

# Exam stress in schools



As adults, we have all taken exams at various stages of our lives and therefore like to believe that we understand exam stress. We have survived this stress and learned coping strategies along the way. So why are we so concerned about students currently taking exams? Why is the topic of teenage anxiety around exams making the headlines so frequently?

Around 3 million students in the UK have taken exams this past summer. A study by ChildLine, a confidential, free 24-hour counseling service for children and young people in the UK, reveals that 96% of the 1,300 respondents felt anxious about exams and revision, more than half felt pressure from their parents to do well and never received any support in dealing with exams. Calls to ChildLine's helpline on exam stress doubled last year.

Recent reforms in the UK national education system have re-ignited the debate around the risks of exposing pupils to high-pressure environments. "When government

defines educational success in fantastically narrow terms and punishes teachers, schools and students who do not attain it, many opportunities for learning are denied to pupils. Pressure grows on children to view exam success as high stakes", explains General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers, Christine Blower. She has criticised the UK government for establishing an accountability framework under which schools are measured in terms of exam results only.

Unprecedented levels of stress and pressure are a real byproduct of the drive to improve educational standards in an increasingly competitive world.

## What happens in the classroom?

Teaching methods and the classroom environment have been shown to significantly impact the stress associated with school exams. Students gain emotional

resilience and learn more efficiently and at higher levels of cognition when teachers and schools create a positive environment. Alfie Kohn, renowned American lecturer and author, outlines that the highest-level of independent thinking, making connections, and the 'aha' moments of insight and creative innovation occur where students of all ages retain enthusiasm and embrace each day with the joy of learning. This environment of 'exuberant discovery' is the key to unlocking student potential and preventing the association between school and stress.

Dr Carol Dweck of Stanford University, in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* discusses how students' performance can be significantly improved by adopting a 'growth mindset'. This means cultivating and improving through practice and effort without predetermined or unchangeable abilities.

Dweck's work sets out constructive



**Further information**

from the Independent Educational Consultants Association can be found at [www.iecaonline.com/PDF/IECA\\_Library\\_Test-Anxiety.pdf](http://www.iecaonline.com/PDF/IECA_Library_Test-Anxiety.pdf)

**and Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP).** <https://mindfulnessinschools.org>.



“Mindfulness helps to reduce exam pressure and stress.”

methods to help students adopt a ‘can-do’ approach. She discusses the importance of i) adequate and appropriate preparation, ii) relaxation techniques, iii) health habits, including exercise and good nutrition and iv) targeting thinking patterns. This final point shows how she expects ‘growth mindset’ to take students away from “Why do I try?” to “When I try I always do better than I thought I would”.

**The role played by education systems**

School systems take vastly different approaches to formal assessments. For example, British students, except in Scotland, take their first national exam at the ages of 10-11. This is followed by GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) at the age of 16, then an advanced school leaving exam, A-levels, at age 18. Controversially, British students are reported to be the most tested in the world but have obtained minimal shift in results. By contrast, for example, a school, which runs the IB, or International Baccalaureate programme, carries out one assessment primarily through an independent project at the age of 16.

Parents selecting a school system for their children should consider the likely impact

diverse exam approaches would have on their children.

**And beyond the classroom?**

Mindfulness is gaining cadence as an approach to dealing with exam stress. Over the last 30 years, it has been secularised and adapted to suit a western context. It supports students in managing stress and is gaining popularity in schools across the UK and internationally.

International school students in London recently took part in a specialist 10-week mindfulness course. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. “These lessons have taught me how to deal with difficult situations and how to stay calm and relaxed through stressful times” said a 14-year-old.

**Is it about more than just exams?**

Finally, it is essential to take a step back and consider the wider context around the increased levels of exam stress reported by students today. Teenagers are exposed to an escalating barrage of stimuli in the age of social media. All parents and educators know that this is unprecedented, and professional mental health experts are reporting that they are confronted with

increased anxiety and depression in young people. It is impossible to avoid the endless string of articles and statistics in the press around eating disorders, self-image issues and school pressure. The questions around youth stress and anxiety need to be taken seriously both by schools and within families.

Exam pressure and stress is likely to be an unavoidable part of the educational journey for children today. However, there are ways to better manage and protect against it. Constructive measures including mindfulness, a change in mindset and improved teaching methods have already reported benefits. Furthermore, a supportive and engaged family environment combined with knowledgeable educators can do wonders to help steer a balanced and healthy path through the many possible pitfalls.

**Karin Purcell** is the Director of Development and Communications at Marymount International School. She can be contacted at [devdirector@marymountlondon.com](mailto:devdirector@marymountlondon.com) and [www.marymountlondon.com](http://www.marymountlondon.com)