.



Remember you're a human first, teacher second.

8. Work smarter, not harder

It's another tip that could quite easily apply to 99% of the workforce, but it applies to few professions more than teaching. Teachers have, frankly, a mountain of things to do, so trying to introduce some working hacks could make all the difference.

Try to mix up how you work through the day in one or a few of these ways:

Draw up to-do lists: A visual representation of your workload can help break tasks down step-by-step. It leads to a great feeling as you tick off each item and see that workload reduce.

Prioritise: Realistically, you just aren't going to get everything done. Put the things that are most important you put at the top, and that way you'll be more likely to dedicate some time to them. You could even incorporate your family life and interests into this – helping you put home life before work life when you need to.

Set realistic targets: If you turn up for work every day thinking you'll plan a handful of lessons, mark a load of papers and get around to replying to all those emails, it can be demoralising when you fail to tick them all off. Be realistic. Things get in the way and you aren't a productivity machine. Set some targets you can achieve, and you'll feel better when you nail it.



9. Try some new apps

In the search for better wellbeing? Why not try some of the many apps available from smartphone's app store?

You might have already heard of some of the most helpful. Headspace and Calm are great for mindfulness and meditation. Many people use them to relax after a stressful day in the hope of a good night's rest.



10. Remember what you enjoy most about teaching

When things are really getting you down, it's important to remember exactly why you got into teaching in the first place. Teaching is one of the most fulfilling professions out there. Make sure you take the time to appreciate the joys of the job.

Plus, is there something specific about the role that you particularly enjoy? If so, put some time aside every month to make sure you're doing it. Sometimes that little reminder is all you need.



11. Sometimes, say no

It's fantastic how hard-working, noble and dedicated teachers are in their efforts to make a brighter future for their class. But sometimes, we all need to take a step back and think of the bigger picture. Your mental health should always be paramount. We like to do as much as we can to help people out, but sometimes you have to take the 'selfish' route and simply say – no.

You can be
a good person
with a kind heart
and still say no

12. Ask around, try and use what works for you

Wellbeing is such a hot topic that it's hard to see the wood for the trees when it comes to what actually helps. The truth is, what works for one might not work for another. But it's always worth trying out.

Ask your friends and colleagues their tips for stress relief and have a go. Daily yoga, reading, a bath, reading in the bath, whatever works for you. Try to build up a reserve of techniques to relieve stress levels so that when things have really gotten on top of you, there are a few things you can try out.



An empty tank
will take you exactly
NOWHERE.
Take time to refuel.

Guided imagery for creating a safe space

Use the guided imagery below to create a safe place. You may create this on your own or ask a friend or colleague to read it to you.

1. Read through the script and decide if it sounds ok to you.
2. Make a recording of the script. (It is much easier to relax if you are listening to your voice or the voice of a safe friend rather than trying to remember what was written.)
3. As you record, remember to slow down and lower your natural speaking voice. Leave pauses at the ends of phrases and sentences. Leave longer pauses where you are imagining doing something, such as standing under a waterfall. Talk in as soothing a voice. If you want background music in the recording, choose something that is very soothing and won't change beat, tempo, or pitch. Be sure that the music won't stop in the middle of the recording.
4. It will take about 20 minutes to record the imagery. Turn off the phone and be sure that you have a safe and quiet place to record. Remember: speak slowly and pause frequently, at least at the end of each phrase.
5. After you have recorded the imagery, practice the visualization several times, until the pattern becomes clear in your mind and your body responds automatically. If, at any time, you feel unsafe, open your eyes, stop the imagery, and regroup yourself in today. Get up and do a nurturing activity. Call someone on the telephone and tell them what is happening. You are safe and you have control today.
6. After you have practiced the visualization, you can follow the abbreviated version when you are feeling the need to go into safety. Sit or lie down in your usual position for the visualization. Allow your body and mind to remember what to do. Begin to breathe as you do in your safe place, and take yourself to your safe place

Short version of guided imagery.

Begin to breathe in the safety and peace. Breathe out the fear. And breathe in the safety and peace. And breathe out the fear. Each time you breathe in, relax your body. And each time you exhale, let go of tension. Breathe in relaxation. Breathe out tension. With each breath, count from five to one.... If you need more than that, begin at seven or ten, counting to one.... Make each breath a number. Each exhale letting go. As you are counting, as you are breathing, allow the image of safety to fill your mind.... You are there, in safety, in peace. No one can be there with you without your permission. Focus only on breathing, on counting, on imagining your safe place once again. Allow your vision to come alive as you breathe. Remember and focus on all the images in your safe place.... Breathe in the peace and the safety. Breathe out the fear. Allow your senses to come alive again in this place. Remember how it looks. Remember all the detail -- the color of the sky, the grass or trees or sand or water.... Remember your place of safety and how very beautiful it is.... As you continue breathing in safety and breathing out fear, remember the sounds of your safe place.... Remember how beautiful it smells.... Remember the sights -- glance around at your house or structure of safe shelter, and see your waterfall or pool of healing water.... And over there, see your garden.... And remember, remember the beauty and the peace and the safety.... Sit as long as you need to, breathing in safety and peace. Breathing out fear, as long as you need to.... Do whatever else you need to do in your place of safety. Spend as long as you like.... And when you are ready, simply count yourself out by counting from one to five. And as you leave the place of safety, bring with you the knowing that you are safe, you are at peace, and everything is going to be all right.

