

The Parents' Guide to Managing exam nerves



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Exam anxiety

It's perfectly natural for your child to be worried about taking exams and how they will perform – you might even be a little worried too! In small doses, anxiety can be a good thing: helping your child to focus, get motivated to study and even recall answers they were unaware they'd learnt.

Prolonged periods or bouts of intense anxiety may have a negative impact, but there are lots of ways you can help them

manage this anxiety and use routines to help keep them calm. If you haven't introduced them to some of these techniques already, we've included some suggestions.

However, in some cases there can be times when anxiety reaches exceptional levels and professional support is required. How can you tell the difference?

IT'S GOOD TO BE AWARE OF THE SIGNS OF ANXIETY SO YOU CAN WATCH OUT FOR THEM



Signs of anxiety and stress

It's good to be aware of the signs of anxiety and stress so you can watch out for them. A change in behaviour for a day or two might be nothing to worry about, but if you notice a regular change, then it's usually a sign that something is wrong. Some of the more common signs of anxiety include:

- Losing interest in things they've previously enjoyed;
- Behaving in the opposite way to usual – quiet children can become very chatty, chatty children can get withdrawn;
- Being grumpy and irritable;
- Lots of headaches and digestive problems (stomach aches, diarrhoea, constipation, vomiting etc);
- Worrying all the time, this can show itself in only picturing negative outcomes (what if I fail, I'm going to fail, I can't do this);
- Talking over and over the same concern and being unable to either stop thinking about it or to find relief;
- Physical symptoms (sweaty palms, shaking, fast heartbeat, aching muscles);
- Restlessness and being unable to stay still;
- Inability to concentrate (such as taking in what's happening in a TV programme);
- Panic attacks;
- Not sleeping.

Remember to keep perspective. If they have had several late nights, they are likely to be tired and this increases irritability. If they've been exercising, they might have aching muscles. If they've just run to meet you, they'll have a fast heart rate. Individual or a short-term combination of the symptoms are normal.



How you can help

If you notice your child is suffering, it's time to help them. That doesn't always mean you stepping in (that could add to the anxiety) although it's good to let them know you've noticed something's wrong and give them a chance to talk to you if they want to. Avoid broaching the subject in front of others, this could make them feel embarrassed or inadequate and make them feel worse (they might think they are doing a job good of hiding it). Don't forget, the aim isn't to eliminate anxiety but to teach them how to manage it.

There are two ways to help. Encourage them to take part in an activity that will provide a distraction so they stop thinking about whatever is making them anxious. Giving the brain some time out from worrying can help obtain a better perspective later.

Physical activities – It doesn't matter what activity - dancing, football, swimming, walking – so long as it's something they enjoy, gets their endorphins flowing and requires focus so the mind is concentrating on something different. Team games are great, as connectivity and communications with others is restorative.

Music – Music has an amazing ability to transport you to a different time and place. Anything that evokes positive memories and experiences is a good thing. To reduce anxiety, it's better to listen to relaxing and calming music rather than something that stimulates.

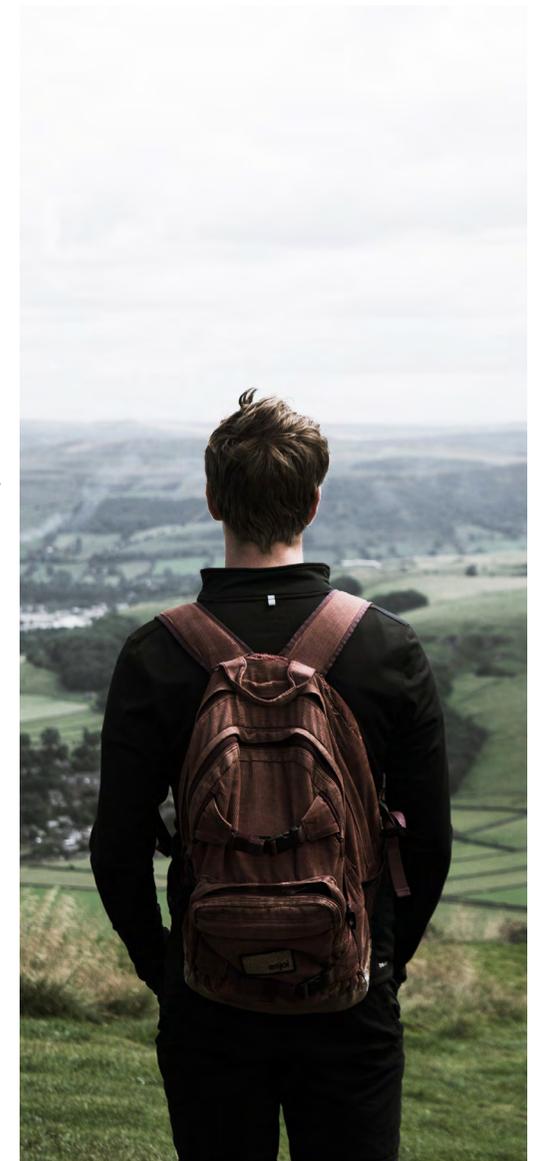
Talking – it may not be to you! A sibling, grandparent, family friend or friend at school or perhaps a charity chatline. Expressing worries out loud can sometimes make them feel less significant than when they're playing on loop in the mind. Talking aloud also encourages finding their own solutions – prompts



such as 'what would need to happen to make you feel better', can help them reframe to seeking solutions rather than dwelling on troubles.

