

An emotionally healthy approach to GCSEs

A guide for teachers



The Charlie Waller Memorial Trust
Depression – let's get talking



It's no secret that GCSEs are a major cause of worry and anxiety each year and while, to a degree, this is to be expected, there are steps that can be taken by schools, parents and the students themselves to look after their emotional wellbeing during exam season.

Why is this important?

It is widely understood that positive health and wellbeing – including mental health – contribute to a child's ability to flourish, thrive and achieve (Public Health England, 2014), and equipping children with the skills to enhance their resilience against adversity will enable them to navigate challenges without compromising performance.

In 2015 - 2016 ChildLine reported that one in three calls were from children experiencing mental health difficulties, a nine per cent increase since 2014. The service facilitated a staggering 19,431 counselling sessions around thoughts of suicide among children, an increase of more than 1,500 compared to the previous year. If children and young people are nurtured in an environment that promotes positive wellbeing, not only are they likely to meet or exceed their potential while completing their GCSEs, but they will move into further education or employment with a greater degree of confidence.

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How do we do this?



Culture

There needs to be a whole-school approach to mental and emotional wellbeing, from the foundation years right through to years 12 and 13. This doesn't mean talking about GCSEs from nursery, but rather teaching positive coping skills on how to communicate about your feelings and how to manage when you encounter something difficult or upsetting.

Making space to talk about these things not only gives children 'permission' to express how they feel, it helps them to understand that emotions are global experiences common to everyone, which helps counter worries of being 'different' or 'ashamed'. Here are some steps that can be taken to foster this approach:

TOP TIPS

- **Start with the staff team!** Students are very perceptive and detect when morale is low or their teaching staff are stressed, unhappy or worried. An emotionally well staff team is more likely to instill confidence and reassurance in pupils and create a positive environment in which to learn.
- Teachers are incredibly busy people, but look after yourself and your colleagues by making sure you take regular breaks and work as little as necessary in school holidays. Rely on the support of your colleagues and lead by example if you are in a senior position.
- Model what you expect from your students and **develop your own resilience.**



TOP TIPS

- **Consider** the necessity and usefulness of school holiday homework. This is obviously more tricky in the run up to exams, but consider whether alternative tasks can be set that allow students plenty of time to rest and recharge and have fun outside of term time. Saving creative elements of coursework or encouraging a healthy revision:rest ratio during the holidays will ensure students can perform at their absolute best.
- **Be visible.** Be a school that acknowledges that things are difficult sometimes, and have clear information about what to do. If students see a poster advising them on who to talk to if they are stressed or worried about something, they're much more likely to speak out. Create spaces in class and in assemblies to talk about emotions and healthy coping mechanisms.
- **Encourage** peer support, and equip the pupils to know how to respond if they are concerned exam pressure is having a negative impact on one of their friends. Young people are more likely to confide in one another in times of stress, and being concerned about someone else will cause distress if they don't know where to get support.

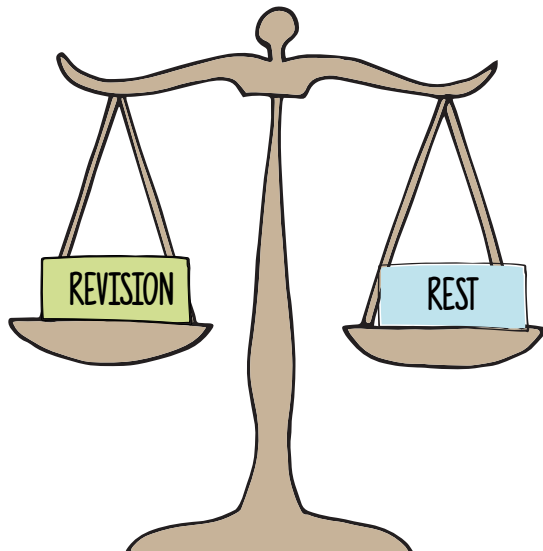
ARE YOU OKAY?

LET'S TALK

Environment

Schools are noisy places, yet GCSEs have to be taken under strict conditions, and being expected to sit for prolonged periods in total silence, with no external stimulation from others, may cause more stress than is realised. If young people are used to concentrating with a backdrop of noise and movement then they're unlikely to produce their best work in silence.

It's obviously not feasible to create an exam environment that's going to be exactly what every pupil will find most conducive to concentrating, so the alternative is to teach them how to manage silence. Being able to cope with stillness and silence will prepare students for the exam hall, and help minimise any anxieties or unfamiliarity at suddenly being in such a different environment, and will also equip them with the skills to remain calm.





“Give pupils a moment to be peaceful.”

1

In an increasingly digital age, create times and spaces that are quiet and technology free.

2

Teach children to manage silence from an early age. This doesn't have to be through a series of mock exams, but by having quiet times of day when talking and movement are kept to a minimum.

