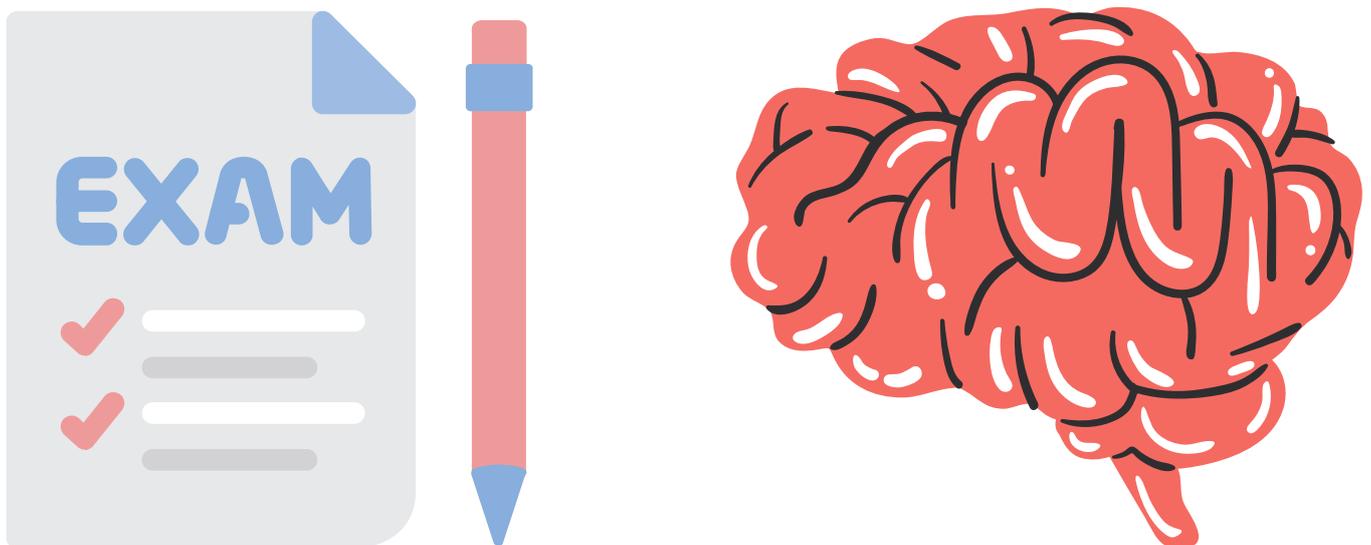




PREPARING FOR EXAMS

A guide to managing your mental health



WHY YOUR MENTAL HEALTH ALWAYS COMES FIRST

We all have mental health, just like physical health. We know that if we wanted to run a marathon, we would have to do a LOT of training over a period of time. We would also have to eat the right foods, get the right running shoes and rest frequently to avoid injury. This seems obvious, yet we often disregard the health of our minds and put unrealistic expectations on ourselves when it comes to exams. To put it simply, if we don't look after our mental health and make it a priority, we CANNOT expect our brains to learn, memorise and perform the way we want.

SOME STRESS IS GOOD FOR US

The stress response is very natural and necessary. Like animals, our bodies release stress hormones when we are in danger, helping us to fight/flight or freeze in order to survive. It keeps us safe, motivates us and has helped humanity to progress for centuries.

In the modern world, we no longer have bears to run from, but our bodies have the same stress response to perceived 'dangers'. A certain amount of stress is very good for us, as demonstrated by the Yerkes Dodson Law:



Think of a time when you have given a 'peak performance' or felt you did your best. This is how we want to feel when we're about to take an exam - prepared, ready, focused, maybe even excited. This is POSITIVE stress. But if we're not careful, our stress levels can tip into exhaustion, burnout and anxiety.

SIGNS OF NEGATIVE STRESS

If our bodies experience the stress response frequently or for prolonged periods, we can experience a whole range of symptoms, including nausea, stomach aches, tightness in the chest, difficulty breathing, tearfulness, headaches, trembling, and more. We can find it much harder to concentrate, experience repetitive negative thoughts, become more forgetful, make poor judgements, become irritable or aggressive and have difficulty making decisions. This can cause some people to overwork and others to procrastinate/avoid.

MANAGING STRESS & ANXIETY

A stress-free life doesn't exist and 'stressors' (exams, work, relationships, environment, money, etc) will always be in our lives. But we CAN do some simple things every day to rid our bodies of unpleasant stress chemicals and bring ourselves back to a state of calm. These include:

Movement (this can be gentle or sweaty, whatever works for you).

Breathing - try sitting quietly and breathe in for 5 seconds and breathe out for 7 seconds for 1-2 minutes. Try and do this 3 times a day to slow down your response.

Social interaction - be with people who make you feel GOOD. Laughter and affection lower cortisol levels.

Creativity - do something creative or just enjoy listening to music. Doing something you enjoy mindfully can quieten loud, negative thoughts.