Avoiding stimulants – bright lights, loud music, caffeine, sugar, alcohol, too much excitement (a thrilling computer game, exciting movie) can all promote adrenaline production and increase feelings of anxiety, so these are best avoided.

Reducing lighting (have dimmable lights or table lamps in the bedroom) also helps to increase feelings of calm and can help prepare for sleep.



The second way to help is to provide an opportunity for them to learn some proven techniques which help reduce anxiety. It's a really good idea for your child to practise some of these methods when they're not anxious, so they can familiarise themselves with the approaches and get comfortable with the experience and how it makes them feel. Then, should anxiety strike, it's something they're relaxed about doing. Regularly practising relaxation techniques helps keep anxiety at bay too. Some good choices are:

Mindfulness with meditation, breathing techniques, visualisation or yoga. Anxiety can induce rapid, shallow breathing which encourages the heart to beat faster to try and compensate for lack of oxygen. Learning slow breathing and how to take deep breaths has an immediate physical effect and is particularly useful in preventing anxiety escalating. Meditation, visualisation and yoga all encourage positive breathing techniques.

Apps like Headspace can be loaded on the phone so your child readily has help to hand in any place at any time.

Practising yoga regularly has been proven to improve the heart rate as well as physical strength. Meditation transports the mind to a completely different place and experience. There are many different types of meditation including auditory (describing experiences) and visual (looking at something). These activities can be done in short or long bursts and alone or in groups, which makes them ideal to put into practise when on the go or needing a ready tool when nerves strike.

Herbs and smells – For centuries we've used herbs and smells to invoke different atmospheres. Essential oils can be burnt in diffusers, added to baths, placed on candles, mixed with water as a spritz or poured on a tissue (great for on the go and to pop in a pocket) and are inexpensive to buy. Some useful staples are: lemon (promotes concentration and calming); lavender (reduces stress and can help sleep), jasmine (uplifting and calming), peppermint (invigorating so helps to clear the mind) and rosemary (acts as a pick-me-up).

Herbal teas are a great caffeine free hot drink and, as well as benefiting from the smell, the herbs work within the system too. Try camomile, peppermint, lavender or lemon balm.

PRACTICING RELAXATION
TECHNIQUES CAN HELP
REDUCE FEELINGS OF
ANXIETY



Reflecting on your own behaviour

A common reason for children being anxious is the expectation their parents have and the worry that they cannot live up to that and will let everyone down. You may unwittingly be putting pressure on your child by being positive about how well they will do. You may think you're being reassuring by saying, "of course you're going to pass every exam" and expressing your faith in them; they may misinterpret what you mean and take it that if they don't pass every exam you'll be disappointed and think less of them.

That's why it's a good idea to focus on effort rather than outcomes: "I'm really impressed that you finished your revision this afternoon" gives positive reinforcement for something good that's

been achieved, rather than "Well done, all that revision's really going to help you pass your exams" which sets an expectation for a future event yet to be achieved.

There are other options

As an adult with your own life experience, you know that doing well in exams will open doors and provide lots of opportunities to succeed. You're keen to make their life easier. But exams are not for everyone, and if your child doesn't do well in theirs, there are plenty of other options and lots of routes to success. Keep this front of mind so you don't give them the impression the world starts and ends with their exams.

REDUCE EXAM NERVES BY
FOCUSING ON EFFORT
RATHER THAN OUTCOMES



Useful links



Where to get support

Professional support includes more than counsellors and psychiatrists (although both these approaches can be helpful). There's a range of professional options available including:

1. Teachers at school – both in an academic capacity to help understand subjects better, as tutors to help create better ways of working outside school and pastoral experts who can help with emotional issues;
2. Some schools have an independent counsellor available with whom your children can talk in confidence (i.e. they will not relay the information to the school);
3. Peer support networks – these can be very helpful as speaking to someone of

a similar age can sometimes feel easier than speaking to an adult, or speaking to someone just slightly older, who has more recently been through a similar experience can be very reassuring;

4. Charities – most now offer both online and telephone support. This anonymity (i.e. not being face-to-face) can make talking over problems and worries easier.

Too much anxiety

If your child is showing several signs of anxiety on a regular basis (several days each week) over a prolonged period of time (several weeks) then do seek help from external support services and a good place to start might be visiting your GP.

