



# Getting through the exam season

## A Guide for Young People Sitting Assessments in 2021

At Centre 33, we understand that the impact of COVID has for many, led to increased stress, anxiety or low mood and affected some young people's ability to prepare for summer assessments. Our team of Children and Young People's Wellbeing Practitioners (CWPs) work with lots of young people who are experiencing these types of challenges. We have created this guide to give you some tips to help you manage anxieties and concerns about assessments this summer 2021.

It may be that you are reading this though you are not taking your GCSEs/A-Levels/B-Tecs this year. You have also just experienced lockdown and may be feeling the COVID related disruptive effects on your education. All the strategies listed are applicable to any age, whether you are at school or college, and by working on wellbeing strategies earlier you will have the strategies in place to support you later with your GCSEs/A-Levels/B-Tecs or Finals.

We recognise that many of you have found that the lack of clear information regarding how you will be assessed to be difficult. We know also, that lots of you are experiencing heightened anxiety about sitting 'mini' exams.

You might be feeling worried because:

- You have had to miss school due to coronavirus so have **gaps in your knowledge**.
- You were planning for exams to be going ahead as normal so have **not performed your best** in 'mock' examinations.
- You have had **limited access to a computer** to complete your studies so feel as though you are at a disadvantage.
- You do not have a good relationship with all **teachers** and feel this could **bias their decision** about your final grade.
- You have **not been able to motivate yourself** to study because you were uncertain as to whether examinations would take place.
- You don't feel you have the time to prepare for **short-notice tests** or 'mini' exams.
- You have **struggled to study online** so do not feel as if you are able to sit 'mini-exams'.
- You may have experienced a **bereavement** which has impacted on your ability to study efficiently.
- You may be **feeling more tired** than usual because of anxieties about the coronavirus pandemic making it harder to concentrate.

*"Although I have found it easier to focus on studying at home learning rather than in college, I've still missed the experience of the lessons themselves. I just keep thinking that I do not want to disappoint myself because I have put in so much work and I want grades that reflect that. I worry that I won't be able to get into university and fear that my life will go nowhere."*

Ella, A-level student

**We want you to know that however you feel right now is valid.**

# What are the Signs and Symptoms of Exam Stress and Anxiety?

Firstly, it is important to recognise when you are experiencing stress or anxiety related to your exams. Sometimes this feels obvious, but it often takes practice to identify clues. The following sensations are common when you are experiencing stress or anxiety:

- Struggling to sleep.
- Having negative thoughts about the future.
- Feeling irritable.
- Crying more often than usual.
- Increase or decrease in appetite.
- Always thinking about your exams and worrying about them.
- Not able to enjoy things anymore.
- Feeling tired all the time.
- Frequent headaches or stomach aches.
- Increased heart rate or panic, perhaps even leading to a panic attack.
- Feeling overwhelmed.
- Loss of motivation.
- Mind fog or loss of concentration.
- Feeling nauseous or butterflies in stomach.

## Why do we experience anxiety around exams?

Feeling some anxiety around exam time is very normal. Most people want to do well in exams both to gain a sense of achievement and to progress to next steps such as college, university, or work. These things alone create a natural pressure which is difficult to completely avoid. The key to managing exam related anxiety/stress is to prevent it from becoming overwhelming. Understanding what is happening to your body when you are under stress can be a helpful place to start.



# FIGHT - FLIGHT

Stress and worry can trigger a fight-flight response. This is an ancient mind/body response to stressful situations where your body prepares to fight its stressor or run away. So, what might this look like when it comes to preparing for exams?

## FIGHT

Some people find that they are 'deadline oriented' and exam-related stress motivates them to study. When a deadline approaches, they find that their thinking becomes clearer and less distracted, and they have more energy to complete the task. Afterwards they may feel exhausted. Although, you may feel that a deadline-oriented strategy works best for you, people relying on deadlines are operating at the edge of healthy stress and overload and it may not be a strategy that always works. Factors such as Wi-Fi, public transport, other people, or good health may affect your ability to achieve deadlines and constantly switching between low stress and toxic stress levels can have negative health implications.

