

## Handout – coping with exam stress

4 main areas to offer support:

### **1. Lifestyle**

- Sleep (teens: aim for 8-9 hours per night)
- Sleep hygiene (e.g.: screens before bedtime)
- Physical activity – supports sleep / helps focus
- Drink lots of water
- Eat well – keep blood sugars level to avoid highs and lows
- Avoid bad things e.g.: caffeine / stimulants (energy drinks) drugs / alcohol.
- Make sure your teen makes time to relax

### **2. Information needs**

- Strategies for exam taking (look at the marks per question, highlight key words in the question, what to do if you “go blank”). Make a list with your teen?
- Make a clear exam timetable.
- Which exams carry more weight – so you can give more time to revision.
- Mark schemes – what is required?
- Support your teen to get this information from the school if needed...

### **3. Studying styles**

- Revision timetable spread over a few weeks
- Regular breaks (every 30-45 minutes)
- Parental support with planning
- Take proper breaks- walk away from the desk / get some fresh air!!!!
- Study when it suits you best
- Need to understand to remember! Explain to a study partner...
- If you must memorise – little and often (fridge notes / toilet door)

### **4. Psychological factors**

- Getting trapped in negative thought patterns (see later)
- Worrying / ruminating
- Bottling it up
- Being too self-critical / comparing self to others
- Getting things out of perspective – exams aren't everything!

## The power of thoughts:

- The way we THINK about a situation impacts on how we feel about it/how our body reacts and how we respond to/ cope with that situation
- Thoughts are not right and wrong – they can be ‘Unhelpful’ or ‘helpful’ thoughts
- The more aware we are of our thoughts - the more we can consider other more helpful ways of thinking about situations
- Sometimes we experience thoughts as if they were facts rather than just one way of seeing/ thinking about a situation

## Challenge your unhelpful thoughts by asking these questions:

Is there any evidence that contradicts this thought?

- I've always done well in my previous exams.
- I've been scoring well in my coursework.

Can you identify any of the patterns of unhelpful thinking described earlier?

- I'm 'predicting the future'. I have no evidence to suggest I'll fail.

What would you say to a friend who had this thought in a similar situation?

- I'd say don't be silly, you've always done well. As long as you've studied hard, you should be fine. Besides, you can only try your best.

What are the costs and benefits of thinking in this way?

- Costs: It's making me feel sick with worry.
- Benefits: I can't really think of any.

How will you feel about this in 6 months' time?

- I'll probably look back and laugh about how silly I was being.













Is there another way of looking at this situation?

- I've always done well in the past so I should be ok. I can only do my best anyway; after all I've studied hard. At worst, I'll just have to re-sit next year.













Once you have asked yourself these questions, you should read through your answers. Try to come up with a more balanced or rational view.

## Unhelpful Thinking Habits

Over the years, we tend to get into unhelpful thinking habits such as those described below. We might favour some over others, and there might be some that seem far too familiar. Once you can identify your unhelpful thinking styles, you can start to notice them – they very often occur just before and during distressing situations. Once you can notice them, then that can help you to challenge or distance yourself from those thoughts, and see the situation in a different and more helpful way.

 <p><b>Mental Filter</b> When we notice only what the filter wants or allows us to notice, and we dismiss anything that doesn't 'fit'. Like looking through dark blinkers or 'gloomy specs', or only catching the negative stuff in our 'kitchen strainers' whilst anything more positive or realistic is dismissed</p>	 <p><b>Judgements</b> Making evaluations or judgements about events, ourselves, others, or the world, rather than describing what we actually see and have evidence for</p>
<p><b>Mind-Reading</b> Assuming we know what others are thinking (usually about us)</p> 	<p><b>Emotional Reasoning</b> I feel bad so it must be bad! I feel anxious, so I must be in danger</p> 
 <p><b>Prediction</b> Believing we know what's going to happen in the future</p>	 <p><b>Mountains and Molehills</b> Exaggerating the risk of danger, or the negatives. Minimising the odds of how things are most likely to turn out, or minimising positives</p>
<p><b>Compare and despair</b> Seeing only the good and positive aspects in others, and comparing ourselves negatively against them</p> 	<p><b>Catastrophising</b> Imagining and believing that the worst possible thing will happen</p> 
 <p><b>Critical self</b> Putting ourselves down, self-criticism, blaming ourselves for events or situations that are not (totally) our responsibility</p>	 <p><b>Black and white thinking</b> Believing that something or someone can be only good or bad, right or wrong, rather than anything in-between or 'shades of grey'</p>
<p><b>Shoulds and musts</b> Thinking or saying 'I should' (or shouldn't) and 'I must' puts pressure on ourselves, and sets up unrealistic expectations</p> 	<p><b>Memories</b> Current situations and events can trigger upsetting memories, leading us to believe that the danger is here and now, rather than in the past, causing us distress right now</p> 

