

# Managing revision

If you feel confident that you are revising effectively, you are less likely to get stressed.

**First, remember to look after yourself well. You need to:**

1. Eat regularly
2. Avoid junk food.
3. Stay hydrated
4. Avoid caffeine after about 4pm if you are having difficulty sleeping.
5. Get away from your computer screen an hour before bed and do something to unwind which doesn't involve computer or mobile screens!
6. Keep exercising.
7. Remember your brain won't work effectively if you make it do massive marathons. Lots of people find the Pomodoro Technique really effective. Here's how it works:



**You probably all know already that just reading your course book or your notes is not very effective. But what would be more helpful?**

**First, try to work out how you learn best.**

**Are you an auditory learner who learns best by listening?**

**Or a visual learner, who needs to see things to learn them?**

**Or a kinaesthetic learner? For you, movement and engaging yourself physically will really help.**

Most people learn in all these ways but will have a preferred mode, so it's worth trying all the following suggestions and working out what's best for you. You can also find plenty of quizzes online which will give you an idea of your dominant style of learning.

### **Auditory learning**

Listen to podcasts and audio-books about your subjects. Watch Youtube's videos and DVDs on your subjects.

Make your own recordings of you reading your notes. Summarise them first, to get the key material. Then keep playing yourself your recordings – in the car, for example, or on the bus. You could even try recording your lessons!

Get someone to test you on your work. Write questions for them to ask or, if something is in fairly easily digestible form, like a chart or a list, let them make up their own questions. My mum learnt all sorts of random stuff years ago, by testing me! 😊

Create a study buddy – a friend to work with who you can discuss stuff with. Test each other out-loud. Be careful though – your study buddy mustn't be a distraction!

Read your notes aloud. If you read silently, sound the words in your head.

Record your notes and play them back to yourself.

Set things to music – I'll bet some of you will know your alphabet through singing it! If you want to listen to a great example of this, find Tom Lehre's 'The Elements' on Youtube. This is a nicely visual version. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGM-wSKFBpo>

Invent mnemonics and repeat them to yourself. *Eg. Divorced, Beheaded, Died, Divorced, Beheaded Survived.* (Henry 8<sup>th</sup>'s wives!)

External noise can be really distracting to an auditory learner so work in a quiet place or use noise-cancelling headphones.

### **Visual learning**

The first and most obvious strategy is to make notes – but how?

1. Summarise sections of your reading as bullet points.
2. Trash your exercise books! 😊 Do this by summarising sections in the margins, underlining key bits, highlighting, adding key words – use colour and get creative! If you own your text books, you can do the same to those, but not if they are school property.

3. Make spider diagrams and mind maps to summarise sections/topics. Tony Buzan has written books and soft-ware on mind-mapping which you might find useful.
4. Draw diagrams, graphs and charts. This doesn't have to be confined to the sciences and technical subjects. Draw battle plans in history, labelled pictures of characters in Eng Lit (give them speech bubbles), Venn diagrams of over-lapping thinking in philosophy etc etc
5. Make lists and use flash cards. You can BUY flash cards on Amazon for loads of subjects!
6. Draw cartoon strips.
7. Watch Youtube videos and DVDs about your subject. See what you can find on iplayer.
8. Reading notes aloud whilst watching yourself in the mirror.

For tricky things like formulae or important dates, create a picture in your head, like this:

Date of the French Revolution – 1792

Imagine 1 French Revolutionary with 7 onions hanging round his neck. He's only got 9 fingers. He's standing in front of 2 guillotines.

If you like this sort of idea, google 'The Method of Loci'

### **Kinaesthetic Learning**

This can be quite challenging, so get creative!

1. Read your notes, looking in the mirror (again)
2. Make notes when you are listening to something and doodle if there's nothing more to note down!
3. Pace up and down while you learn by heart or go for a walk whilst you're learning. Walking helps you learn – honest!
4. Chew gum! Honestly, research has shown that chewing gum links with an increased ability to recall words as well as an improvement in several parts of working memory. Just make sure you use sugar-free gum (Be aware that Sorbitol, the sweetener, is a mild laxative, so don't over-do it!) and dispose of it responsibly.
5. Dramatize key topics. I remember my children dramatizing the circulatory system and the life cycle of locusts! If you have no helpful siblings, act it out with Lego people etc! (Look, it's got to be more fun than just reading your notes!!!)
6. If you have to learn poetry, read it aloud, standing up and dramatizing it as you read.
7. Use inter-active computer programmes and phone apps on your subjects.
8. Set up competitions for yourself eg. for foreign language vocab. Create two sets of cards, one with the English words, one with the corresponding FL words. Spread them round the floor randomly. How fast can you run around and match them all up? Keep trying to beat your own record. It works well for dates too – one set with the events, one set with the dates.
9. When you have a break, get moving!

