

Supporting Your Child Through Exam Season

Exam season can turn even the most relaxed household into a pressure cooker. It's tough to watch your child struggle, but your role isn't to be their tutor—it's to be their **emotional anchor**.

Here is a guide to helping them navigate the stress without becoming stressed yourself in the process.

1. Spot the Stress Signals

Children don't always say, "I am feeling anxious about my GCSE English." Therefore, it is important that adults look for these physical and behavioural cues:

- **Physical:** Headaches, stomach pains, or sudden changes in appetite.
- **Emotional:** Irritability, "snapping" over small things, or appearing tearful and withdrawn.
- **Sleep:** Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep (the 3:00 AM panic).
- **Cognitive:** Total avoidance of revision or, conversely, 'paralysis' where they stare at a textbook or revision resources for hours without absorbing anything.

2. Know your Child's Style

Consider how your child has been reacting to their revision timetable and activities recently. Do they avoid it or are they an over-worker? Once you know their style, approach it in the way that is most helpful.

The Avoider

Handling an "avoider" is a delicate balancing act. Usually, avoidance isn't about laziness; it's a defence mechanism. If they don't try, they can't "fail"—they just "didn't do it." It's a way of protecting their self-esteem from a scary result.

To help them break the cycle of procrastination without it turning into a nightly row, you can try these tactics:

The "Low-Stakes" Entry Point

Avoiders are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the specification. The mountain looks too high to climb, so they don't even put on their boots.

- **The 5-Minute Rule:** Ask them to commit to just five minutes of revision. Tell them they can stop after five minutes if they want. Usually, the hardest part is starting; once the book is open, the "wall" breaks down.
- **Micro-Goals:** Instead of saying "do some Biology," ask them to "label this one diagram of a cell." Crossing a small task off a list provides a dopamine hit that encourages them to do the next one.

Use Active vs. Passive Revision

Avoiders often hate the idea of sitting and reading a textbook because it feels stagnant.

- **Flashcards & Quizzing:** Use apps like **Quizlet** or physical flashcards. It feels more like a game and less like "study."
- **Past Papers:** Sometimes avoiders need to see the "point" of the work. Doing a quick 10-minute timed section of a past / sample WJEC exam paper can show them exactly what they need to know, making the task feel more defined.

The 'Body Doubling' Technique

Sometimes, an avoider just needs a silent partner to keep them grounded.

- **Parallel Working:** Sit at the dining table with them. You do your life admin, emails, or reading while they do their revision. You aren't hovering or checking their work; you are simply providing a "work-mode" atmosphere. It makes them feel less isolated in their struggle.

Address the Fear

If you notice the avoidance is peaking, it might be time for a "reset" chat.

- **Acknowledge the Elephant:** Say something like: *"I noticed you're finding it hard to get started. Are you worried that even if you work hard, it won't be enough?"*
- **The Safety Net:** Reiterate that their GCSEs or A-Levels are just one stepping-stone. Remind them of the Plan B, whether that's resits, a different college or course, or an apprenticeship. Often, once the worst-case scenario is spoken out loud, it loses its power.

Reward the Start, Not the Finish

For avoiders, the victory is in **beginning**. When they finally sit down to work, acknowledge it quietly with something like, *"I'm really impressed with how you got started on that today; I know you found it difficult."*

The Over-Worker

While the avoider is trying to escape the pressure, the over-worker is trying to control it by doing everything at once. This often stems from perfectionism and a fear that if they stop, they'll lose their momentum or forget everything.

The risk here isn't a lack of grades; it's burnout, physical exhaustion, and high levels of cortisol (the stress hormone) that can actually impair memory. Here is how to help an over-worker find a healthy balance:

Enforce "Mandatory Maintenance"

Over-workers often view self-care as a waste of time. You need to reframe rest as a productive part of revision.

- **The Athlete Analogy:** Remind them that Olympic athletes don't train 24/7; they have strict recovery periods so their muscles can grow. The brain is the same; it needs 'offline' time to consolidate information into long-term memory.
- **Non-Negotiable Breaks:** Insist on a curfew where all books / revision resources are closed and put away at least an hour before bed. Encourage activities that occupy the hands but rest the brain, like cooking, walking the dog, or a hobby.

Quality Over Quantity

Over-workers often fall into the trap of performative revision, e.g. spending 12 hours highlighting a textbook because it *feels* like hard work, even if they aren't absorbing it.

