

Exam Pressure

Exam season is a stressful period of the year; that's to be expected and a certain degree of stress can be considered useful. The 'stress response' that we experience in these moments, the racing heart, accelerated breathing, are the body's way of priming itself for action. Oxygen floods your cells, neurones are firing; it's your body's ignition sequence.

Exam *pressure* can feel very different and is something pupils experience in a variety of ways. That pressure can be felt before and during the exam season, but for some pupils, doesn't end when the exams are over.

How might exam pressure affect me?

Emotions or feelings

- Anxious, worried, overwhelmed
- Upset, teary
- Exhausted
- Defeated, bored, uninterested, fed up
- Frustrated, angry
- Embarrassed, silly, stupid
- Easily annoyed
- Disappointed
- Confused

Physical feelings

- Shaking
- Feeling sick
- Headaches and dizziness
- Stomach pain
- Changes in eating habits
- Crying
- Struggling to concentrate
- Forgetful
- Restless
- Feeling tense in your body
- Changes in breathing, breathing very quickly
- Sweating a lot
- Feeling tired

Thoughts

- Fear of failure
- Fear of disappointing yourself or others
- Comparing yourself to others
- Talking badly to yourself
- Feeling like you can't cope
- Feeling things are pointless
- Doubting yourself
- Believing everything is wrong or bad

Behaviour

- Avoiding things like revision and exam planning
- Struggling to manage day-to-day life
- Lack of motivation
- Not doing things you usually enjoy
- Working too much without taking break

How to cope with exam pressure

During the exam period

You may be on exam leave or might need to continue going to school. Either way, the exam period can feel long and difficult, but you can look after yourself in different ways:

- Make time for things you enjoy. Find ways to release stress and celebrate progress. You could listen to music, draw, cook, play with a pet or go for a walk. You can try things alone or with friends.
- Talk to others about how you feel. Connect with other people, especially people who are going through the same thing. You can also still reach out to all your teachers and pastoral staff at school – just because you aren't here every day, doesn't mean we aren't still here for you.
- Try to find balance. Take regular breaks and be realistic about what you can do in a day. Keep things in perspective and remember that exams won't last forever.
- Take care of your physical health. Make sure you get enough sleep, food, water and exercise. All of these things are **crucial to successful performance in exams**.
- Focus on yourself. Try not to compare yourself to others. Think of things you like about yourself and what you're good at – this can help boost your confidence.

Preparing for an exam

While you're preparing an exam, you could try lowering stress levels by:

- Finding a study group. If there's nothing at school, try starting one with friends or people in your class.
- Making a revision timetable. This helps organise your revision and your breaks. You can find useful tips on the [BBC Bitesize website](#).
- Working in the best way for you. Be creative or active if it helps, like drawing diagrams or making up songs. Try being open to different types of studying and revision.
- Revising in the best place for you. You might prefer the quiet or being around others. If you don't have a space to study at home, you could try at school, the library, or a family member or friend's house.

On the day of your exam

To help cope with stress on the day of your exam, you could:

- Prepare your items the night before. Get everything you need ready to take with you, like pens and water for your exam.
- Start your day the best you can. Try to eat breakfast and make sure you have enough time to arrive at your exam without rushing.
- Try to ground yourself with a breathing exercise. If you feel overwhelmed in the exam, try to breathe in through your nose for 4 counts, hold it for 2 counts, and breathe out through your mouth for 7 counts. If you repeat this, it can slow your breath and help keep you calm.
- Take your time. Read the exam carefully and plan what you need to do before answering.
- Remind yourself that it'll be over soon. You've done your best and that's all you can do.

After your exam

To cope with stress and difficult feelings after an exam, you could:

- Try not to compare your answers to others. If possible, avoid talking to other people about the questions, comparing answers or looking up answers online.
- Reward yourself. Think of something to do afterwards that you enjoy. You could go out with your friends, play video games, or eat your favourite food.
- Focus on next steps. Plan what you'll do next, like going home, doing something fun, then revising for the next exam. Think ahead in a positive way – if you have another exam, focus on the time and date that it'll be over.
- Relax before your next exam. The stress from doing an exam can leave you feeling exhausted. You might find it hard to revise again before you take a break.

Always remember that, whatever the outcome of your exams, the school and staff will continue to support you and take the next steps you need.

Mrs Helen Leaf

Senior Mental Health Lead – Warwick School