EXAM ANXIETY, STRESS & REVISION

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR STUDENTS AND PARENTS

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Helping students feel calmer, revise more effectively and approach exams with greater confidence.

A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Some nervousness before an exam is normal and can even help with focus. The aim is not to remove every anxious feeling, but to keep stress at a manageable level so that preparation and performance are not disrupted.

This guide offers general educational and wellbeing information. It is not a substitute for individual medical or mental-health advice.

1. UNDERSTANDING EXAM ANXIETY

Exam anxiety is the worry, tension or physical stress that can appear before or during tests. It may show up weeks beforehand, the night before an exam, or only when a student sits down in the exam hall.

Common signs to look out for

Thoughts	Feelings & body	Behaviour
“I’m going to fail.”	Racing heart	Avoiding revision
Going blank	Butterflies or nausea	Procrastinating
Difficulty concentrating	Tension, headaches, poor sleep	Over-revising without breaks
Comparing yourself with others	Irritability	Repeatedly checking notes
Catastrophising one bad result	Feeling tearful or overwhelmed	Skipping meals or sleep
	Restlessness	Wanting to avoid the exam

> **REMEMBER**
>
> A stressful thought is not a prediction. “I feel nervous” does not mean “I will do badly”. Preparation, routines and simple coping techniques can reduce the impact of anxiety.

What can make exam stress worse?

- Leaving revision until the last minute or trying to cover too much in one sitting.
- Unclear expectations: not knowing what is on the exam, how marks are awarded or what a good answer looks like.
- Comparing revision hours, grades or confidence with friends and classmates.
- Poor sleep, irregular meals, dehydration and excessive caffeine or energy drinks.
- Treating every practice-paper score as a judgement rather than information about what to work on next.

A more helpful way to think about exams

An exam is a chance to demonstrate what you know at that point in time. It is important, but it does not define a student's intelligence, worth or future. The most useful focus is on controllable actions: preparing well, practising the right material, looking after basic needs and using sound exam technique.

2. MANAGING STRESS BEFORE THE EXAM

Use a small number of reliable routines consistently. Complicated wellbeing plans often become another thing to worry about.

Step	Routine
1	Make the workload visible. List the topics that need attention and split them into small, specific tasks. “Complete 10 simultaneous-equation questions” is easier to start than “revise algebra”.
2	Work in focused blocks. A useful starting point is around 25–45 minutes of focused work followed by a short break. Adjust the length to suit the student, but avoid hours of unfocused reading.
3	Protect sleep. Keep a broadly consistent bedtime and stop intense revision shortly before bed. A rested brain is better placed to recall and apply knowledge.
4	Keep the body steady. Eat regular meals, drink water, move each day and be cautious with large amounts of caffeine or energy drinks, particularly later in the day.
5	Plan the evening before. Pack equipment, check the exam time and location, and decide what breakfast and travel will look like. Removing small uncertainties can reduce morning stress.

Helpful self-talk

Instead of…	Try…
“I have to get everything right.”	“I can collect marks one question at a time.”
“I don’t know any of this.”	“I will start with what I recognise and build from there.”
“Everyone else is more prepared.”	“Their revision is not my task. I will follow my plan.”
“One bad question means the exam is ruined.”	“I can move on, earn marks elsewhere and return later.”

3. EFFECTIVE REVISION: WORK SMARTER, NOT JUST LONGER

Effective revision should make the student retrieve, apply and check knowledge. Simply rereading notes can feel productive because the material looks familiar, but exams require students to produce methods and answers without the notes in front of them.

The five-part revision cycle

1. Identify — Use a topic list, specification, recent test or teacher feedback to decide what needs work.
2. Recall — Close the notes and write down the facts, formulae, definitions or steps you can remember.
3. Practise — Answer questions without looking at worked solutions. For maths, doing questions is the core of revision.
4. Mark — Check answers carefully. Do not just record a score—identify exactly where marks were lost.
5. Revisit — Return to weaker material after a gap. Spacing revision over time helps make recall more durable.

Maths revision that produces progress

- Do questions, not just notes. Use short sets of targeted questions when learning a topic, then mix topics once confidence improves.
- Keep an error log. For each mistake, record the topic, what went wrong and what you will do differently next time.
- Redo incorrect questions later without looking at the original solution. A corrected answer immediately after seeing the method is not yet secure learning.
- Use past papers strategically. Early on, use individual questions by topic; closer to the exam, complete full papers under realistic timing.
- Mark using the official mark scheme where possible. Learn what earns method marks and where working needs to be shown.
- Practise without a safety net. Some sessions should be completed without notes, videos or hints so that revision resembles the demands of the exam.
- Mix easy, medium and challenging questions. Confidence grows from success, but progress also requires appropriately difficult practice.

> **THE ERROR-LOG QUESTION**
>
> After every mistake, ask: Was this a knowledge gap, a method error, a calculator/accuracy error, a misread question, or a time-pressure problem? The answer tells you what to fix.