It also means that you rely on something external to motivate you and it may leave you feeling a little out of control. If Fight is your main way of preparing for exams or assessments, then you can practice reducing your reliance on external motivations by setting your own deadlines or rewarding yourself for completing a task earlier. You could experiment and see if a slight change in your deadline behaviour affects your wellbeing and ability to do the task.



# Flight

It is not unusual for the pressure of assessments or exams to show in anxiety symptoms such as racing heart; shortness of breath or digestive problems; struggling to think clearly or settle on one task.

This can lead to avoidance or procrastination. You may avoid all thoughts of working and put off studying. You might find yourself easily distracted and unable to focus.



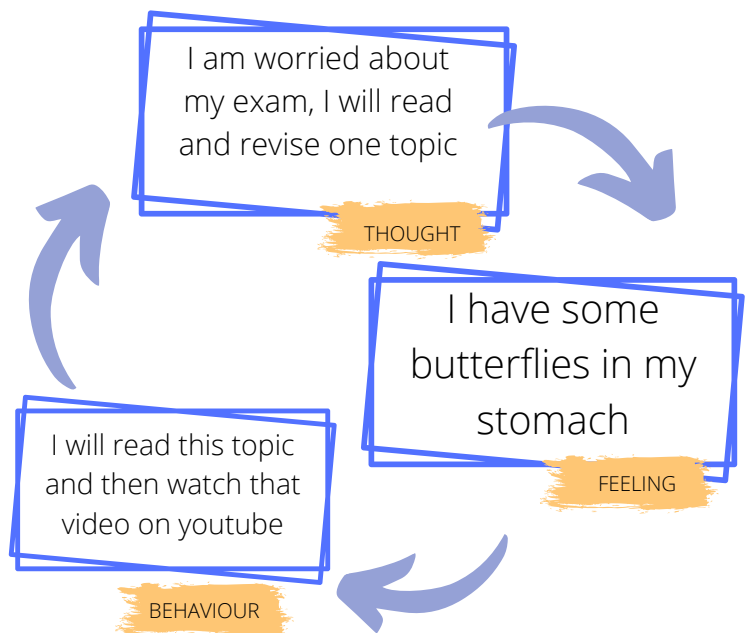
If this is the case, it may be helpful to start breaking your study into smaller, more manageable steps or 'goals'.

You could rate each goal from easy (smiley face) to difficult (sad face) before you work towards them. Start by working towards the easier goals and then progress up to the ones that you have rated more difficult.

Reward yourself after achieving each one.

By breaking tasks into more manageable goals, though you still may feel more anxious, you are less likely to avoid them compared to tackling the whole topic at once.

If you feel too unsettled to even start, it could be helpful to think of a mindful/grounding technique (see below Wellbeing Tips for Exam Self Care). Slow inbreaths followed by longer outbreaths can trick the body into feeling calmer, more settled and you may feel more able to begin studying.



# STUDYING WITH LOW MOOD

Low Mood can affect your ability to study. People experiencing low mood can feel tired, unmotivated, find it difficult to think clearly or have energy to take on tasks. They may feel self-critical or feel that others perceive them negatively and feel negative or even hopeless about the future.

