



How to Support your Child's Wellbeing & Mental Health

What's Really Happening When We Are Stressed?

The best way to minimise stress and anxiety for students is to understand what it is and how we can combat it. Everyone has experienced some form of stress in their lives, but how often do we stop to analyse its symptoms and its effect on the body? Understanding and being prepared for the physical and emotional signs of stress can stop students from getting overwhelmed in new situations. It really does all come down to a bit of basic biology...



"Many students show physical signs of stress right before assessments as their fight or flight response kicks in with their adrenaline - their hands might shake, their heart might be beating faster. By understanding what is happening biologically, you are better equipped to take yourself through some logistical steps or techniques to regain control and be able to focus in the assessment. Learning breathing exercises, meditating and practicing yoga can all help to calm these nerves and there are loads of YouTube videos students can watch and learn from." – Karen Collins, Lead Science Associate for PiXL

Neurological development of young adults

Teenagers are going through monumental changes in most aspects of their lives during the time when they're also expected to sit their GCSEs. With this in mind, knowing what is physically changing in your child's brain can be really illuminating for parents.



"Important changes are taking place during the teenage years. Hormonal changes and changes in different parts of the brain are prompting complete transformations in their lives before academic, family or social pressures even get a look-in. These changes are taking place in the limbic system, which is responsible for seeking pleasure and rewards, emotional responses and sleep, as well as in the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for decision making, organising, planning and controlling impulses. Knowing and recognising that these changes are going on makes you realise just how much neurological development is happening during these years and how unsettled teenage life really is." – Madeleine Inkin, psychotherapist and co-founder of Tassomai

Parental Expectations

Parental expectations can be a double-edged sword: you want to motivate them and help them succeed, but you may end up doing the opposite if you don't strike the right balance. Students are bombarded with information about assessments and revision throughout their time at school and it is easy to go along with this rhetoric without thinking about what is actually achievable and specific to your child's abilities.

That isn't to say that you can't encourage them to aim for higher grades, but keeping a healthy perspective on what they as an individual are academically capable of ensures that they will strive to perform to the best of their ability, rather than an arbitrary standard.

Here's what some of our specialists have to say about keeping a level approach:

"Parents have a tricky balancing act to perform, as over involvement can lead to additional pressure for students and sometimes unrealistic expectations, and under involvement can lead to students switching off and not performing as well as they could. As a parent you would aim for that goldilocks position where parents are encouraging, interested and supportive." – Wendy Finan, Senior Secondary Mathematics Teaching and Learning Consultant

"When parental expectations are not met and parents feel disappointed, developing children and teenagers will internalise a sense of themselves as being a disappointment, which will nurture low self-esteem and shame. When what is expected of them by the parent isn't within their ability, parental disappointment can be devastating. Be child led and be honest about their unique interests, talents, and temperament. Place your child at the centre of your parental observation and concern - this will inform you of any necessary parental expectations." – Madeleine Inkin, psychotherapist and co-founder of Tassomai



Read more from Madeleine Inkin about the teenage brain and parental expectations on the [Tassomai blog](#).

Practical Tips to Support Your Child

Do

- **Start the conversation!** Ask them questions about how they're feeling. If they're not comfortable sharing, try opening up about any struggles you've faced in the past. Vulnerability is contagious!
- Encourage them to **exercise and get some fresh air** each day, a change in surrounding can do wonders for shifting a negative mindset.
- **Act early!** If you think they are struggling, don't sweep it under the rug. Even if you're not sure of the best way to help, it's always better to address any underlying issues or unhappiness as soon as it arises.
- **Educate yourself** on mental health and the best ways to support your child if they are struggling. [Young Minds](#) has great resources for parents and carers who want to feel a bit more informed.
- Work with your child to try and set up a sustainable routine around GCSE preparation, even if it's initially 15 minutes each day. The confidence-building power of daily routine is transformative and can **prevent performance stress** before it starts.