### **Big chunk/Small Chunk**

Some people like to take a broad overview – others love the small detail.

If you're Big Chunk, you might need to consciously 'chunk down' to make sure you tackle the detail. If you're Small Chunk, select a small topic to revise and home in on it, and put out of your mind everything else while you tackle it. Small Chunkers can get overwhelmed, so take steps to avoid that!

### **Choices/Process**

Some people love choices and options and keeping everything fluid. Others want to make a plan and stick to it. If you're a Choices person, you may need to keep an eye on yourself when revising. This is not the time to spend ages deciding which topic to revise or whether to have a cup of coffee or tea! You may have to limit your choices and just get on with it!

### Towards/Away from

Some people are focused on what they want from life (Towards) – others are focused on what they want to avoid! (Away from)

If your aim is to avoid (Away from) failing your exams, this can give you a far more anxious approach to exams – it become all about the dread of the consequences. Revising with the idea in your head of 'What do I want to learn from this? How much more can I find out?' (Towards) can make the whole process far more dynamic and exciting.

**Whatever style of learner you are, you will find some great books in the school library on improving your memory and memory exercises – they're definitely worth a look!**

### Finally....

It is well known that teaching someone else can 'hit' all the types of learning, if done well, so it's a very effective way to learn something thoroughly. So teach your parents or grandparents! Get them to ask if they don't understand and not just pretend they get it! If no one will co-operate, teach your teddy bears/Lego people etc. They will probably be extremely dim but well-behaved. 😊

**If you are feeling stressed about all this – read on!**

## **Avoiding and Dealing with Exam Stress**

The first thing to say is that exam stress is not all bad!

What's happening is that your brain and body are engaging your Fight/Flight/Freeze response. Here's a good video to explain that:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEHwB1PG\\_-Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEHwB1PG_-Q)

It's all about protection. Your brain and body are responding in this way to protect you from danger. It's all aimed at dealing effectively with a threat.

So how does that apply to exams?

Well, your brain is seeing exams as a threat. You may be worried that you will look stupid if you do badly or you will let your parents or teachers or yourself down or you won't be able to do what you've planned to do next eg. Certain A levels or the degree you've chosen. You may even worry about events far into the future like getting a job and a house. Maybe you are seeing this particular test or exam as the start of a catastrophic chain of events!

Whatever it is, your brain and body are aiming to step up to the mark and deliver you from this danger! Adrenalin and cortisol are racing round your system, enabling you to be more alert than usual, to concentrate better and to have an extra boost of energy - which is great!

**Step 1** is therefore to **welcome** the rather strange feelings you may be having!

eg. Butterflies in your stomach, shaky legs, needing to go to the loo or feeling sick. They are signs that everything has speeded up. Your heart is pumping faster, your brain is getting more blood and everything is getting ready for action. The unfortunate side effect is that your stomach (which isn't really needed at this particular moment!) can be left feeling really weird! Why the need to pee? One theory is that if we have to run fast, it's best to shed any extra weight!!!

Why the shaky legs? Well, just before an exam you have probably gone into the FREEZE part of the FFF response. You cannot run away and there's nothing to fight, so your brain is choosing the only other response - which can leave you feeling paralysed and shaky. It's meant to keep you hidden from danger - hopefully that sabre-toothed tiger won't spot you or that big guy from the other tribe will think you are dead.

It's not quite so helpful when the threat is an exam!

You have probably noticed that once you get started on a test or exam you begin to feel better. Well, of course! What's happening is you are now able to engage the FIGHT response. You are going to get hold of this exam and give it all you've got! Hurrah! Finally, your adrenalin and cortisol can be your friends and help you do the best you possibly can.

It's essentially the same as stage fright - and many an actor has commented that if they don't feel a bit nervous before they go on stage, then they don't give their best performance. That makes perfect sense if you think about it. Sounds like they haven't had the extra edge that the FFF response gives them. They've been TOO relaxed about their show and it hasn't actually served them well, surprising though that might sound.

So what do you do if the FFF response feels overwhelming?

**Step 2** is to **take control of your breathing.**

If you've gone into FFF, your breathing will have got faster. You need more oxygen to fight or run away - but for you, it feels like it's got out of hand and you need to turn down the FFF response.

