



# How to de-stress your child

Help for parents ahead of school exams

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for IAPS



# How to de-stress your child: help for parents ahead of school exams

Taking exams can be one of the most stressful times in your child's life. With exam season looming, Priory's Dr Hayley Van Zwanenberg talks about ways that parents can help to reduce exam stress in their children.

As a consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist, and Priory Group's associate medical director, Dr Van Zwanenberg says, "Every child has stressful situations to cope with, which can include bullying, and disputes with friends and parents.

However, many also struggle with huge exam pressures and when exams end, the stress of waiting for results begins. Exams can't be prevented, but young people and parents can learn to cope with exam stress in healthier ways."

## Top tips for parents to reduce exam stress

1. Remind your child it's normal to experience emotions such as sadness, anger and anxiety around exam time, but these don't last forever.
2. Young people often 'catastrophise' and believe they will fail. Help them to look at evidence of their hard work, so they can challenge irrational thinking.
3. Help children to form a plan so even if their results are not what they hope for, there are options and a future.
4. Remind your child you love them unconditionally.
5. Encourage them to talk to you about how they're feeling and explain you have felt like that too in times of stress.
6. Don't put pressure on your child to revise. Remind them that they will feel satisfied if they know they have tried their best, and therefore they need a healthy balance of revision and relaxation.
7. Let your child know they can always contact a supportive charity such as ChildLine or the Samaritans if they need a confidential discussion.
8. Make sure your child turns off all screens an hour before bed, as looking at a screen may prevent them from getting to sleep.
9. Encourage them to exercise each day; it will help improve their mood and sleep.
10. If your child is suffering intense stress, try to distract them. You could:
  - Watch a film together, read a funny book, watch humorous clips on the internet, look at old photos of yourself or them as a baby
  - Encourage your child to build a brick wall, metaphorically, between themselves and their stressful thoughts. Encourage them to avoid worrying about their exams except for short periods, say 10 minutes, morning and night. This is not suggesting they don't revise, but that they block out the worry.

- Get your child to think of a relaxing memory as a safe place to go to in their head, and ask them to describe it to you in detail. This can help them relax and distract them from their worries. With practice, they can take themselves back there in their head at times of stress.

If children have intense emotions, Dr Van Zwanenberg suggests, “Tell your child to hold some ice really tightly; as the ice melts they might feel their tension melt away. If the anxiety does not seem to improve, it is important to seek help from your GP. Your doctor can refer your child to a psychiatrist to receive therapy, which can make a significant difference in a short period. Medical experts can also liaise with schools and recommend extra time in exams for your child or suggest they sit exams in smaller rooms with fewer peers. Remind yourself and your child that there is help available.”

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