Crying - having a good cry releases endorphins (the same chemical we get when we exercise) and can instantly improve our mood.

Get outside - get outside for bursts of natural light throughout the day, to immediately improve your focus and mood.

WHEN WE'RE HIGHLY STRESSED

When we're feeling highly stressed or anxious, it is helpful to remember the following:

A = Acceptance. Notice that your body has gone into a stress response and pay attention to where you're feeling it in your body.

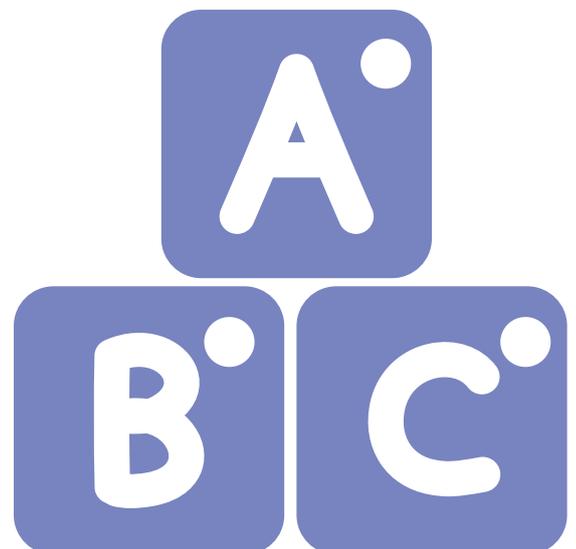
B = Breathe. Sit quietly and take some deep breaths (above). This helps to lower your heartrate and bring you back to a state of calm.

C = Compassion. Don't try and fight it and remember that it WILL pass. Tell yourself "I am here and I am safe" and do NOT beat yourself for feeling this way.

The more we can learn to tolerate discomfort and trust that the feeling will pass (however painful), the more resilient we become in dealing with stress and anxiety in the future.

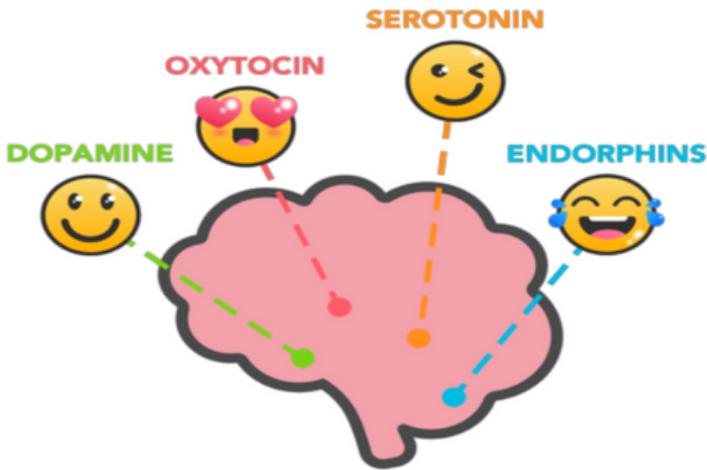
It is also important to talk to someone you trust and feel comfortable with. Be honest about how you feel and the thoughts you're experiencing. Sharing them out loud can help to disarm their power and make them feel less intrusive.

At the end of this booklet there are some useful organisations, apps and helplines for extra support.



FEEL GOOD CHEMICALS

We know how bad we can feel when we're flooded with stress chemicals, so how can we get more positive chemicals in our system?



DOPAMINE Enables motivation, learning and pleasure

OXYTOCIN Feeling of trust, motivates you to build & sustain relationships

SEROTONIN Experience of social power or confidence in accepting yourself

ENDORPHIN A brief euphoria to mask physical pain

This graphic shows how we feel when we lack these chemicals and what we can do to increase them:

- procrastination
- low self-esteem
- lack of motivation
- low energy or fatigue
- inability to focus
- feeling anxious
- feeling hopeless
- mood swings



- feeling lonely
- stressed
- lack of motivation
- low energy or fatigue
- disconnect of relationships
- feeling anxious
- insomnia



- low self-esteem
- overly sensitive
- anxiety/panic attacks
- mood swings
- feeling hopeless
- social phobia
- obsession/compulsion
- insomnia



- anxiety
- depression
- mood swings
- aches and pains
- insomnia
- impulsive behaviour



How to Increase Happiness Levels

- meditate
- daily to do list
- long term goals
- food rich in L-Tyrosine
- exercise regularly
- create something: writing, music or art

- physical touch
- socializing
- massage
- acupuncture
- listening to music
- exercise
- cold shower
- meditate