Your brain and body are totally connected so if you start breathing slowly and deeply, your brain will get the message that it's got things wrong - there is no immediate danger. If there was, you wouldn't be hanging around breathing slowly and deeply, you'd be fighting or running away!

So stick with it. Breathe slowly and deeply. Watch for your tummy expanding as you breathe in. Avoid letting your shoulders rise and your chest tighten – which people often do when told to take a deep breath. If necessary, lie on the floor with a cushion on your tummy, and when you breathe in, make sure the cushion is rising. When you've got the idea, stand or sit and carry on.

There are loads of other simple methods to turn FFF down or off. They are called grounding or stabilisation techniques. (See the article on Grounding Techniques)

It's a really good idea to learn some and have them ready for when you might need them. It's a case of experimenting and finding something that suits you. Personally, I find it really helpful to chew some gum or suck a hard sweet such as a mint imperial. It's much harder to breathe too fast if you are sucking something and it's quite calming if your stomach feels like it's jumping about!

### **Step 3 is to take your mind off it!**

The FFF response is coming from your brain/mind which is detecting threat, so once you are feeling a bit better, it's important to stop it over-reacting again. If your exam is about to start, great! Get on with it! Use up all that adrenalin! If not, maybe you need to listen to a great audiobook in the car on the way into school or watch something good on Youtube whilst you eat your breakfast (for once!!). Maybe you need to chat to friends on the bus or train or see what's happening on your favourite social media sites.

If you still feel a bit on edge, remember **Step 1** and **welcome** that feeling. Remember that it is your friend, so long as it's not gone into hyper-drive!

**Also, look at the article on Revision. If you can improve your revision strategies, you are less likely to feel stressed about exams, because you will feel confident that you are on top of the revision.**

## **Exam Stress First Aid Kit**

### **Reducing Stress, Promoting Sleep**

This is advice for how to look after yourself generally during times of revision and exams.

**You may need some help with this from your parents so there are some notes for them underneath.**

- One hour off-screen before bed (Take a walk, phone a friend, talk to parents, read a non-work book, have a cool shower, pack your bag, clean your shoes, do some

ironing....!!!) When you do have your screen on, occasionally watch something funny. Laughter is a great stress buster!

- No caffeine after 6pm.
- Eat well (at least 5 fruit and veg). Don't snack on sugary things or have sugary drinks. Sugar increases anxiety. Snack on nuts, toast, fruit, porridge.
- In the evening have snacks from this rich in tryptophan list – milk, oats (porridge!), bread, almonds, eggs, chicken, turkey, lettuce – and herbal teas! Use honey rather than sugar as a sweetener if you have to.
- Walk while you work. Get away from the bent over posture of study.
- Exercise – preferably outdoors in green space.
- Cut down on your alcohol consumption – preferably abstain completely!
- Have breaks on a 5:1 ratio. Keep them calming. Change your posture. Move. Go out of your study space and into a bright area. Extroverts – talk to someone. Maybe phone a friend.
- Many people find a daily dose of Vitamin B complex and Vitamin D helpful. Vit C reduces Cortisol levels. If you have any medical concerns about taking vitamin supplements, check with your doctor.
- Turn your phone and all social media off whilst you are studying and sleeping.

Finally, here's a helpful short video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RZ86OB9hw4>

### **Note to parents:**

Above, you'll find ten tips to help at this time, some of which boys will need help with, especially in providing the right sort of snacks! Teenage boys can eat a phenomenal amount and it's important to make sure that they're filling up on food that helps rather than hinders their mood. It's also important, if possible, to eat the main meal early in the evening, in order to promote a good night's sleep. Eating late stimulates the metabolism which can contribute to sleeping poorly.

Fizzy drinks and high-sugar snacks can contribute to anxiety and poor sleep so if your son needs a top-up it's goodbye Frosties and hello porridge, goodbye doughnuts and hello toast and peanut butter!

They might need you to be Phone Police too and to co-operate with late night avoidance of screen time! If your son wants to pack his bag or take Rover for a walk at midnight, that's a whole lot better than playing a video game!

It can feel like you're always playing Bad Cop so make sure you're available to test them on vocab or history dates in a wonderfully supportive and friendly manner! A great way to revise is to teach a topic to someone who knows

nothing about it – so now is your chance to bone up on subject you never did at school! Ask to be taught some obscure topic that your son should know about and that you don't!

Arrange some treats to cheer him on his way and be there for a chat when he needs a break! Above all, be encouraging without nagging – easier said than done, I know!