Learner guide

DEALING WITH EXAM STRESS



PAIGE HARRISON

Finding your exam calm

It's exam season, and you've got a million things rushing through your mind. Your friends, family or teachers are likely saying "it will be fine, just try and relax". But all you're thinking is, "how can I relax? This is my future!" I get it, 100%. Here are some tried and tested techniques to help you manage any feelings of anxiety or nervousness during your exam times.

1. Give yourself a break

It's very easy to burnout during exam time, so pay close attention to what your mind and body need. This is key to keeping those nerves at bay. Remember, exam success does not define you as a person. Everybody copes differently, and there is far more to who you are than how well you respond to exam pressure.

- Make it your priority to unwind after each exam. Whatever you choose, the aim is to give your brain some respite, preventing you from fixating on your exam performance.
- On the run up to each exam, ensure to have frequent breaks during your revision periods. We can only concentrate effectively for 30-45 minutes at a time, so staying at your desk all day will be counterproductive.
- Don't cut out all the enjoyment in your life. It's tempting to knuckle down and 'focus', leaving no time for fun or distractions, but you will struggle to maintain that focus if you feel unfulfilled in other areas of your life.

2. Eat, sleep and exercise well

Let's pull the plug on surviving on super noodles and monster energy drinks, getting minimal amounts of movement and staying up all night revising. Cutting out these unhealthy habits will minimise stress and anxiety, and your body will thank you in the long run.

- Make sure to get a minimum of seven hours of sleep a night. If you struggle to get to sleep, create an evening routine that helps you to wind down and, more importantly, stay away from blue light devices. They only make it harder!
- Keep active. Exercising is one of the quickest and most effective ways to destress; even a short walk will do. Fresh air will clear your head and exposure to the sunlight will release serotonin in your brain, boosting your mood and helping you feel calmer and more focused.
- Avoid highs and lows of energy by eating slow-release foods such as multi-grain bread, oat porridge, nuts and vegetables. Try to reduce your intake of caffeine and junk food too. They may provide a quick energy boost, but their effects are short lived and can leave you feeling sluggish. Not ideal when you need to bring your A-game to the exam room.

3. Get ready and feel organised

It's normal to feel uneasy the night before the exam but try not to cram information in. Have one last read over your revision notes and then get your things ready so you feel more relaxed and prepared in the morning.

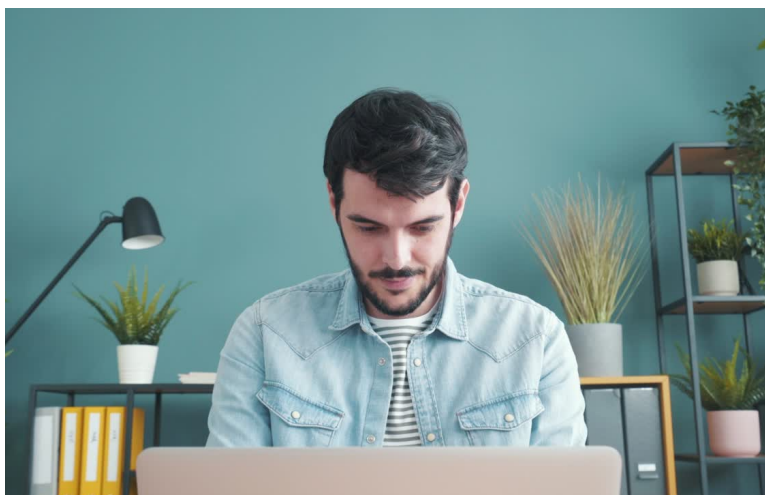
- Check your exam details e.g. location, time and what equipment is required.
- If you have to travel to an exam location, schedule and plan your route, leaving plenty of time for parking, public transport etc.
- Prepare everything you need for the exam: water, student ID and any equipment and medication you might need.

4. Believe in yourself

When we're faced with challenges, we often forget to look back at how we've come and how much we've already achieved. Making time for reflection before each exam will help to boost your confidence.

If you start having negative thoughts, try to replace them with positive ones. For example, instead of thinking "I'm a failure if I don't get a 4 for my English exam," think, "whatever happens, I will be proud of my efforts and value how much I've already achieved."

You're capable of more than you know. You've got this.



Relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, are a fundamental part of stress management. These techniques trigger the relaxation response, which counters the body's stress response.

