TEENAGE HEALTH & WELLBEING FACTSHEET

Exam Stress and Healthy Revision

A practical guide to learning effectively while protecting sleep, health and confidence

The short version

Some exam stress can sharpen attention, but overwhelming pressure can disrupt sleep, concentration, appetite, mood and memory. Effective revision is active, spaced and realistic: retrieve information from memory, practise questions, check mistakes and return to topics over time. Breaks, movement, food, sleep and connection are part of the plan—not rewards earned only after exhaustion. Ask early about access arrangements, and seek help when stress is taking over daily life.

Stress: useful signal or overload?

Manageable pressure	May increase energy, focus and motivation for a limited period while the young person still sleeps, eats and functions.
Too much pressure	Can cause panic, blanking, irritability, headaches, nausea, avoidance, poor sleep, appetite change and loss of confidence.
Sources	Workload, uncertainty, family expectations, school messages, comparison, previous results, health, neurodiversity and fear about the future.
The goal	Not to remove every anxious feeling, but to make study achievable and keep distress within a range the student can manage.

Grades are information, not identity

Exam results may affect the next step, but they do not measure kindness, creativity, courage, practical skill, worth or the full range of future routes.

Build a revision plan that can actually work

Map the task	List subjects and topics, then mark confidence and importance. Do not spend all the time rewriting what already feels comfortable.
Use short targets	Set a specific, time-limited goal: “Answer five questions on photosynthesis and mark them” is clearer than “revise biology”.
Plan capacity	Allow for school, travel, meals, sleep, disability, caring, faith, activities and rest. A timetable that ignores real life is not realistic.
Mix subjects	Alternate demanding and lighter topics. Interleaving helps practise choosing the right method rather than repeating one kind of question.
Leave buffer time	Keep some sessions unallocated for illness, difficult topics or catching up. One missed block should not collapse the whole plan.
Review weekly	Check what was learned, what remains uncertain and whether the schedule is sustainable. Adjust; do not punish.

A balanced day

- one or two priority topics
- regular food and drinks
- protected social or quiet time
- short focused study blocks
- movement and daylight
- a firm revision finish point

Revision methods that strengthen memory

Feeling familiar with notes is not the same as being able to recall and use the information in an exam.

Retrieval practice	Close the notes and write, say or draw what you remember. Then check gaps and correct them.
Spaced practice	Return to a topic after increasing intervals rather than cramming it once. Some forgetting makes retrieval useful.
Past papers	Practise the format, command words and timing. Mark answers and study why marks were lost.
Teach it	Explain a concept simply to another person, a pet or an empty chair. Difficulty explaining reveals uncertainty.
Dual coding	Combine concise words with meaningful diagrams, timelines or processes. Decoration alone does not guarantee learning.
Feedback loop	Attempt, mark, identify the error, learn the missing step, then try a similar question later.

Use rereading carefully

Rereading and highlighting may help orientation, but they should lead into recall, questions or application. Beautiful notes can become avoidance if they replace testing memory.

Focus, breaks and procrastination

Lower the starting barrier	Prepare materials, choose one tiny first action and begin for five minutes. Motivation often follows action.
Work in blocks	Try 20–40 minutes of focused work followed by a short break, adjusting for age, attention and health needs.
Make breaks restorative	Stand, stretch, drink, use the toilet, look outside or speak briefly to someone. Endless scrolling may not feel like a break.
Control distractions	Use Do Not Disturb, website blocking, a visible timer or another room for the phone. Study with a supportive friend if accountability helps.
Perfectionism	Aim for completed, checked practice rather than perfect notes. Decide in advance what “good enough for today” means.
Avoidance	If one subject repeatedly triggers panic or shutdown, ask for teaching help and emotional support rather than simply adding more hours.

