
Year 12 exams - managing stress

Summary

- Year 12 exams are stressful. Some stress can be a good thing, but try not to let your child get overwhelmed.
 - A balance of study, exercise, rest, relaxation and sleep will give them the best chance of doing well in their exams.
 - Go for foods that fuel the brain. Avoid 'traditional' study foods like energy drinks, highly processed foods, chips and lollies.
 - Encourage your child to find out what study techniques work best for them, and make sure they ask for help if they need it.
 - Remember, there is life after Year 12!
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Year 12 exams can be very stressful. Many students feel pressured to do well – to get into certain courses, or to please their family. On top of that, young people may be stressed about the uncertainty of what will happen once school ends.

You can't study for your child, but the good news is there are some simple ways you can help your Year 12 manage the stress of their exams. Eating well, sleeping well and taking time to exercise and relax from study will all help your child to stay healthy as exams approach.

Managing exam stress with good nutrition

So, what's the best way to nourish your child's body to help them cope with exam time?

Protein

Eating enough protein can help with learning, memory and mood, and retaining information for the long term – just what your child needs.

This means including foods such as lean meat and fish, eggs, nuts and seeds, beans, dairy and whole grains in your child's diet. This [article](#) in the Conversation has some great suggestions.

But remember, too much of anything is not healthy. Protein should make up about one fifth to one quarter of your child's daily diet.

Carbohydrates

The brain also needs energy and nutrients to repair and maintain brain cells. Glucose is the brain's main energy source, and it comes from carbohydrates. But carbohydrates come in different forms, so think about what you put on your child's plate.

Complex carbohydrates – found in wholegrain cereals, breads and pastas, and in fruits and vegetables – are absorbed slowly in the bloodstream, which means energy is released and is available over a long period. Complex carbohydrates keep students more alert and able to concentrate better for longer.

Simple carbohydrates – found in foods such as cakes, biscuits, lollies, soft drinks and white bread – give a quick energy hit, but are followed by a tired and sluggish feeling.

Sugary foods and drinks can lower concentration levels and memory function – the last thing students need when they're trying to study.

What about caffeine?

Caffeine causes the body to release adrenaline, which produces a 'flight or fight' response. Your hands get cold, your muscles grow tense, you feel excited and your heart beats faster.

And once the adrenaline wears off, you face fatigue and difficulty sleeping. Another dose of caffeine can get the

adrenaline flowing again, but having the body in a state of emergency, jumpy and irritable all day, isn't healthy.

For students, one coffee a day is plenty (though it's better to have none at all). And having it earlier in the day is better.

The best drink for the brain is water. A good tip is to fill a 1.5 litre bottle at the start of each study session and sit it on the desk with a glass. Your child can then work through it as they study.

On the day of the exam...

Before they sit their exam, make sure your child has eaten a light, healthy meal. As throughout the study phase, protein and carbohydrates make a good combination. Think: baked beans on a wholemeal muffin with a sprinkle of grated cheese. Or try one of these suggestions:

- a multigrain or wholemeal sandwich made with salad and your choice of egg, tuna, fresh turkey, chicken or ham
- chicken and vegetable noodle soup
- vegetable stir-fry with tofu and rice
- grilled fish and salad with a small baked potato.

And for a snack, your child could try:

- cereal with milk
- fruit and yoghurt
- cheese and wholemeal crackers
- dried fruit and nuts
- carrot sticks and hummus.

Exercise is great for managing stress too

We all know exercise is good for general health and fitness, but it gives the brain a boost too. Exercise can be energising and refreshing, and it will help keep your child alert during exams.

Encourage your child to exercise regularly, even if they have lots of study to do. They don't have to run a marathon every day. A 15 minute walk can be enough to revitalise the mind.

While it may seem like an essential part of studying, sitting at a desk looking at books or a computer for a long time is not good for your child's health. They will function better if they take regular breaks from study. They could use this time to walk around the block, shoot a few hoops or get out a yoga mat.

If your Year 12 is worried about missing out on study time, they could try to combine exercise with learning. Putting headphones on and listening to study notes that they have recorded or downloaded is one way. Or they could just listen to their favourite music – research shows music improves concentration and learning.

Rest and relaxation is necessary

When studying for exams, rest and relaxation is important for physical and mental health. It gives muscles a break, and it also relaxes the brain and aids concentration.

