

# HOW TO SURF THE STRESS



A GUIDE TO MANAGING **EXAM STRESS**

**This booklet has been designed and  
produced by Louise Urquhart  
and Rewired Counselling**

The word "Rewired" is written in a black, hand-drawn, typewriter-style font on a textured, light brown paper background. To the right of the word is a solid red square.

**Rewired**

A horizontal purple banner with white text. The word "think" is highlighted in red.

**don't believe everything you think**

**School and college can bring many exciting times...meeting new mates, forming new relationships, opening up new opportunities for your future. It can also bring with it some stress...exams, revision, workloads and making “big” decisions.**

**Stress can be useful to get us to focus on things and take action. But when it gets too much, it can be damaging and unhelpful.**

**This booklet is designed with students like you in mind. It describes how stress works, then offers some suggestions of how to calm the stress down so that you can do what you need to do in a more effective and helpful way.**

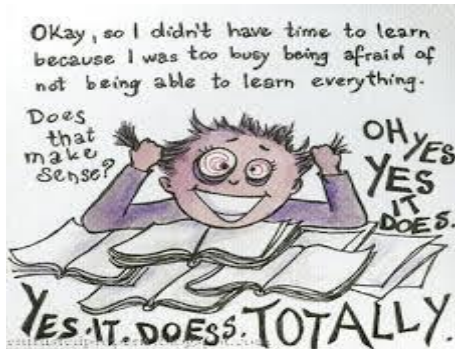
**It’s about looking after yourself now....and about looking after the future you.**

**We hope the following information is useful to you.**



MAKE TIME TO DO  
WHAT MAKES YOUR  
SOUL SPARKLE

## Before we start .....



.....let's keep things in perspective!

Exams might seem like the most important thing you have to focus on right now, but they are actually only a small part of your whole life and who you are.

There are thousands of successful people who didn't do as well as they hoped in their exams. It's great to do well but remember you can only do your best.

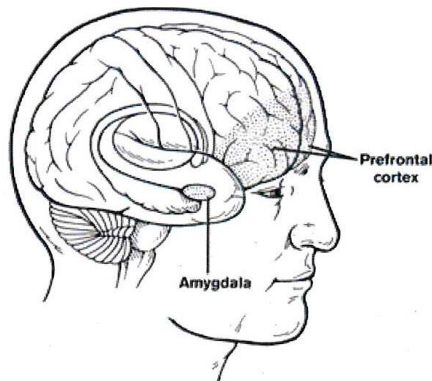
So.....**just do your best**..... that is all that you, your teachers and your loved ones truly ask of you. If you can look back after the exams and think to yourself, “I gave that my best shot” then, whatever the outcome, you can feel proud of what you did.



## What is stress?

Stress is a natural, healthy bodily response which humans have evolved in order to protect them in times of danger. When an individual is faced with a stress, a hormone is released within the body which causes various changes in the body; the heart begins to pump faster in order to supply the body's muscles with a larger supply of oxygen, blood pressure therefore increases and the body perspires more to prevent over-heating. Although this evolutionary advantage is excellent at preparing the body for a fight with a wild tiger, it's not as magnificent when it comes to doing exams.

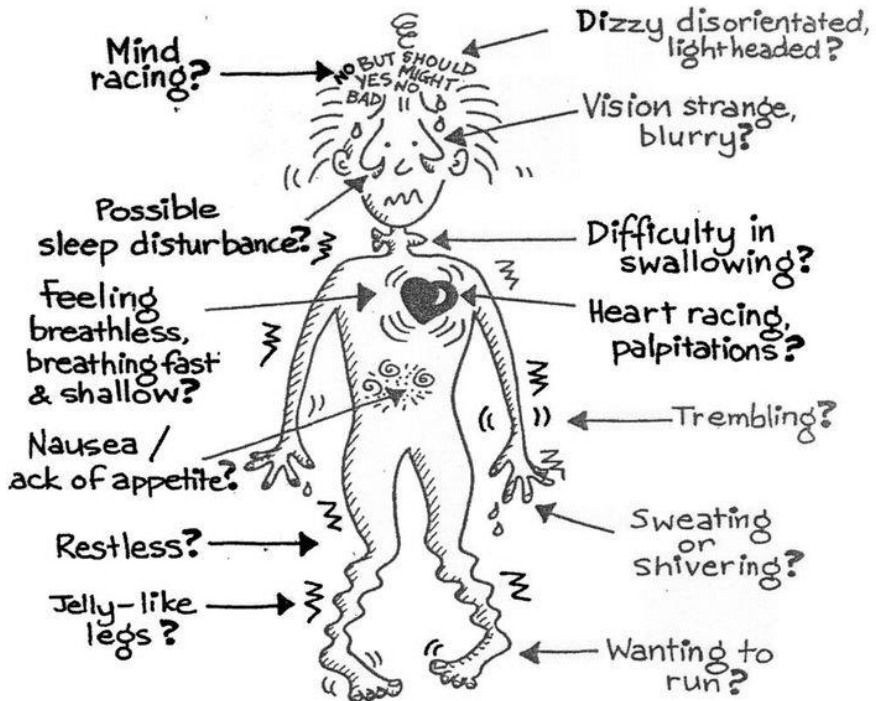
Too much stress can make it very tricky for you to focus and recall things you have revised. Studies have shown that a stress hormone (cortisol) impairs our speed of memory retrieval.