3

Introduce mindfulness techniques. Give pupils the opportunity to be quiet and still and gently talk them through different things to enhance their senses and give them a moment to be peaceful. Immediately after the lunch break can be a good time to try this, and you can encourage the students to practise mindfulness at other times, such as bedtime or when they feel worried, or before they start a period of revision. By being comfortable in silence and aware of their breathing, pupils will have an inbuilt coping strategy to employ in the quiet of the exam hall. There are lots of mindfulness resources and suggestions available online.





Before GCSEs

- Be positive about the experience of GCSEs – if the pupils can see how much you may be worried about them, they're going to follow suit.
- Be transparent about what will happen. Ensure each pupil knows where they'll be completing their GCSEs and under what conditions. Make sure they know that the school may have visitors to see how the exams are being run, as well as external invigilators, and so not to be concerned if there are people they don't know in the room.
- Reinforce how proud you are of their efforts – not every student will attain the grades you hope they will, but it's important to acknowledge effort and determination nonetheless.
- Discuss coping strategies – what's a good thing to do if they feel anxious or worried? Why can stress be a good thing and how can we learn from it? Reinforce that anxiety is largely normal, and not something necessarily to be afraid of.
- Acknowledge if there's anything negative in the media about GCSEs and allow them to air their thoughts – young people are exposed to headlines in a number of settings, from social media and newspapers on the kitchen table to what they see in newsagents and supermarkets. It's better to be transparent and give them an opportunity to debate what it means, than to pretend it isn't there.
- Invite parents to a GCSE information evening, and if there's a low attendance then send written information. Explain what strategies the school is putting in place to help the pupils through the exams, and encourage them to do the same.



During GCSEs

- Tell the students to keep on top of their schedule and be prepared, but also to rest and have fun where possible. Last minute panicked revision will be less effective than a good night's sleep or going for a walk with friends.
- Consider offering a free breakfast club. Not only does this ensure that all students have had a decent amount to eat ahead of each exam, but will also enable you to keep in touch with them and help deal with any worries. Play music, laugh, provide tasty food and set the mood for the day.
- Suspend assemblies for those students still in full time school. They're unlikely to add anything, and the pupils will just see them as something else to concentrate on.
- Offer praise and encouragement at every opportunity – and remind them that GCSEs are just for a season. Hopefully you will enable them to see this as a personal challenge or adventure!

After GCSEs

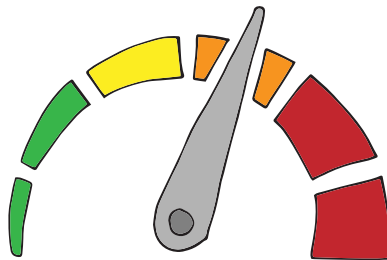
- Consider sending written confirmation from the headteacher congratulating the pupils on completing their exams.
- When the time comes, help them to understand the results while they weigh up their options of what comes next. Have people available on results day to support those who may be disappointed or worried.

When should we worry about a pupil, and what should we do?

It would be unnatural for GCSEs not to induce a certain degree of stress or anxiety. Rather than be concerned about this, it can be seen as an opportunity to instill resilience and teach young people to manage such situations. There is, of course, a tipping point. GCSEs should not:

- affect a pupil's appetite or ability to sleep
- alter a pupil's personality or affect their relationships
- induce panic or tears
- lead to disengagement from lessons or become a reason to avoid attending school

If any of the above are evident, then the prospect of undertaking GCSEs may be causing an excessive degree of emotional distress, and the young person in question may benefit from some intervention. Again, this isn't about removing the stressor, but rather equipping them to cope with the situation.



STRESS-O-METER



Steps to take:

- Talk to the family. This is important to get a snapshot of what may be happening at home that you may not be aware of.
- Spend time with the student to understand fully what aspect of GCSEs concerns them most. Is it the prospect of failure? Is it the environment? Is it the unknown of the GCSE papers? Identify the fear and take steps from there. Reassure them feeling some stress and anxiety is normal, and this can be managed.
- Consider what additional support the student might benefit from during their GCSEs. This doesn't have to mean input other than having a familiar adult to speak to before or after each exam, or maybe completing the papers in a room with fewer students where possible.
- Follow up. For most students, signs and symptoms of stress or anxiety may disappear as soon as the exams are over, but if this isn't the case then further intervention may be required. It's at this point that young people may slip through the net, so it's vital someone checks in and concerns are passed on as appropriate. As close to adulthood as these young people are, they're still children.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ?





References and further reading

Childline Annual Review 2015 – 2016 – available at nspcc.org.uk

Mindfulness in Schools Project – mindfulnessinschools.org

Local action on health inequalities: Building children and young people's resilience in schools, 2014 (Public Health England/UCL Institute of Health Equity) – available at www.instituteoftheequity.org/resources-reports/building-children-and-young-peoples-resilience-in-schools



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