A SIMPLE 45-MINUTE MATHS REVISION SESSION

Time	Activity	Purpose
5 min	Recall key facts or methods from memory	Wake up prior knowledge
25 min	Complete targeted or mixed exam questions	Active practice
10 min	Mark carefully and analyse mistakes	Turn errors into feedback
5 min	Redo one error and choose the next topic	Close the loop

4. Planning revision without becoming overwhelmed

A revision timetable should reduce decisions, not create guilt. Keep it realistic and leave spare time for topics that take longer than expected.

A practical weekly approach

- Start with fixed commitments: school, tuition, clubs, family plans, meals and sleep.
- Add a manageable number of revision blocks rather than filling every free hour.
- Prioritise weaker or high-value topics, while still revisiting stronger topics to maintain fluency.
- Mix subjects across the week. For maths, aim for frequent contact rather than one very long weekly session.
- Include catch-up space. Missing one planned session should not make the whole timetable collapse.
- Schedule rest and enjoyable activities deliberately; recovery is part of a sustainable revision plan.

> **QUALITY BEATS A PERFECT-LOOKING TIMETABLE**
>
> A simple plan that a student follows is more useful than a colour-coded schedule that is too ambitious. Review the plan each week and adjust it using actual progress.

5. ON THE DAY OF THE EXAM

Before the exam

- Eat something familiar, drink water and arrive with enough time to avoid rushing.
- Bring the required equipment and, for maths, check calculator mode and batteries where relevant.
- Avoid last-minute conversations about how many hours everyone revised or predictions about difficult topics.
- Use brief reminders rather than trying to learn a whole new topic immediately before entering the room.

During the exam

- Read the instructions carefully and note the total time available.
- Start with a question you can engage with if the paper structure allows it; early marks can help settle nerves.
- Show working. In maths, a correct method can earn marks even when the final answer is wrong.
- If stuck, write down relevant information, try a first step, then move on and return later.
- Keep an eye on time, but do not repeatedly check the clock after every question.
- Leave time to check signs, units, rounding, calculator entries and whether every question has been attempted.

If your mind goes blank

> **USE THE FIRST-STEP RULE**
>
> Do not demand the whole solution at once. Write what the question gives you. Identify the topic. Write a formula, draw a diagram, label known values or complete the easiest operation you can see. One sensible first step often unlocks the next.

6. HOW PARENTS AND CARERS CAN HELP

Parents can make a significant difference by creating calm structure around revision without turning every conversation into a discussion about grades.

Helpful	Usually less helpful
Ask: "What would help you get started today?"	Repeatedly asking: "Have you revised yet?"
Praise specific effort, routines and improvement.	Focusing only on predicted grades or comparing with other students.
Help protect sleep, meals, breaks and a workable study space.	Encouraging very late nights to squeeze in more revision.
Listen first when a student is worried; problem-solve after.	Immediately dismissing worries with "you'll be fine".
Help break an overwhelming task into the next small step.	Trying to redesign the entire revision plan during a stressful moment.

Useful questions for a weekly check-in

- What went well with revision this week?
- Which topic still feels least secure?
- What did your mistakes tell you?
- Is the plan realistic for next week?
- What support do you need from me—quiet, resources, encouragement, or help organising time?

7. When to seek additional support

Extra support is appropriate when anxiety is persistent, feels difficult to manage, or is significantly affecting sleep, eating, attendance, revision, everyday activities or a student's ability to sit exams.

- Speak to the school or college, such as a form tutor, head of year, pastoral team, SENCO or examinations officer, especially if support or exam arrangements may be relevant.
- For health or mental-health concerns, speak to a GP or another appropriate healthcare professional.
- If a young person is in immediate danger or needs urgent help, use the appropriate emergency or urgent support service rather than relying on a revision guide.

> **SUPPORT IS A SENSIBLE RESPONSE, NOT A FAILURE**
>
> Exam stress can be managed, and asking for help early can prevent difficulties from escalating. The right support will depend on the individual student and the severity of the problem.

8. STUDENT QUICK-REFERENCE CHECKLIST

Use this page in the final weeks before an exam. Tick what is already in place and choose one or two items to improve next.

✓	Check	Focus
☐	My revision plan is realistic and includes breaks.	Planning
☐	I know which maths topics are strongest and weakest.	Priorities
☐	Most of my maths revision involves answering questions.	Practice
☐	I mark my work and keep track of recurring mistakes.	Feedback
☐	I return to mistakes and weaker topics after a gap.	Spacing
☐	I have completed timed exam-style questions or papers.	Exam practice
☐	I know what equipment I need for each exam.	Preparation
☐	I am protecting sleep, meals, water and some daily movement.	Wellbeing
☐	I have a simple breathing/grounding strategy for anxious moments.	Calm
☐	I know who I can speak to if exam stress becomes difficult to manage.	Support

A FINAL MESSAGE TO STUDENTS

Your job is not to feel perfectly confident. Your job is to prepare as well as you reasonably can, use the time and support available to you, and keep going one step at a time. A difficult question, a nervous morning or an imperfect practice score does not erase the work you have done.