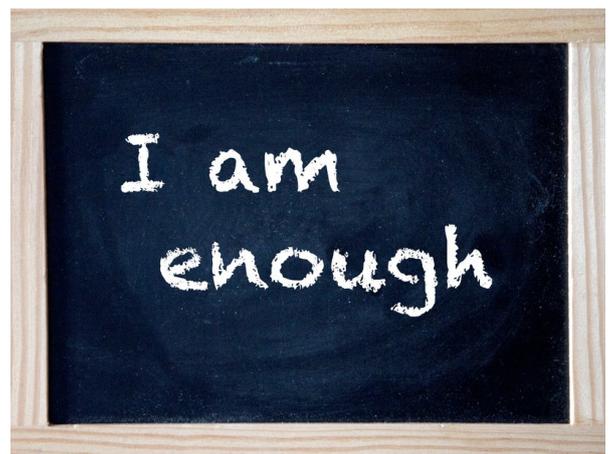
- exercise
- cold showers
- sunlight
- massage

- laughter/crying
- creating music/art
- eat dark chocolate
- eat spicy foods
- exercise/stretching
- massage
- meditate

A MENTALLY HEALTHY APPROACH TO EXAMS

Here are some simple steps to help you get in the right headspace to revise:

- **Use affirmations** - put them in your bedroom, on your mirror, on your phone, wherever you can see them. Pinterest and Instagram have some great examples, so find something that works for you. Examples include, "I am enough", "I accept myself for who I am", "I've got this".
- **Prioritise your sleep** - without enough sleep, we CANNOT function well. Aim for at least 8 hours per night, plan when you need to be asleep and try to wind down (without tech) 1-2 hours before you sleep.
- **Do more of what you love** - it sounds odd when you've got so much work to do, but you'll be more focused and productive if you've given yourself breaks to do the things that make you feel good. List what these are and plan to do them in between revision. Use Brene Brown's DIG approach to make sure that what you're doing has purpose and not just avoiding/procrastinating:
D - Deliberate - "I'm going to watch a TV show that makes me laugh"
I - Inspired - "In watching it, I'll feel good and ready to tackle more work"
G - Get going - Do it and set a time limit for returning to work.
- **Be aware of distraction/procrastination** - when we're not enjoying ourselves, we are easily distracted and find it hard to motivate ourselves. Identify your distractions and plan to remove them before working.



WORRIES AND 'OVERTHINKING'

Many students say that they find it hard to 'switch off' and have repetitive negative thoughts. An effective strategy is to write it down (old school pad/pen) or record it (a note app or voice recording on your phone). List everything that is on your mind - from worries to things that make you feel angry or down. This can help to unscramble your jumbled thoughts and take away their power. Natasha Devon (mental health activist) suggests writing 3 lists:

- Things I can control
- Things I need help with
- Things I can't control

This helps to identify what needs our attention and more importantly, what doesn't. Take the list of 'things I can't control' (which should include your exam grades) and TEAR IT UP. You will see that there are SO many things that are completely out of our control, and that's ok, but they don't need to take up important space in your head.

If you find that intrusive worries or negative thoughts come up throughout the day and evening, try a technique called 'worry time'. This means marking out a period in your day (no more than 30 mins) where you can focus on your worries and write them down. When unwelcome thoughts/worries come up at other times in the day, you can make a note of them and 'postpone' them until your worry time. This is a simple but powerful tool for creating control and boundaries with your thoughts.

REVISION STRATEGIES

In 'Yes You Can', Natasha Devon outlines some simple ideas for managing revision and exam preparation:

- Prioritise your work by making 3 lists:
 1. Subjects/topics I love
 2. Subjects/topics I hate
 3. Subjects/topics I'm behind on

If you're finding it hard to get going, you might want to start with a subject you enjoy, but aim to study the subjects you're behind on/hate first.

- Have a pre-work routine:
 1. Brain Dump - talk to someone or write down any negative thoughts
 2. Change - get into comfortable clothes (i.e. NOT your uniform)
 3. Refuel - eat/drink for sustained energy. Avoid too much caffeine/sugar
- Aim for no more than 2.5 hours' revision per night and always take breaks. This could be done a number of ways:
 - 1 hour study - 30 min break - 1 hour study
 - 40 min study - 20 min break - 40 min study - 10 min break - 40 min study
 - 30 min study - 10 min break x 4
- Set yourself up to succeed - go back to your list of distractions and remove them whilst you are working. It might mean tidying your room, putting your phone in another room or in airplane mode and asking others in your house to help by being quiet or not disturbing you.
- If you're working on a computer and find other websites (e.g. You Tube) too tempting, then you can go to <https://freedom.to/> to block certain websites for a short period of time, to help sustain your focus.
- Find a routine that works for you and stick to it!

USEFUL RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

Worry Time:

<https://www.studenthealthatshu.co.uk/website/C88007/files/The%20Worry%20Time%20Technique.pdf>

Clear Fear app for managing Anxiety:

www.clearfear.co.uk/

Sam app for managing Anxiety:

<https://www.mindgarden-tech.co.uk/>

Mee Two online community support:

www.meetwo.co.uk/

Young Minds:

www.youngminds.org.uk

Shout FREE text service: text 'SHOUT' to 85258

Childline: 0800 111

Samaritans: Call 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org



Natalie Hunt
Mental Health & Wellbeing Coordinator
OX14 Learning Partnership