Don't

- Stop them from seeing friends during revision time, it's good to break up the work with healthy social situations and **everyone needs some downtime**.
- **Bottle up your concerns!** Talk to your child if you're worried about their stress levels and see what you can do to help - it might be simpler than you think.
- **Try to take everything on yourself** - it's really important to remind yourself that you are not a professional and there may come a time when your child needs more than just your personal support. This is very hard, especially for parents, as our natural instinct is always to try and 'rescue' someone we care about from situations that are hurting them, but we can't do everything ourselves, nor are we qualified to.
- **Allow stress to become sickness.** Intervene before your child has a chance to get overwhelmed - it's all too easy for everyday stress over GCSEs to tip into something more serious, so don't let a fixable situation get worse than it needs to.
- Let your child mistake a single test score for a **final assessment of their potential**. Instead encourage them to focus on how their work is developing, what they want to improve next, and on the positive incremental changes over time.



Building Resilience

GCSEs require students to have a level of mental resilience against the stresses and strains they are bombarded with, but they are rarely taught how they can develop these skills. Learning to pick yourself back up again after a failure doesn't always come naturally - it's its own kind of art form and requires practice just like everything else, without it students are much more likely to burnout and get overwhelmed.

"When I look back at my preparation for GCSEs, I remember being much happier to pretend that I knew the answer rather than admitting that I was struggling. I never had the courage to ask for help because I was worried about being a failure and the judgements that would follow. Encouraging children to identify their weaknesses and then ask for help is one of the golden rules for resilience. This skill will not only improve results but will be a key cog in resilience building for the future."

"One of the dangers is that children become so focused on their exams that they don't think about anything else. This leads to fatigue, stress and actions that lack resilience. Encouraging children to take time away from revision helps to get them out of the exam bubble and provides a balance that will inspire a more resilient approach to their learning. The emphasis on good food, exercise and sleep will further enhance this resilient mindset." – Sam Clark, teacher and author of 'What They Don't Teach You in School'

Read more about Sam Clark's top tips for building resilience on the [Tassomai blog](#).

Positive Mental Attitude

Mastering this kind of academic resilience will help students identify when they are getting overwhelmed, a skill which can easily be transferred into other aspects of their lives:

“Getting stuck is a good thing! Some of the best learning you can do is learning from your mistakes. This process helps improve self-analysis and to build confidence over time through self-checking.” – Kit Bett-Masters, Director of Learning Science and YouTuber at [Gorilla Physics](#)

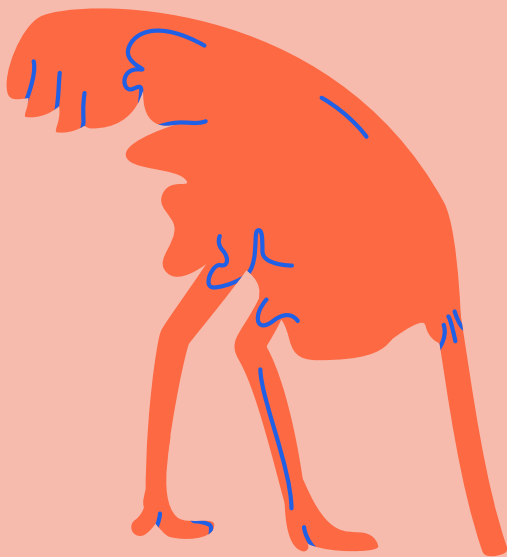
“It's really important that parents reinforce the idea of keeping going and building resilience in their work, so that students learn to carry on even when they're finding something tricky. Working hard will always lead to progress, it's not always about getting the top grades.” – Wendy Finan, Senior Secondary Mathematics Teaching and Learning Consultant

“The best piece of advice I can give parents and students alike is to remember that you can only do the best you can and not to overthink. I'm so pleased that students have such amazing role models like Simone Biles to look up to these days. It is reassuring for students to know that stress gets to everyone and it doesn't undermine your strength - it's perfectly natural to ask for a break when you need one.” – Karen Collins, Lead Science Associate for PiXL



Is Your Child Suffering from Exam Stress? How to spot the Signs

Students preparing for exams often display very similar characteristics and it is good for parents to be aware of a few classic archetypes of exam-stressed children. Be sure to look out for the signs!



