



EXAM STRESS:
don't worry,
be happy, healthy and organised

Exam stress can be a big problem for some students, often resulting in a fear of failure that defeats them even before they put pen to paper.

The good news is that exam stress can be avoided and parents have the power to help their children get around it altogether.

Child psychologist Dr Marilyn Campbell says a little stress and anxiety can sometimes help motivate students to prepare for exams and perform at their best.

“You don’t want to avoid it completely, but you don’t want it to take over so it impairs exam preparation by procrastination and exam performance by freezing,” Dr Campbell says.

So to avoid excessive worry and stress, parents should help their children prepare for exams and manage their physical and mental health.

Positive attitude

Dr Campbell says it’s important for children to know that it’s not the end of the world if they don’t do well. She advises young people to adopt a positive attitude.

“Think positive, use affirmations, tell yourself you will give it your best shot,” she says.

“Calm yourself before the exam by doing something that works for you — relaxation, going for a run, listening to music.

“Adequate exercise, healthy eating and regular sleep are also keys to staying in top shape for exams,” she says.

Springwood High School Senior Guidance Officer Bronwyn Fossey says parents should prepare their children for testing times with simple organisation of their school commitments throughout the year.

She says the art of being organised should be taught when children are in junior school.

“I find that students get really stressed when assignments are due and by the time they realise, it’s too late and they don’t have time to do the work,” Ms Fossey says.

“These are the students who are disorganised and the same students get stressed when it comes to exams as well.”

Ms Fossey says students need to be shown how to organise and plan their school work throughout the year.

She says if they can show their parents what school work they have, what assignments are due and when, they can learn to plan and organise their time and she has a practical idea to make it work.

“Children will always understand planning ahead when they can see the plans in front of them,” she says.

Monthly chart

“Parents can get students to draw up a monthly chart of their schedule, get them to colour-code their projects, show all their due dates for the month and put it up on a wall in their room where they and their parents can see it clearly.”

Ms Fossey says those students who organise their work throughout the year are well prepared when it comes time for examinations too.

“It really is important to help students monitor their time. The ability to plan and organise doesn’t come naturally, it has to be taught,” she says.

As Deputy Director of Student Services at the Queensland University of Technology, Malcolm McKenzie spends much of his time advising young people about how to manage stress around exam time and suggests a range of practical techniques.

He says perceptions of how a student should perform can affect actual exam performance.

Mr McKenzie says the person who believes they are likely to perform poorly will often realise that expectation, even where they might otherwise have succeeded.

“The person who sets unrealistic expectations, seeking perfection, will inevitably fall short and the unrealistic demands placed on them will have created extra stress,” he says.

“Don’t set unrealistic expectations. Aim to do the best that is possible with the personal resources that are available at that time and accept the result that eventuates.

“Learn from the situation and seek to determine what might be done differently next time.”

Toowoomba Catholic Education School counsellor Cathy Perkins says there are signs parents should watch out for that might indicate their child is overstressed.

Signs of stress

- Changes in behaviour
- Lots of negative self-talk (e.g. I am going to fail, I’ll never get through all this study)
- Irritability
- Quick to get into arguments or get angry
- Cutting off from usual routine (e.g. friends, family, sport)
- Avoidance of study (e.g. might be excessive sleeping)

What parents can do

- Keep calm, and try not to get angry
- Help their child put exams into perspective – remind them of previous successes and other times they’ve got through exams
- If there is an older sibling or someone else close who has been through exams, get them to give some tips
- Ensure their child is taking time-out and doing something relaxing or enjoyable
- Help with time management and planning