When you feel stuck

- name the next physical action
- start with one question
- ask someone to sit nearby
- set a ten-minute timer
- remove one distraction
- record progress, not only hours

Sleep, movement, food and caffeine

Sleep	Sleep supports memory consolidation, attention and emotional control. All-night revision commonly produces diminishing returns and poorer next-day performance.
Movement	Walking, stretching, sport or adapted activity can reduce tension and improve alertness. Short movement breaks count.
Regular meals	Use familiar balanced meals and snacks. Exam season is not the time for restrictive diets, detoxes or dramatic supplement regimes.
Hydration	Drink regularly, especially during long sessions. Follow exam-centre rules about bottles.
Caffeine	Tea, coffee, cola, chocolate, pre-workout and some medicines contribute. Move caffeine earlier and avoid using it to replace sleep.
Energy drinks	High-caffeine energy drinks can worsen anxiety, palpitations and sleep. They are not a safe revision strategy for teenagers.

Revision has a finish time

Set a clear evening stopping point, prepare tomorrow’s first task, then wind down. The brain needs time away from the material as well as time on it.

Managing worry, panic and going blank

Catch the thought	Notice predictions such as “If I fail, my life is over.” Treat them as thoughts, not facts.
Make it realistic	Replace catastrophe with a balanced statement: “This matters, but one result does not decide my whole future. I can use my plan and ask about options.”
Slow the body	Breathe slowly, allowing a longer exhale. Relax shoulders, press feet into the floor and notice physical support from the chair.
Ground attention	Name what you can see, feel and hear. Then return to the exact instruction or underline the command word.
If the mind blanks	Pause, breathe, write any related keywords, move to another question and return later. Tell an invigilator if genuinely unwell.
Practise calm	Use breathing and grounding during ordinary revision so they are familiar before the exam hall.

Anxiety is not failure

Physical anxiety can feel frightening, but it is the body’s alarm system. Skills can reduce it; persistent or overwhelming anxiety deserves proper support.

Neurodiversity, disability and health needs

ADHD	Use visible time, short starts, movement, accountability and specific endpoints. Review medication timing only with the prescriber.
Autism	Make schedules predictable, clarify vague instructions, reduce sensory load and include recovery time after school and exams.
Dyslexia and processing	Use accessible fonts, text-to-speech where permitted, audio, structured notes and repeated exam-format practice.
Long-term illness	Plan around fatigue, pain, appointments and fluctuating capacity. Pacing and rest breaks may protect both health and performance.
Mental health	Anxiety, depression, eating disorders, trauma and obsessive-compulsive symptoms may intensify during exams and need coordinated support.
Support before diagnosis	Schools can respond to evidenced need and normal way of working while assessment is pending; ask early what is possible.

Access is not an unfair advantage

Reasonable adjustments reduce disability-related disadvantage while the assessment continues to test the same knowledge, skills and understanding.

Access arrangements and special consideration

Ask early	Discuss needs with the school, college or exam centre as early as possible. Some arrangements need evidence and awarding-body approval.
Possible arrangements	Depending on need: extra time, supervised rest breaks, word processing, a reader or scribe, assistive technology, modified papers or a smaller room.
Normal way of working	Evidence often includes the support ordinarily used in learning and internal assessments, not a last-minute preference.
Temporary events	Illness, injury, bereavement or another event outside the student's control may support an application for special consideration. The centre applies under the relevant rules.
Private candidates	Clarify arrangements, evidence, costs and deadlines with the chosen exam centre before entry.
Who to contact	Speak to the SENDCo, exams officer, tutor or named college contact and ask for the decision and next steps in writing.

Questions to ask

- What evidence is needed?
- Which arrangement is being considered?
- Who tells the exam board?
- What is the deadline?
- Can it be practised in mocks?
- What happens if health changes?

Exam day and the hours afterwards

The night before	Stop revision at the agreed time. Prepare identification, stationery, calculator, medication, water and route information.
Morning	Allow enough time, eat and drink something familiar, and avoid a large last-minute caffeine dose.
At the start	Read instructions, note the available time and scan the paper. Ask an invigilator if a procedural instruction is unclear.
During the paper	Use time marks, move on when stuck and return later. Use approved rest breaks and arrangements as practised.
If unwell	Tell the invigilator rather than silently struggling. The centre needs to know what happened if any formal process may apply.
Afterwards	Avoid a long answer comparison. Eat, drink, move, rest briefly and then prepare only what is needed for the next exam.

One exam at a time

Once a paper is finished, analysing every answer rarely changes it. Protect energy for recovery and the next step.