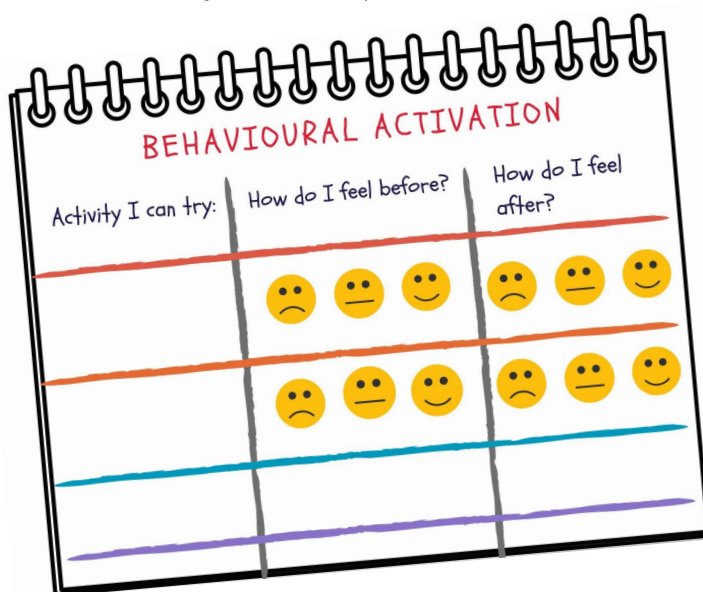
*It also often means that people avoid doing things, activities they used to enjoy and feel less sociable.*

It is important to recognise that you may be experiencing symptoms of low mood and that these may be affecting your motivation and ability to study. Try and catch any labels that you may direct towards yourself. You are not “lazy”, “useless”, “stupid”, “hopeless” or whatever name you may call yourself. You have low mood and things may feel difficult right now.

Research suggests that low mood can be improved by Behavioural Activation where if people begin to redo some activities that they may have stopped, they find their mood improves and they begin to feel able to do more activities. This is like a snowball effect.

*If you are experiencing low mood and it is making studying difficult try thinking about small, easy activities that you are not currently doing and try doing them.*

Then see if it has a positive effect on your mood and ability to study. It may be that these are easy study tasks, for example you re-read something you know well and may have enjoyed previously, or you write a list of what you may need to study for an exam and then put it to one side. It may be that you do a wellbeing activity (see below) such as you could do a walk or some exercise, do something creative or contact a friend and suggest a COVID-friendly (!) meet up.



If these first steps feel hard, then break them down into smaller steps that feel easier. In this way Behavioural Activation is like riding a bike or driving, you start in a low gear to get the vehicle moving. By redoing activities, in time you will hopefully feel that your low mood begins to improve- as does your motivation to study- and that you feel positive towards the future.

# "All I ever do is think about exams and assessments"

Rumination and worries are types of thinking. It is where people go over and over the same information in their heads about things which have happened in the past (ruminations) or that they think could happen in the future (worries). These may be thoughts like "I should have done better in my mocks" or "The teacher won't give me a fair grade". Ruminations or worries might take a catastrophic path- "I have failed my mock and I will fail everything!" Be careful about falling into thinking traps where your thoughts may not be true.

The thoughts often circle around and around when you are trying to focus on your studies or when you are trying to fall asleep, and this reduces your ability to study effectively.

**There are strategies which help decrease your ruminations and worries. First you need to identify them.**

What are my ruminations (past) or worries (future)?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

It may be helpful to notice when you usually ruminate or worry. At these times plan a distracting activity, or instead allow yourself a set time to ruminate/worry with a scheduled ending, for example set an alarm after ten minutes. Other people find it helpful to identify the worry and try and see if they can problem solve it, can they do anything about it? If so, try and identify the steps needed to solve the problem. If there are no obvious solutions and your thoughts still go round and round, try and distract yourself with an activity.

Other strategies to deal with ruminations/worries:

- Write the thoughts down and either put them somewhere or rip them up.
- Identify the circling thoughts and create an image based on them, what does your worry or rumination look like. Where would you like to put your image, stick it on the wall or screw it up and bin it?

**Your aim is to get your worry out of circling around your head and out into the world. Research suggests that by identifying and stating ruminations or worries you can improve your feeling of wellbeing.**



# Wellbeing Tips for Exam Self-Care

There is plenty of advice out there about study techniques but what you do when you are not revising is just as important as when you are.