- **The Law of Diminishing Returns:** Explain the concept that after a certain point (usually 2–3 hours of intense focus), the brain's ability to retain new information drops significantly.
- **Focus on "Active Recall":** Instead of more hours, suggest more effective methods. Doing one past paper in 60 minutes is better than reading notes for four hours.

Challenge the "All-or-Nothing" Mindset

Perfectionists often believe that if they don't get an A/A*, they have failed entirely.

- **The 'Good Enough' Concept:** Help them identify which subjects need the most focus and where they can afford to be 'good enough' rather than perfect.
- **The Success Criteria:** Ask them: "*What does a successful day look like to you?*" If their answer is "finishing everything," it's unrealistic. Help them redefine success as completing three key tasks and getting 8 hours of sleep.

Physical Signs of Over-Work

Because they won't admit they are tired, keep an eye out for these physical signs of a "frazzled" nervous system:

Sign	What it Indicates
The 'Zoned Out' Stare	They are physically present but their brain is 'looping' and not processing.
New / Increased Clumsiness	Fatigue leads to a drop in motor coordination.
Caffeine Dependency	Watch for an uptick in coffee or energy drink consumption, which can spike anxiety and cause heart palpitations.

The "Permission to Stop"

Sometimes, an over-worker just needs to hear that it is okay to stop. You can be the one to give them that permission by saying something that acknowledges their achievement but makes it clear enough is enough, e.g. *"You've worked incredibly hard today and I'm really proud of your dedication. But for your brain to actually keep that information, you need to stop now. Let's watch a film / go for a walk / sit in the garden and chat."*

3. Practical Support Strategies

Sometimes the best way to lower anxiety is to reduce the friction of daily life.

Strategy	How to Implement it
The Calm Zone	Help your child to organise a dedicated revision space that is quiet, well-lit, and (ideally) separate from where they sleep.
Brain Fuel	Keep the fridge / cupboard stocked with protein-rich snacks and slow-release carbs. Hydration is key; dehydration mimics the physical symptoms of anxiety.
The 50/10 Rule	Encourage 50 minutes of work followed by a 10-minute total disconnect (no screens!). This prevents the mental fog of over-studying.
Sleep Hygiene	Negotiate a digital sunset where mobile phones are put away 45 minutes before bed to allow the brain to wind down.

4. The Power of Perspective

Anxiety often stems from **catastrophising**—the belief that one poor mock result equals a failed life. You can help reframe this:

- **Normalise the feeling:** Tell them, "It's okay to feel nervous; it just means you care about doing well."
- **De-escalate the stakes:** Remind them that while exams are important, they are not a definition of their worth. Share a story of a time you faced a setback and how you recovered.
- **Focus on effort, not outcome:** Praise their discipline and the hours they've put in rather than the predicted grade.

5. On the Day of the Exam

The morning of an exam is about **energy management**, not last-minute cramming.

1. **Avoid last minute stresses:** Don't grill them on specific topics over breakfast. Keep the conversation light and supportive.
2. **The Breathing Anchor:** Teach them a simple 'Box Breath'. Inhale for 4, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold for 4. It's a physiological "kill switch" for the fight-or-flight response.

3. **The 'Plan B' Reminder:** Remind them that no matter what happens, you are proud of them and there are always different routes to their chosen career or university course.

A Note for You

Children are incredibly sensitive to their parents' stress. If you are pacing the hallway worrying about their results, they will pick up on it. Your calm is contagious; make sure you're taking care of your own wellbeing too. It is important to remember that as a parent / carer, you are part of a wider support network. Within the school, our staff - from form tutors and subject teachers to our achievement teams - are also keeping a close eye on your child's stress levels. We provide students with regular guidance on revision techniques, time management, and emotional regulation to help them navigate this period as smoothly as possible.

Partnering with the School

If you are concerned that your child's anxiety is becoming unmanageable or is affecting their health, please get in touch with us. Whether it's their Leader of Achievement or a trusted teacher, we can offer:

- **Targeted support:** Adjustments to revision schedules or extra help to boost confidence.
- **Pastoral check-ins:** A safe space for them to talk through their worries with a staff member who isn't as close as a parent / carer; sometimes it's easier for young people to speak to someone who is more removed.
- **Professional signposting:** Guidance on whether further support from a counsellor or external wellbeing services might be beneficial.

Exams are a collective effort. By working together, we can ensure that your child feels supported, capable, and, most importantly, well, throughout the entire process.