Another reason is that we work out of a different part of the brain when we are stressed or emotional – our **amygdala**. When we are calm, we use our **prefrontal cortex (PFC)**. It is the PFC that helps us think clearly, recall information and problem solve (pretty useful in exams). When we are stressed or emotional, our amygdala actually hijacks our thinking and takes control. It doesn't allow us anywhere near our PFC – not helpful when we are trying to focus or remember information. It is just a ball of emotions and feelings (usually fear). It is important, therefore, to **calm our amygdala down** so that we can get into our PFC otherwise we cannot access the information or skills we need.

## What does stress look like?

Adrenaline and cortisol can have very strong physical effects on our bodies as well as psychological. It's useful to get to recognise your own signs of stress so that your body can give you clues about when you may need to calm.



In order to give ourselves the best chance of passing our exams, we need to reduce stress. We can do this in two main ways;

1. **Calming** the amygdala (the emotions) that hijack our thinking using techniques such as mindfulness, having fun and being kind to ourselves.
2. **Preparing** as best we can so that the amygdala has less to worry about in the first place and the PFC takes control.

## Tips for Calming

Calming the amygdala means turning the volume down on it so that information can pass through to the PFC (the bit we need in exams). We can do this quickly by distracting it - giving it something else to think about that isn't stressful. Try using the following methods.

**TIP:** the more you focus on the activity, the more effective it is at calming your emotions/stress.

### 1. Hand Massage

What's great about it is that you can do it anywhere. No one will notice. Simply use the thumb of one hand and press around the palm of the other hand. It's very soothing.

### 2. Palm Push

By pushing your palms together and holding for five to ten seconds, you give your body "proprioceptive input" which lets your body feel grounded. The palm push is like a mini, portable yoga position.

### 3. Closing Your Eyes

80% of sensory stimulation comes in through the eyes, so shutting them every now and then gives your brain a much-needed break.

### 4. Mindful Sighing

Breathe in to a count of five through your mouth, and then let out a very loud sigh. It's amazing how powerful those small sighs are to adjust energy levels and focus.





## **5. Mindful Monkey Stretch**

Stand up and bring your hands and arms extended in front of you, then down. Next extend your arms to your sides, and then down. Next bring your arms all the way past your head, close to your ears. Once fully extended, swoop down with your head dangling between your knees. Just hang there for a second. This exercise is extremely effective at releasing the tension we hold in different parts of our body. (Maybe not one to do IN the exam room!).

## **6. Hugging Yourself (or a close buddy/loved one)**

Did you know that a ten-second hug a day can change biochemical and physiological forces in your body that can lower risk of heart disease, combat stress, fight fatigue, boost your immune system, and ease depression? You can begin by giving yourself a hug. By squeezing your belly and back at the same time, you are again giving yourself proprioceptive input (letting your body know where you are) which can help stabilize you and balance your emotions a little more.

## **7. Wall Push**

Another great exercise to ground those with sensory issue is the wall push, where you simply push against the wall with flat palms and feet planted on the floor for five to ten seconds. Placing the weight of our body against a solid, immobile surface and feeling the pull of gravity is stabilizing, even on a subconscious level.



## 8. Superman Pose

Lie on your belly on the floor. Extend your arms in front of you, and hold them straight out. Extend your legs behind you and hold them straight out. Hold that pose for ten seconds. It's a great exercise if you are groggy, overexcited, distracted or annoyed.



## 9. Shaking

Did you know that animals relieve their stress by shaking? Lots of animals like antelopes shake off their fear after being frozen in panic to escape a predator. It doesn't look all that pretty but it can be super beneficial.

## 10. Bubble Breath

Place one flat palm on your heart, one flat palm on your belly. Breathe in through your nose and hold your breath for five seconds. Imagine you are breathing out into a bubble wand. When you breathe out, be careful not to pop the bubble. Breathe out a large "bubble" though pursed lips for five seconds.

Repeat as much as required.



## Tips for Preparing

**Get some decent sleep.** Research shows that there is **50% more** cortisol in the blood stream if an individual has six hours' sleep instead of the recommended eight hours.

**Eat and drink well.** Keep a nutrition-rich diet and eat three good meals a day; this will keep the pesky stress hormones at a natural level and allow you to concentrate better. Fuel and water is vital.

**Keep hydrated.** Dehydration means our body is less effective and so our ability to retain and recall information is affected. When you're feeling stressed and your brain goes blank, take a drink of water then breathe deeply and slowly. This will calm you and allow your body to rehydrate and stop the effects of stress.

**Plan ahead.** Don't leave revision to the last minute. Have your own revision timetable starting well before exams begin.

**Make time.** You are important. Carve out time to look after future you.

**Create your space.** Find/create a place you feel comfortable to work in (e.g. at home, at a friend's, at school, in the library in town).