Here are some different relaxation techniques your child can try:

- **mindfulness**
- visualisation – start by imagining a peaceful place. Then focus on relaxing different parts of the body, working down slowly from the top of the head to the tips of the toes
- **breathing** – place one hand on the chest and the other on the tummy. Take slow, deep breaths, so the tummy pushes against the hand. Then hold a breath for as long as is comfortable. Slowly exhale and repeat. (Your child could try ReachOut's mobile app '**Breathe**'.)
- **muscle relaxation** – slowly tense and release each muscle group. Start with the toes and finish with the head
- ReachOut's '**worry time**' app .

The importance of sleep

When your child is stressed and feels like they don't have enough hours in their day, it's easy for them to stay up late studying and cut back on sleep. But they will have a better chance of doing well in their exams if they get enough **sleep**.

A good night's **sleep** improves concentration levels and brain power the next day. It is better for students to be rested and clear-headed than exhausted and foggy.

If your Year 12 is having trouble sleeping, suggest some of the relaxation exercises above.

Friends can help with study

Year 12 exams are guaranteed to bring stress. And a little stress can be a good thing. But you don't want your child to feel overwhelmed.

If they are having trouble coping, they might like to talk about it with their friends. Most will understand the situation and will be happy to chat. Talking things through brings lots of benefits. It can clear your child's head and calm them down, and may even help them solve tricky study questions.

Your Year 12 might like to find a 'study buddy' or two, or set up a study group. Small groups (up to six people) can work well, and help keep your child motivated and engaged. Study groups can be an opportunity for extra discussion, a chance to test each other, or a reward for study time spent. Study sessions can be before or after school, and about an hour is good.

If your child prefers to study silently, a study buddy can help keep them accountable. They can tell each other what they want to achieve that session, and check in with each other at the end.

A study schedule is useful

It is important your child doesn't feel weighed down by their workload. One way to do this is to make a study schedule. They should write down for how long they are going to study and what things they want to learn or achieve, and include time for breaks.

Speaking of breaks, your Year 12 should take them regularly. Many people find the 45/15 rule works well – study for 45 minutes and break for 15 minutes.

In that 15 minute break, your child could walk around the block, make a smoothie, do some yoga, play a video game, plan a holiday or take a power nap. After that, their next 45 minutes of study is more likely to be focused and efficient.

Encourage your child to remove distractions, and study in an area that is separate to where they relax. That way they won't be tempted to chill out when they're meant to be studying.

Suggest they put their phone and laptop out of reach. If they need their computer for study, they could consider disconnecting it from the internet.

Using a timetable is a good idea

As well as planning their study for each session, it will help your Year 12 if they prepare a study timetable for all their subjects well before exams start. (ReachOut has a great example, [here](#).) They should decide how much study time they need for each subject, thinking about how much work they have to do and when each exam is scheduled.

A useful strategy is to assign each subject a colour, so the timetable is easy to read. Each subject can be broken down into the topic areas that need to be covered, and then under each of those topics goes a list of precisely what needs to be studied.

It is a good idea if your child starts filling in one subject at a time, and then spreads the topic areas out evenly over the timetable. Allocating a mix of subjects each day will help them avoid getting bored.

Make sure they factor in plenty of time at the end of the period to revise and do some practice exams. If they leave their revision to the day before the exam, they won't have enough time to work on the problem areas.

It is okay for your child to be flexible with their timetable – it is likely to change as they go along and understand more of what they need to do.

Your Year 12 might like to check out this [sample](#) of how to prepare a timetable.

Top tips for tests

Know yourself. Your child needs to find what different methods of study work best for them, and what times of day they are sharpest.

- Work on critical thinking skills. This is all about connecting what your child is learning with what they already know. It takes time, but understanding what they are learning can make exams a whole lot easier.
- Practise exam techniques. Doing past papers within the allocated time frame is a great way to prepare for exams.
- Prepare well the night before. It is important your child eats well and has a good sleep the night before an exam. They should have a healthy **breakfast**, and get to the venue early. Once there it is a good idea to relax, revise a little and keep away from stress-heads.
- Don't cram. Cramming will only stress your child. Encourage them to take a deep breath and have confidence in what they know. If they combine this with some common sense, and they think things through logically, chances are they will be fine.
- Get back to basics. When your Year 12 gets stuck on an exam question, they need to think about the important concepts and key topics.

Life after learning

And don't forget to remind your child there is life after Year 12 exams!

Whatever your child wants to do with their life, there's always a way for them to achieve their dreams. If they have determination and a positive attitude, and are willing to do whatever it takes, they can always get where they want to go – they might just have to take a different route to get there.

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