The Ostrich

The ostrich is that student who, at the mere mention of their exams - or their revision - buries their head in the sand. They could be quite obvious in this behaviour - "I don't want to talk about it" - or it might be subtler, finding an excuse to get out of the room and avoid the topic. Waste no time in confronting this behaviour and making a plan together, because the very act of avoidance means that the revision work will pile up and the stress will increase.

The Porcupine

Similar to the ostrich in many respects, but rather than avoid the conversation, the porcupine might become rather spikey and start shaking their quills. The reasons are quite similar, and the approach, likewise requires calm, careful conversation and a structured plan to work together to remove the fear of the exams.



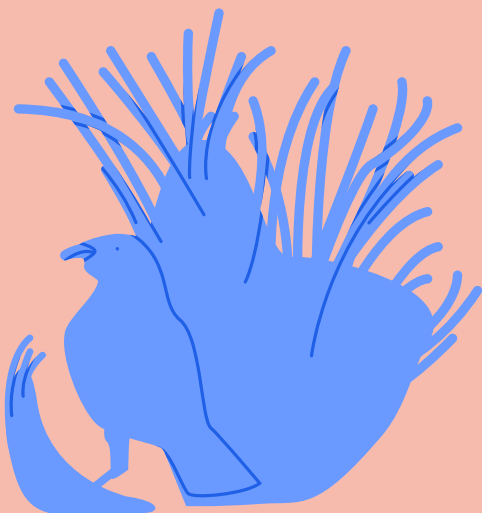


The Meerkat

You might think you've been fortunate if your child is the Meerkat: super busy, extremely diligent, revising late and requesting extra practice papers from the teacher. But this behaviour may indicate a lack of confidence and a tendency to worry. Talk to your child to make sure they're keeping things in perspective and limit the revision schedule in order to allow time for R&R.

The Lion

A tendency of higher-achievers - the Lion is that child who seems to have it all under control, but spending an inordinate amount of time lying around. If they're behaving as though the exams present no problems - to the point perhaps of arrogance or laziness - then it's time for a conversation. Are they hiding any anxiety and feeling like they can't ask for help, or don't know how to?



The Bower Bird

A classic behaviour, not unlike the Meerkat. The Bower Bird (who spends large parts of its life decorating its nest) lends its name nicely to the type of student who keeps themselves terribly busy focusing on superficial tasks like colouring in notes or organising files and revision plans. If you are the parent of a Bower Bird, then talk to them, constructively, about their aims for each revision session, and check in with them regularly to see how much they have achieved.

Mental Health Resources

[SHOUT85258](#)

SHOUT85258 is a text message based organisation that gives young people an accessible way of asking for help. Think of it as the texting version of the Samaritans. Even if your child isn't currently struggling, suggesting they save the number to their contacts will let them know that you're thinking of them, without smothering them.

[Samaritans](#)

Samaritans is a registered charity aimed at providing emotional support to anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope, or at risk of suicide throughout Great Britain and Ireland, predominantly through their telephone helpline, which is available 24/7 for those who need it.

[Papyrus UK](#)

Papyrus UK is a mental health charity specialising in supporting young people and they have great advice for parents and carers, both on their website and if you contact them. The resources on their site are fantastic. If you are unsure where to start, head to their website.

[Young Minds](#)

Young Minds is the UK's leading charity fighting for children and young people's mental health. As an organisation, they are fighting for a world where no young person feels alone with their mental health. They have a parents helpline and large bank of resources for parents who are unsure of how to best support their child's mental health.

[Switchboard](#)

Switchboard is a hotline, instant message and email service run by volunteers who all identify as LGBT+. They offer a safe space for anyone to discuss sexuality, gender identity, sexual health and emotional well-being.



"People don't compare mental health to their physical health enough - if you were concerned for your child's physical health you would be straight down to your GP asking for a check up and making sure everything was ok. You wouldn't leave an infection to 'clear up by itself', you would act, and the same has to go for mental health. Act early if you notice someone struggling." – Ben West, mental health campaigner

Read Ben West's top tips for supporting your child's mental health during GCSEs on the [Tassomai blog](#).