

Taking the Stress out of Exam Time

Understanding and working with the body's natural stress response is the key to helping students manage exam anxiety.

Does your child worry excessively about exams? Do they experience panic or paralysis? If so, they are not alone! According to a survey by mental health organisation ReachOut, 65.1% of Australian students aged 14-25 reported high levels of exam related stress in 2018, an increase from 51.2% in 2017. This exam related anxiety presents itself in many different ways including breathlessness, headaches, shaking, nausea and perhaps most concerning, the inability to think clearly or concentrate on the task at hand.

In response to these common stress reactions, many schools and universities offer students special provisions for sitting exams including private testing rooms and rest breaks. Whilst these are positive, short term solutions for students who find it difficult to cope with the traditional exam format, they are somewhat of a band-aid approach and don't really help students learn long term strategies for dealing with performance anxiety. Also, with an ever increasing number of students seeking special provisions on the basis of mental health, the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) continue to tighten the parameters for granting such provisions so there's a risk that students who have been assisted at school for in-house exams may find their application rejected when it's time to sit the HSC.

Understanding what causes exam anxiety can help young people manage their discomfort more effectively. American neuroscientist Paul D. MacLean developed a useful theory to explain how the brain responds to 'threat'. His three tiered 'Triune' brain approach can help sufferers of anxiety and panic understand their responses more deeply, empowering them to manage their nerves. His theory suggests there are three parts to the human brain:

1. the Reptilian Brain - the most primitive part, wired for survival, also known as the brain stem,
2. the Mammalian Brain - the slightly more developed part, also known as the limbic or emotional centre,
3. the Primate Brain - our highly developed neo-cortex, responsible for logic and higher order thinking.

When students feel under stress, regardless of the actual 'threat', their brain and body will react accordingly, usually thrusting them into the reptilian or primitive part of the brain resulting in a flight, fight or freeze response. Neuro-scans have shown that when this happens, blood in the brain drains away from the logical part and moves towards the primitive and emotional parts, making it virtually impossible to think clearly and concentrate. In other words, students go into survival mode, whether it's appropriate, convenient or not. Understandably, normal feelings of mild to moderate anxiety can escalate to panic or paralysis when the stakes are high and exam pressure is at its worst.

Young people who understand this natural process are better able to manage the inevitable feelings of nervousness around exam time. Using simple behavioural strategies that target the nervous system, that is, the primitive part of the brain, students can learn to tolerate their discomfort, developing lifelong skills that will help them as they transition through school, higher education and beyond.

Breathing exercises, distraction, drinking water to hydrate the brain, mindfulness and specific gentle movements such as tapping are just a few examples of techniques for dealing with high levels of anxiety before and during exams. Positive self-talk has also proven to be helpful for many students. For example:

- *I'm okay, I'm safe, I will breathe deeply for a minute or two.*
- *I'm just in my primitive brain at the moment but I'm doing really well.*
- *My body is doing what it's supposed to do, these feelings will pass.*

If you, or someone you know would like to learn more, please come along to a free information session on this topic.

Understanding and Managing Exam Stress.

FREE INFORMATION SESSION

For students, parents, teachers or anyone interested in finding out more.

Register early! Places are limited.

When: Monday 26th August, 7pm - 8pm

Where: Awareness Institute: Level 1, 28 Chandos Street, St Leonards

Bookings: narellegillies@bigpond.com or phone/text: 0431 594 141

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