When exam stress needs more help

Daily functioning	Stress is preventing sleep, eating, washing, attending school, leaving the room or doing any revision.
Physical symptoms	Frequent panic, fainting, vomiting, chest pain, severe headaches or other symptoms need appropriate assessment rather than being assumed to be “just stress”.
Mood and safety	Persistent hopelessness, severe withdrawal, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, agitation or unusually elevated mood require prompt support.
Eating and substances	Marked restriction, bingeing, purging, weight change, misuse of stimulants, energy drinks, alcohol, drugs or someone else’s medication.
Burnout or shutdown	A neurodivergent or disabled student may lose skills, communication or capacity under sustained demand and need demands reduced and support increased.

Urgent help

Call 999 for immediate danger, a serious overdose, loss of consciousness, severe breathing difficulty or when a young person has acted on suicidal thoughts or cannot be kept safe. Do not leave them alone while urgent help is arranged.

People who may help

- trusted family member or friend
- SENDCo or exams officer
- mental-health professional
- teacher, tutor or pastoral lead
- school nurse or GP
- appropriate private clinician

NHS, school, private and complementary support

School or college	Teachers can help prioritise topics, explain exam technique, provide a study space, review workload and arrange pastoral or SEND support.
NHS route	A GP, school nurse or local young people's mental-health service can assess significant anxiety, low mood, sleep, eating, physical symptoms and safety.
Private route	Families may choose a private GP, paediatrician, clinical or counselling psychologist, accredited counsellor, dietitian or other suitable professional. Match expertise to the concern.
Academic support	A qualified tutor or study-skills specialist can address subject gaps and technique but should not claim to treat mental illness unless suitably qualified.
Complementary support	Mindfulness, relaxation, gentle movement, massage or faith/community support may help wellbeing alongside appropriate care. Avoid cure claims and unneeded supplements.

Choosing private help

- Check professional registration or accredited membership and experience with teenagers.
- Ask about confidentiality, parental involvement, safeguarding and communication with school or NHS care.
- Request goals, fees, review points and crisis arrangements in writing.
- Avoid guaranteed grade improvements or anxiety "cures".

How Health Matters UK can support

Health Matters UK offers personalised health education and practical wellbeing support for teenagers and parents. We can help organise pressures, build a sustainable revision and wellbeing plan, prepare for school or clinical conversations and identify appropriate NHS or private support. We do not provide academic grading, diagnose mental-health or neurodevelopmental conditions, prescribe, arrange formal exam access decisions or replace regulated services.

Map the pressure	Identify workload, expectations, health needs, sensory demands, sleep, confidence and practical barriers.
Build the plan	Create realistic study blocks, active revision methods, breaks, food, movement and a firm evening finish.
Support communication	Help the teenager explain what is manageable and help parents encourage without adding pressure.
Prepare questions	Organise concerns for teachers, SENDCo, exams officer, GP or private professional and clarify the desired outcome.
Protect wellbeing	Notice when ordinary stress is becoming harmful and support timely escalation rather than waiting for crisis.

A simple starting point

Choose one subject, one 25-minute active task and one short break. Finish by writing the first task for tomorrow—then stop.

Teenage health matters to us

Exams matter, but the teenager matters more. Young people deserve preparation that builds knowledge without sacrificing sleep, physical health or self-worth. Health Matters UK can help families use reliable information, make revision manageable and find appropriate education, NHS or private support when pressure becomes too much.

Important

This factsheet provides general education, not a diagnosis, individual medical advice or a guarantee of academic outcomes. Seek professional help for persistent or severe distress. Call 999 in a life-threatening emergency.

Key sources

- NHS: Tips on preparing for exams (accessed 16 November 2026).
- Ofqual: Coping with exam pressure—a guide for students, updated May 2025 (accessed 16 November 2026).
- Ofqual: Student guide to exams and assessments in 2026, including access arrangements, reasonable adjustments and special consideration (accessed 16 November 2026).
- YoungMinds: Exam stress—young-person guidance, co-created with young people (accessed 16 November 2026).
- Health Matters UK Evidence and Editorial Standards page for our evidence, review and scope.

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