

Parents Tips to Surviving Exam Stress

Exam stress is most apparent in secondary school children studying for their Junior or Leaving Certificate, when many feel they have to 'prove themselves' and display their year's work in the pressured situation of a one or two hour exam. However, exam stress can also affect young children in primary school.

Exam time can also be a stressful time for parents, who often feel they can do nothing to ease their child's anxiety. However, there are ways that you, as a parent, can help your children – and yourselves – through this difficult time.

Signs of exam stress

A little bit of stress is useful for us; it can help motivate us to do important tasks and push us to achieve that little bit more. However, **excessive stress** is damaging. Excessive stress happens when we are so overwhelmed by worry that we are unable to do anything effectively.

Physical Symptoms of Exam Stress

- . Loss of appetite
- . Headaches
- . Sleeplessness
- . Lack of concentration
- . Panic Attacks
- . Difficulty breathing
- . Heart palpitations
- . Dizziness

Not all of these symptoms will be present, but if one or more are, especially the more serious, breathing, heart palpitations and dizziness a visit to the GP is necessary.

Emotional Psychological Symptoms of Exam Stress

- . Feeling angry
- . Impatient
- . Irritable or intolerant
- . Increase intake of alcohol, caffeine and nicotine.

It is thought that sometimes parents can indirectly and unconsciously damage their children's chances of passing exams. Many parents suffer from exam stress as much as their children and the stress is transmitted back and forth between parents and child. Parents must deal with their own stress and minimise their stress levels or risk passing the feelings on to their children, and then deal with the child's stress.

Causes of exam stress

Children suffer from excessive exam stress for a variety of reasons.

- Your child may be a **natural worrier** or have a nervous disposition and exams are simply another life event that causes them to worry. These children need special support to manage their worries as well as lots of encouragement and reassurance.
- Their own or their parents' **expectations** about their academic abilities are too high. These children are simply under too much pressure to succeed.
- Some children are stressed because, for whatever reasons, they haven't developed a good **routine of study** or prepared enough for the exams.

Top Tips for Parents

- Be supportive, not intrusive!

It is unhelpful and damaging to self esteem to constantly bring up the subject of exams and to apply the pressure. It is also unhelpful to your child to make comparisons to the child across the road or to older siblings. Don't be tempted to say " I told you so" when the child starts panicking about their exams and about having not done enough work in the year leading up to the period.

- Adjust the family timetable

It is useful to work within the family timetable to make sure that the studying student is accommodated. Adjust family activities to suit the students study timetable and try and fit meals into a break in the timetable. Also keep family meals healthy, sleep patterns regular and family exercise should be kept up too.

- Accept and offer unconditional love

The best thing you can do as a parent at this time is offer absolute support. Reassure the child that you will love them no matter what, that you think that they are wonderful just the way they are. Also learn to accept your child praise them for their talents and appreciate their weaknesses. This should lessen the pressure

- Lead by example

If you are stressed to the hills about your child's exam how do you expect them to be cool, calm and collected? You need to deal with your own stress issues before you can tackle theirs. If a child feels that you are stressed out they will react in the same way.

- Keep it in perspective

Assure your child that as important as the junior and leaving certificate are they are not the be-all-and-end-all. Keep reminding your child that this is just one thing they have to overcome, one small period of their lives. They do have options even if the junior and leaving certificate exams do not go well. There are always options.

- Keep positive

If you're not positive it will rub off on your child. Keep the positive statements and encouragement up. Don't fob your child off though with a "You'll be fine" when they speak about stress or anxiety. You may be dismissing an important request for help.

- Encourage Breaks

Of course constant interruptions late nights and phone calls won't help anyone to concentrate, but don't rule out socialising altogether. Relaxing is valuable to combating stress. After all who else understand the stresses and strains of exam period than your child's peers. Getting out a good walk may be just the tool to refresh them during long study periods!

A good relaxation CD, such as Exam Buster, is a great tool to help kids get off to sleep and helps promote self belief through mental exam dress rehearsal. (It's on special offer at www.ichievement.com at €9.99 reduced from €20!) Get one for yourself if you are feeling the pressure to much – remember, 'it's not you, it's them!'

Food

Poor nutrition is associated with a whole range of performance impediments. A blank mind can be cause by zinc deficiency, memory problems are often associated with amino acid deficiency and stress and the inability to focus is often a side effect of not having enough essential fatty acids. Ensure your child is eating a balanced diet. Fish oils are known for their properties to help with concentration, they are readily available and can be a good study aid!

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Try and keep their intake of caffeine, processed food and refined sugar to a minimum. Refined sugar and caffeine lead to energy swings, lethargy and cravings, Instead of buying in chocolate keep plenty of fruit in the house.

Sleep

Although staying up late to cram is tempting it may actually be detrimental to your child's performance. Sleep allows the information to be processed. The longer the sleep the easier it will be to recall the previous day's learning. The Exam Buster CD is a great sleep aid!!

- Avoid nagging and threatening

This can be totally counter-productive, no-body wants to be told what to do especially when the thing they are avoiding is not that enjoyable in the first place. Resist the temptation to threaten children into studying. Threatening to keep them indoors, or switch off the tv or playstation is not as effective as positively motivating student towards study. It's all about reducing the pressure that children feel and encouraging them to do their best at the same time. A tough task!

Best of luck!