

12 Tips to avoid exam stress

1. Be prepared

Make sure you know what you are supposed to have learned and that you have all your notes, books and essays to hand. Do you know what format the exam takes and how the marks are allocated? If not, ask your teacher and/or study the marking scheme, which is often on the exam board's website. This can be particularly important with A-level stress and GCSE stress, when there are so many exams, all structured in different ways.

2. Make a plan

Working out how much time you have to revise and planning how you can use it best by making a timetable is a key factor in how to deal with exam stress. Another technique recommended by all time management experts is taking what feels like an overwhelming task and breaking it down into manageable chunks. Perhaps you need to spend more time on some subjects than others? Vary the timetable so you don't get bored. You can always update the plan, if necessary, as you go along (see attached revision timetable)

3. Know when and where you work best

Work when you are most alert. We all have slightly different body clocks – are you a night owl or a dawn lark? Everyone has different revision styles – maybe you like to sit at a tidy library desk or under the duvet with your laptop. Wherever you feel calm and in control is the best place for dealing with exam stress.

4. Take a break

Psychologists suggest that we can only concentrate properly for about 45 minutes at one stretch, while neuroscientists tell us that the longer we try and focus on one thing, the less our brains are able to deal with it effectively. Take breaks to stay refreshed. Instead of cramming in more revision or, indeed, stressing over how to deal with exam stress, the best thing might simply be to do something completely different.

5. Eat well

Keeping your blood sugar levels steady so that you don't have energy dips during the day and can sleep well at night is a vital way of dealing with exam stress. Avoid lots of processed, sugary foods like cereal, biscuits, sweets and chocolate. Lean protein like chicken, salmon or egg, plenty of veg and carbs that release their energy slowly like wholegrain bread, rice and pasta will keep energy levels steady. Pulses like chickpeas and lentils are great for vegetarians (and others), since they contain both protein and slow-release carbs. If you are so nervous before an exam that you can't eat, then don't worry, your body will catch up later – but do make sure that you drink lots.

6. Drink well

Staying hydrated with lots of water, low-cal sodas or herbal teas is key to feeling alert. Juices or sugary drinks can make you feel jittery and mess up your energy levels.

7. Get exercise

This is probably one of the best ways of dealing with exam stress. Anything from walking the dog to going for a swim, run or bike ride, this helps to reduce physical tension that can lead to aches and pains and releases natural feel good brain chemicals. If you can't get motivated, rope in friends – it's much harder to make excuses.

8. Avoid stimulants

Like caffeine and energy drinks. They can give you the impression that you are somehow dealing with exam stress, but they can leave you craving more and, in excess, will either slow or bring you down, or over-stimulate you.

9. Sleep well

Tossing and turning the night before an exam is understandable, and our bodies are able to cope with lack of sleep for a day or so. Worrying about not being able to nod off only makes matters worse but there are many things you can do to help. A hot bath and having somewhere dedicated just to sleeping (and not to watching TV or going on a computer, phone or tablet) will help you switch off. If you really can't get to sleep, do something repetitive like a jigsaw or ironing. If you really, really can't sleep, don't panic. Sheer adrenaline will help you get through most exams the next day better than you might expect.

10. Talk about it with someone

Almost everyone finds exams stressful – so you are not alone, talking to a good friend or a member, your school tutor or a student counselor will help get them out of your system.

11. Reward yourself

Build in treats to your timetable – anything you can look forward to as a reward for sticking to it. Plan something exciting to celebrate the end of the exams.

12. Keep it in perspective

If you feel you have really messed up an exam, there's nothing you can do until you get the results. Worrying about it won't help – and may reduce your chances of doing well in other exams you are taking. Think about what you could do about a disappointing result – that will help you feel in control.

Yes, it's great to do well in exams. But if you are suffering from GCSE stress, remember that exams aren't the only thing that will help you succeed in life. Employers will also be very interested in other things, like your attitude, work-rate or ability to get on with others.