**Find your methods.** Everyone revises differently. Make your books, notes and essays user-friendly. Use headings, highlighting and revision cards. Get tips on other revision techniques from your teachers and friends with experience of exams. You could consider buying revision guides. Take notes of the important points. Try to answer the questions of past exam papers; explain answers to someone else. Work alone or with another; early morning or late at night; short, sharp bursts or longer sessions; with music or without.

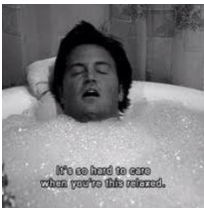
**Ask for help** from your teacher/learning mentor, parent/carer or a friend if there are things you don't understand.



**Don't cram** before an exam. This will heighten the amygdala and your stress levels. Studies have shown that we actually do worse around the subject we cram on as our brain will have focused on this subject only and then become stressed if it can't recall it.

**Look after Yourself.** Put yourself first – this is an important time for you. Try to talk to your family about how they can make studying a little easier for you – for example, by agreeing times when you can have your own space when you'd rather not be disturbed.

**Relax/Have fun.** Don't revise all the time. Make sure you give yourself time each day to relax, taking breaks to do something you enjoy – watch TV, listen to music, read a book, see friends, play games, have a bath or go out for a walk.



**Get on with it!** You can't wait to be "in the mood" to revise. Motivation follows action. Try doing a task for 10 minutes and see how you feel – usually mood will follow the task and you'll be more likely to continue doing it. <http://lifehacker.com/six-scientificallly-supported-ways-to-crush-procrastinat-589722729/all>

**Visualise.** Repeatedly picturing an outcome can help you achieve it (beware - it works for negative outcomes, too!). Picture yourself as a confident student, walking into the exam room, feeling calm and prepared. Picture yourself calmly reading the exam paper and being able to recall the information to answer it. Picture yourself finishing the exams, smiling, knowing you have done your best and feeling good.

## On the day



Have a good breakfast, or at least some water if you can.

Make sure you know where the exam is being held and what time it starts. Give yourself plenty of time to get there.

Take all the equipment you need for each exam, including extra pens and pencils (perhaps get this ready the night before?).

Take in a bottle of water if you're allowed, otherwise drink a little water before you go in.

Go to the loo beforehand!



If you feel really anxious, breathe slowly and deeply whilst waiting for the exam to start. Gently bring your mind to focus on your breath. This will ground it and calm down that amygdala. You can use this technique at any point.

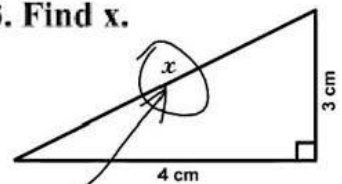
Read the instructions before starting the exam. Ask the teacher or exam supervisor if anything is unclear.

Read through all the questions before starting writing, and make sure you are clear how many questions you are required to answer. If there is a choice, start by answering the question you feel you can answer best. Plan how much time you'll need for each question.

If you are stuck on a question, go on to the next. You can always come back to it later. If you are really stuck, try to have an intelligent guess anyway.

Leave time to read through and check your answers before the exam finishes.

3. Find  $x$ .



*Here it is*

## **Yay! You did your best 😊**

Knowing that you've done your best means you haven't let anyone down, especially yourself.

Try to put the last exam out of your mind and look ahead to the next one. You can't go back and change things. Best not to go through the answers afterwards with your friends if it is only going to make you more worried

You're you, and you can only do the best you can on the day.

When the exams are over, pat yourself on the back – it's time to relax and forget about them. If you did well – congratulations! But remember, **there is life beyond exam results.**

Disappointing grades are not the end of the world, even if it does feel that way at the time. You might decide to re-sit and, in any case, there will be lots of other opportunities to express yourself and succeed later on in life

Although it may feel like the most important thing in the world, these tests ain't worth the physical strain that you're putting on your body if you stress about them. And, as you now know, too much stress won't help you do your best.

## Further tips can be found at:

[www.examtime.com/blog/beat-exam-stress-10-easy-ways](http://www.examtime.com/blog/beat-exam-stress-10-easy-ways)

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/jan/08/five-secrets-of-successful-revising>

<http://www.revisionbuddies.com/>

[https://www.cgpbooks.co.uk/interactive\\_tips\\_exam](https://www.cgpbooks.co.uk/interactive_tips_exam)

<http://www.wikihow.com/Revise-Successfully>

<https://successatschool.org/advisedetails/161/Seven-of-the-Best-Free-Online-Revision-Toolsddies.com/>

## Apps

ExamPal

Examcountdown

SQS My Study Plan

## Extra Support

If you feel that you can't cope with the pressure or are feeling stressed, find someone to talk to. Don't bottle it up!

Try to talk to your teachers or tutors, family, Pastoral staff, friends or other support.

Kooth.com

Childline - 0800 1111 (24 hours) - [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

**Exams are important – but they are  
not the only key to a successful  
future.**

**Go ahead - give it your best shot.**

