

What is exam stress?

Stress can be defined as "The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them." (Health and Safety Executive)

Stress is not in itself an illness – it is a state. However, if stress becomes too excessive and prolonged, mental and physical illness may develop

Closely linked to stress, is the feeling of anxiety. Anxiety is a feeling of fear or panic. Like stress, feeling generally anxious sometimes is perfectly normal. Most people worry about something - money or exams - but once the difficult situation is over, you feel better and calm down. However, if the problem has gone, but the feeling of fear or panic stays or even gets stronger, anxiety can become a problem.

Feelings of stress and anxiety in relation to exams can start when a young person feels they can't cope with revision, or they experience real or perceived pressure from their school or family. For a young person it can sometimes feel like their whole future depends on what grades they get.

Without effective coping strategies, stresses about exams can affect young people's ability to sleep, trigger anxiety, depression and tearfulness, and eating disorders. In some cases it can also lead to self-harm and/or suicidal feelings.

Key then for a young person, their parents, and the professionals in contact with that young person are the following things:

- The ability to recognise when stress and anxiety is normal, and when it has become excessive and prolonged.
- Healthy coping strategies to effectively respond to and manage feelings of stress and anxiety.
- Knowledge of support available to a young person should stress and anxiety become excessive and prolonged

What do we know about exam stress?

Figures from ChildLine have revealed a sharp rise in the number of school-children contacting them because they were worried about exam stress.

In 2015/16, ChildLine carried out 3077 counselling sessions about exam stress, a rise of 9% on 2014/15. There was also a rise of 20% of concerns about exam results, with 1127 counselling sessions in 2015/16 compared to 2014/15.

Major themes that young people contact ChildLine with include:

- Not wanting to disappoint their parents
- Fear of failure
- General pressures linked to academic achievement.

ChildLine (2011) have also found that 92% of young people feel anxious about revision and exams, with some vulnerable young people turning to alcohol (14%) and self-harm (8%) to cope.

There are also other sources for information on young people's experience of exam stress. The Prince's Trust (2013) found that while young people were waiting for their exam results, one in five said that the worry was affecting their health, one in six said they had experienced panic attacks and more than one in 10 said they were unable to sleep at night.

A survey by the Scout Association (2007) also revealed that 90% of teenagers in the UK (aged between 13-18-years-old) felt under pressure to achieve high grades at school and in exams.

We also know that exam stress is an issue in Hertfordshire. Our schools participate every two years in the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire (HRBQ). In the most recent survey, secondary school aged boys and girls both identified exams and tests as the thing they worry about most in life, with one in ten pupils saying they had been away from school in the past month due to worries about school.

Even at primary school, while 'family' caused the most worries for this age group, more than a third of pupils worry quite a lot or a lot about SATs and tests.

What's currently on offer?

Young people

For many, self-help tools and information will be sufficient to develop strategies to cope with and manage exam stress. There are many websites that offer information and tools for young people. Some of the key local and national ones are listed below:

<http://www.healthforteens.co.uk/feelings/exam-stress/tips-techniques-for-surviving-exam-stress/>

<http://www.youthconnexions-hertfordshire.org/careers/info-on-education-and-learning/learning/exams-and-revision/?id=>

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/teengirls/Pages/examsense.aspx>

<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/school-college-and-work/school-college/exam-stress/>

Young people can also access free, safe and anonymous support from <https://kooth.com/>

Or contact their school nurse via text (Chat Health) on 07480 635050

Schools

There are also a number of things that schools can do in order to help to reduce the impact of exam stress on their students.

- Review current PSHE offering to ensure that pupils are taught about healthy coping strategies, and given opportunities to build resilience and self-esteem
- Young Minds have developed a number of toolkits, slides, and resources to look at topics related to exam stress, such as academic resilience, including slides for those working with children with learning disabilities
<https://youngminds.org.uk/resources/tools-and-toolkits/academic-resilience-resources/>
- Review and promote the emotional support available for pupils within your school.
- Ensure staff are confident in spotting early signs of mental ill health, through training such as Mental Health First Aid Youth, My Teen Brain, and online training such as www.MindEd.org.uk

- Consider whether specific exam stress training may be useful e.g. Herts for Learning offer exam stress training for school staff, and also offer staff wellbeing sessions
- Some schools are involved in the Youth Health Champions programme coordinated by YC Hertfordshire. This takes a peer support approach to promoting health and wellbeing, and includes a mental health component.
- Pastoral leads networks are available in all districts across Hertfordshire. This provides an opportunity for secondary schools to discuss issues that they face and hear about the support available to them

Parents

For parents looking to be more informed about exam stress, the professional and young person information can be useful. There is also the Young Minds Parent Line if a parent is looking for some advice: 0800 802 5544 (this can also be used by professionals)

Free online mental health information and e-learning can also be accessed via <https://www.minded.org.uk/families/index.html#/>

NHS choices also offers advice for parents on how to support their child through exams <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/Coping-with-exam-stress.aspx>

Planned future developments

- A multi-agency team are currently developing an anxiety toolkit for schools. This will also include an exam stress component.
- The Public Health team are piloting exam stress training with schools, working with pupils, parents and school professionals
- Public Health are working to identify examples of best practice in relation to Mindfulness approaches to managing stress and anxiety in schools

Key Stakeholders:

- Primary schools (around SATs) –head-teachers and staff
- Secondary schools – head-teachers and staff
- Parents
- Children and young people
- School Governors
- School nurses
- Central Government/Ofsted
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
- Clinical Commissioning Groups
- Public Health
- Herts for Learning

For further information please contact:

Jen Beer jen.beer@hertfordshire.gov.uk

Health Improvement Lead – Children and Young People
Public Health team, Hertfordshire County Council