### Finding Alternative Thoughts

Unhelpful Thinking Habit	Alternative more balanced thought
Mental Filter 	<i>Am I only noticing the bad stuff? Am I filtering out the positives? Am I wearing those 'gloomy specs'? What would be more realistic?</i>
 Mind-Reading	<i>Am I assuming I know what others are thinking? What's the evidence? Those are my own thoughts, not theirs. Is there another, more balanced way of looking at it?</i>
Prediction 	<i>Am I thinking that I can predict the future? How likely is it that that might really happen?</i>
 Compare & despair	<i>Am I doing that 'compare and despair' thing? What would be a more balanced and helpful way of looking at it?</i>
Critical self 	<i>There I go, that internal bully's at it again. Would most people who really know me say that about me? Is this something that I am totally responsible for?</i>
 Shoulds and musts	<i>Am I putting more pressure on myself, setting up expectations of myself that are almost impossible? What would be more realistic?</i>
Judgements 	<i>I'm making an evaluation about the situation or person. It's how I make sense of the world, but that doesn't mean my judgements are always right or helpful. Is there another perspective?</i>
 Emotional Reasoning	<i>Just because it feels bad, doesn't necessary mean it is bad. My feelings are just a reaction to my thoughts – and thoughts are just automatic brain reflexes</i>
Mountains and molehills 	<i>Am I exaggerating the risk of danger? Or am I exaggerating the negative and minimising the positives? How would someone else see it? What's the bigger picture?</i>
 Catastrophising	<i>OK, thinking that the worst possible thing will definitely happen isn't really helpful right now. What's most likely to happen?</i>
Black and white thinking 	<i>Things aren't either totally white or totally black – there are shades of grey. Where is this on the spectrum?</i>
 Memories	<i>This is just a reminder of the past. That was then, and this is now. Even though this memory makes me <u>feel</u> upset, it's not <u>actually</u> happening again right now.</i>



### Positive Self-talk / Coping Thoughts Worksheet

Positive statements encourage us and help us cope through distressing times. We can say these encouraging words to ourselves, and be our own personal coach. We have all survived some very distressing times, and we can use those experiences to encourage us through current difficulties.

Examples of coping thoughts might be:

- Stop, and breathe, I can do this
- This will pass
- I can be anxious/angry/sad and still deal with this
- I have done this before, and I can do it again
- This feels bad, it's a normal body reaction – it will pass
- This feels bad, and feelings are very often wrong
- These are just feelings, they will go away
- This won't last forever
- Short term pain for long term gain
- I can feel bad and still choose to take a new and healthy direction
- I don't need to rush, I can take things slowly
- I have survived before, I will survive now
- I feel this way because of my past experiences, but I am safe right now
- It's okay to feel this way, it's a normal reaction
- Right now, I am not in danger. Right now, I'm safe
- My mind is not always my friend
- Thoughts are just thoughts – they're not necessarily true or factual
- This is difficult and uncomfortable, but it's only temporary
- I can use my coping skills and get through this
- I can learn from this and it will be easier next time
- Keep calm and carry on



**Yes!**

Write down a coping thought or positive statement for each difficult or distressing situation – something you can tell yourself that will help you get through. Write them down on a piece of card and carry it in your pocket or handbag to help remind you.

Difficult or distressing situation	Coping thought / Positive statement