5 minutes

**Here are some top tips to build self-care into the non-working parts of your day.**

Try a grounding technique. These types of exercises help to take your focus away from overwhelming worries or unpleasant physical feelings by bringing your attention back to the present moment. These are also perfect for stress just before the exams themselves. Here are three simple activities to try:

**Look around, name:**

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste



**Choose a colour. Then look around, noticing everything you see that is that colour.**



**Hot Chocolate Breathing:**

1. Imagine you are holding a mug of hot chocolate (this also works with a real mug of hot chocolate).
2. Breathe in through your nose to smell the hot chocolate. Count slowly 1,2,3,4,5.
3. Breathe out through your mouth to blow on the hot chocolate to cool it. Count 1,2,3,4,5.
4. Repeat until you feel calm.





15 minutes

Something else that can help if we're feeling stressed or worried is to say positive statements to ourselves to boost our confidence and feelings of being able to cope in anxious situations. Have a look at the examples below and see if any of them sounds helpful or use the blank lines to add some of your own.



- Find a YouTube **video** which makes you smile.
- Do something **creative** such as drawing, doodling, or creating a mood board with pictures found online. You could even use this time to practise learning a new skill such as crochet or a new football trick.
- Go outside and take some deep breathes in of the **fresh air**. Mindfully attend to the sounds of the birds or traffic and look out for blooming flowers.
- Make a **hot drink** but do not take it back to your desk with you. Enjoy it away from your study space and turn it into a quick mindfulness exercise- notice how the mug feels warm in your hands and how the liquid tastes as you take a sip. Try to come back to this if you feel your mind start to think about revision before the end of your break.
- Soothe yourself by **singing** loudly as if you do not have a care in the world.
- Take some time to **cuddle** a pet, a family member, or a blanket.

*"To help manage my anxiety, I am trying to stay focused on my studies and talking to my mum about how I'm feeling. I have a dog and dogs are known to lower your heart rate and reduce stress levels- all pets are good for that. I am making sure I have plenty of breaks where I just cuddle my dog- particularly if I am really stressed!"*

*(Esme, 6th Former)*



- Get outside in nature for a walk or sit in the park. Research shows that spending time **outdoors** can substantially increase creativity in students.
- Have a hot **bath** and make it special by using bath bombs. You could try a lavender scented shower gel as many people find this calming so that the smell lingers for a while.
- Use this time to try and **connect** with others, phone a friend, or talk to a family member. It is easy to feel isolated during the exam period so make time to connect with friends.
- Prepare a comforting meal or **bake** some cookies.
- Try some simple **meditation** or yoga- there are plenty of YouTube videos which can teach you how to do this. You may also find that this increases your productivity when you return to your studies.
- Listen to **music** which will either calm you down or raise your spirits.
- Take some time to **tidy** your study space. Cleanliness has been shown to improve concentration and decrease overall stress levels.
- Create a list of all the **fun things** you will have time to do once the exams are over!

*"I am trying to make time to still do the things that make me feel happy like eating, dying my hair and doing my makeup. Going outside for a walk everyday so I am not stuck in my room all day really helps. I find doing art and reading my books helps me to switch off and relax. It is important to find something that makes you happy to focus on in this stressful time." Yasmin, A Level student*

# Common Problems and Solutions

## 1. There is no point in making a revision timetable because I will never stick to it

When exams are approaching, we can often use up a lot of energy contemplating when we could be studying. Creating a revision timetable will help you to overcome feelings of being overwhelmed. It can provide you with something to focus on, resulting in using your time more productively. It is important to be flexible when making a timetable so that it is easier to stick to. For example, if you have planned to revise for maths at 3pm but have found yourself watching an extra episode of Netflix, you can still push the remainder of your studies back an hour, so no sessions are missed. A timetable will also allow you to plan for regular breaks which will help with your productivity and overall wellbeing.

## 2. I do not have time to get 8 hours of sleep per night

Each day our brains become saturated with all the information we have learnt. Sleep lets us soak these new memories in so that they will stay there for the long-term. It also helps to increase productivity, so you can learn more information the next day. So, getting adequate sleep will really help you achieve the grade you are aiming for.