- Sit in a comfortable chair (or lie on the floor, or on a bed).
- Ensure you will not be disturbed by other noises.
- If you become aware of sounds - just try to ignore them and let them leave your mind just as soon as they enter.
- Make sure the whole of your body is comfortably supported - including your arms, head and feet. (Rest your arms on the arms of the chair, with your feet flat on the floor)
- Close your eyes. Feel the bed or chair supporting your whole body - your legs, your arms, your head.
- If you can feel any tension, begin to let it go.
- Take 2 slow and deep breaths, and let the tension begin to flow out.
- Become aware of your head - notice how your forehead feels.
- Let any tension go and feel your forehead become smooth and wide.
- Let any tension go from around your eyes, your mouth, your cheeks and your jaw. Let your teeth part slightly and feel the tension go.
- Now focus on your neck - let the chair take the weight of your head and feel your neck relax. Now your head is feeling heavy and floppy. Let your shoulders lower gently down. Your shoulders are wider, your neck is longer.
- Notice how your body feels as you begin to relax.
- Be aware of your arms and your hands. Let them sink down into the chair. Now they are feeling heavy and limp.
- Think about your back, from your neck to your hips. Let the tension go and feel yourself sinking down into the chair. Let your hips, your legs and your feet relax and roll outwards. Notice the feeling of relaxation taking over.
- Think about your breathing - your abdomen gently rising and falling as you breathe.
- Let your next breath be a little deeper, a little slower...
- Now, you are feeling completely relaxed and heavy.
- Lie still and concentrate on slow, rhythmic breathing.
- When you want to, count back from 5 to 1 and open your eyes.
- Wiggle your fingers and toes, breathe deeply and stretch.
- Pause before gently rising.



Take time to rest,
reflect and reset.

| Situation | Emotions / Moods (rate 0 – 100%) | Physical sensations | Unhelpful Thoughts / Images | Alternative / realistic thought More balanced perspective | What I did / What I could do / Defusion technique / What's the best response? Re-rate Emotion 0-100% |
|---|---|---|--|--|--|
| <p>What happened? Where? When? Who with? How?</p> | <p>What emotion did I feel at that time? What else? How intense was it?</p> | <p>What did I notice in my body? Where did I feel it?</p> | <p>What went through my mind? What disturbed me? What did those thoughts/images/memories mean to me, or say about me or the situation? What am I responding to? What 'button' is this pressing for me? What would be the worst thing about that, or that could happen?</p> | <p>STOPP! Take a breath.... Is this fact or opinion? What would someone else say about this situation? What's the bigger picture? Is there another way of seeing it? What advice would I give someone else? Is my reaction in proportion to the actual event? Is this really as important as it seems?</p> | <p>What could I do differently? What would be more effective? Do what works! Act wisely. What will be most helpful for me or the situation? What will the consequences be?</p> |

Stress is caused by our thoughts about a situation, not by the situation itself. Two people in the exact same situation might have different levels of stress (or no stress at all), just because of how they think about it. Often, the thoughts that cause stress are irrational or exaggerated, but we respond to them as if they are factual. Use the 6 column thought record above to help you challenge some of those unhelpful thoughts.

Weekly Schedule

Create a schedule of activities that will lead you to having more positive experiences in your day. If you are feeling low and unmotivated, it can be very difficult to focus on revising for your exams or managing other tasks. If this is the case, start with simple goals, that are achievable.

| DAY | MORNING | AFTERNOON | EVENING |
|------------------|--|--|--|
| <i>Example</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Wake by 8 AM</i> • <i>Eat a full breakfast</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Go for a 15 minute walk</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Call a friend</i> • <i>Practice guitar</i> |
| Monday | | | |
| Tuesday | | | |
| Wednesday | | | |
| Thursday | | | |
| Friday | | | |
| Saturday | | | |
| Sunday | | | |

Positive Journal

Every day brings a combination of good and bad experiences. Unfortunately, the human brain tends to focus more heavily on the bad experiences, while forgetting or discounting the good experiences. For example, we're more likely to remember one awkward social interaction over hundreds of normal ones.

Making a point to recognise positive experiences - no matter how small - can help to improve your mood. Practice by recording three positive events at the end of each day.

| Monday |
|--------|
| 1 |
| 2 |
| 3 |

| Tuesday |
|---------|
| 1 |
| 2 |
| 3 |

| Wednesday |
|-----------|
| 1 |
| 2 |
| 3 |

and so on...

Daily Sleep Diary

Complete the diary each morning ("Day 1" will be your first morning). Don't worry too much about giving exact answers, an estimate will do.

| | | Day 1 | Day 2 | Day 3 | Day 4 | Day 5 | Day 6 | Day 7 |
|---|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | Enter the Weekday (Mon, Tues, Wed, etc.) | | | | | | | |
| 1 | At what time did you go to bed last night? | | | | | | | |
| 2 | After settling down, how long did it take you to fall asleep? | | | | | | | |
| 3 | After falling asleep, about how many times did you wake up in the night? | | | | | | | |
| 4 | After falling asleep, for how long were you awake during the night <u>in total</u> ? | | | | | | | |
| 5 | At what time did you finally wake up? | | | | | | | |
| 6 | At what time did you get up? | | | | | | | |
| 7 | How long did you spend in bed last night (from first getting in, to finally getting up) | | | | | | | |
| 8 | How would you rate the <u>quality</u> of your sleep last night? | | | | | | | |
| | 1 2 3 4 5 | | | | | | | |
| | V. Poor V. Good | | | | | | | |