## 3. I lay awake each night worrying about exams making me too tired to revise during the day

Stress and anxiety can make sleep more difficult than usual. It is therefore important to maintain good sleep hygiene to help us fall asleep. This means we should stick to a routine and get up at the same time each day regardless of how tired we feel. It is also important to avoid blue light from smart phones or TV for at least half an hour before bedtime as this stimulates the brain making it harder to fall asleep. Instead try and listen to music, a podcast or try some mediation. It will also help to avoid caffeine after 3pm as the stimulant effects of caffeine on the brain can last for at least six hours. Daytime naps can also make it harder to fall asleep at nighttime.

#### 4. My friends are revising the same amount as me but seem to know much more than I do.

It can be stressful when you think that everyone is doing better than you, spending more time on revision than you, or just not feeling as anxious as you. But we are all different and that is ok. Remember, your friends' results are not guaranteed, life is unpredictable, and they are likely to be feeling just as stressed as you are without showing it!

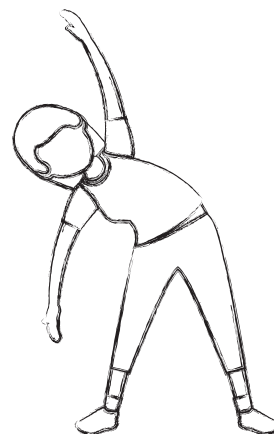
#### 5. I do not have time to eat regular meals or prepare healthy food



It can understandably be tempting to eat food at your desk to maximize study time, but you will work more effectively if you take time to eat meals away from your study space. Opting for healthy foods such as oily fish, lean meat, fruits, vegetables, nuts, eggs, leafy greens, tofu, peanut butter, and green tea will help you to feel more energetic, productive and help improve your overall wellbeing. However, do not forget to be kind to yourself during this time and enjoy a chocolate treat every now and again.

#### 6. I am too tired to exercise after a day of revision

It is important to try and prioritize exercise because this can help reduce your stress levels, anxious thoughts, and help you to get a good night's sleep- which will help boost your brain power when it comes to remembering information. Try and find activities which you enjoy doing so that exercise becomes a fun break from revision, such as learning a TikTok dance. Aim for 15-30 minutes a day and see if this begins to help your mental well-being.



#### 7. I feel guilty when I take study breaks

You are going through a very challenging period of your life and its okay to feel stressed. You must be kind to yourself. Remember that this will not last forever and you will get through it.

## Further support

If you feel that you need further support with anxiety or low mood here are some resources that you can try:

**Centre 33** – provides a range of services to support mental health and wellbeing for young people across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Wellbeing workers can provide young people with Guided Self-Help (GSH)- similar to strategies mentioned in this leaflet where we utilise practical support to work with young people experiencing anxiety and low mood. Research has shown GSH to be highly effective and young people feel more able to cope with anxiety and low mood. In addition Centre 33 also offers counselling and support with areas such as housing, finances and sexual health. For more information see our website: [www.centre33.org.uk](http://www.centre33.org.uk)

**Keep Your Head** - a mental health website for children and young people that provides quality information on keeping well, self-help, and support services. Further information can be found at [www.keep-your-head.com](http://www.keep-your-head.com)

**Kooth** – a free online emotional support and counselling service for young people aged 11-19. Services can be accessed up to 10pm in the evening. Further information can be found at [www.kooth.com](http://www.kooth.com)

**Young Minds** - a mental health website for children and young people that provides quality information on keeping well, self-help, and support services. Further information can be found at [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

You might also want to explore the following apps which offer a range of exercises that can help to reduce anxiety:



- Virtual hope box
- Mind shift
- Headspace
- Clear Fear
- Chill Panda

**"Grades do not define you"**  
**(Richard Branson, 2019)**

**Remember – this will not last forever!**