



Exam stress

In this lesson, students identify the signs and symptoms of exam stress and recognise that it can affect young people before, during or after an exam.

Using the concept of designing an 'Exam Buddy' app to help them, students develop helpful strategies in order to manage their own exam stress and be supportive of friends who may also be experiencing stress.



Curriculum links to the PSHE Association Programme of Study

KS3

Core theme 1: Health and wellbeing

Pupils should have the opportunity to learn:

- the characteristics of mental and emotional health and strategies for managing it.

Core theme 3: Living in the wider world

Pupils should have the opportunity to learn:

- about their own identity as a learner, preferred style of learning and to develop study, organisational, research and presentation skills.

KS4

Core theme 1: Health and wellbeing

Pupils should have the opportunity to learn:

- the characteristics of emotional and mental health and the causes, symptoms and treatments of some mental and emotional health disorders (including stress, anxiety and depression)
- strategies for managing mental health including stress, anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide, and sources of help and support.

Core theme 3: Living in the wider world

Pupils should have the opportunity to learn:

- time management, self-organisation and presentation, project planning, team-working, networking and managing online presence).

- the role peers can play in supporting one another (including helping vulnerable friends to access reliable, accurate and appropriate support).

>> Learning objectives

We are learning about the potential effects of exam stress on our physical and emotional wellbeing, and ways to manage it.

>> Learning outcomes

Pupils can:

- identify signs of exam stress in themselves and spot the signs of it in others
- know who to ask for advice and where to look for guidance on exam stress, including on the Rise Above website
- select and use strategies to help them manage exam stress, including revision techniques.

Preparation

Before delivering the lesson:

- visit the Rise Above website (riseabove.org.uk) and [Rise Above YouTube](#) channel and familiarise yourself with its content
- read through [Introduction to Rise Above](#).

Climate for learning

Read through [Guidance for learning in a safe environment](#). This includes advice on:

- developing and revisiting effective ground rules drawn up with students
- familiarity with your school's safeguarding policy and procedures, including Child Protection and other relevant policies
- being prepared in case students make a disclosure
- including and protecting vulnerable students
- using distancing techniques so that students can discuss sensitive issues without being encouraged to make a disclosure
- handling sensitive questions
- involving students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Anonymous question box

A question box or envelope should be placed somewhere in the classroom. Students are encouraged to write down any questions that occur to them during the lesson and submit them anonymously.

Teachers can address these questions in the next lesson or form time.

Students can also post anonymous questions to the Rise Above Twitter account [@We_RiseAbove](#) and the [Rise Above MTV Wall](#). You may wish to display these links during the lesson and/or write them on your question box or envelope.

Students can submit question anonymously via Twitter or the MTV wall and will be answered by one of the Rise Above team who are there to help at all times, even over the weekend. Students' anonymity will always be protected and if needed, they will receive advice as to where to seek help and guidance from next.

Rise Above moderate every comment and follow a set procedure for managing disclosures and safeguarding.

>> Resources

- [Young Voices – Exam stress?](#) film
- [How to ace an exam](#) film
- [Dealing with exam stress](#) film
- Rise Above website
- Blank A4 paper and pens
- Sticky notes
- Flipchart/flipchart paper

>> Time

60-75 minutes, depending on time available

>> Key vocabulary

Exams, pass, fail, stress, signs, symptoms, revision, planning, organisation, strategies, support, conversations, management, relaxation



Baseline assessment

These starter activities introduce the topic of exam stress in a safe, non-threatening way, enabling you to find out what students already know or perceive about the topic. You can choose to revisit them in the plenary to show evidence of students' progress.

Before you begin, establish or review your ground rules for learning in a safe environment.



Exam Buddy (5-10 minutes)

Explain that students are going to design an 'Exam Buddy' app to help young people recognise and manage exam stress. They will be in small groups throughout the lesson and at the end will present their app designs to each other.

As an option if time permits, play the class the [▶ Young Voices – Exam stress?](#) film to introduce the topic, or use the class discussion questions below:

- Why do exams cause us stress?
- How could you tell if you or a friend is experiencing stress?
- What would you like to know about dealing with exam stress?

Signs and symptoms

The first step towards managing stress is recognising the signs (what someone else might be able to see) and symptoms (what the person experiences). Students should get into their groups and complete a 'head and body' diagram by sketching a silhouette of a person's head and body and labelling it with:

- what the person might think or say when stressed (head)
- the physical symptoms a person might experience (body).

Physical symptoms could include:

1. difficulty getting to sleep or difficulty waking up in the morning
2. constant tiredness
3. forgetfulness
4. unexplained aches and pains
5. poor appetite
6. loss of interest in activities
7. increased anxiety and irritability
8. increased heart rate
9. migraines/headaches
10. blurred vision and/or dizziness
11. comfort eating
12. drinking too many caffeinated/energy drinks
13. exacerbated existing health conditions/depleted immune system (feeling 'run down').

Each group feeds back the signs and symptoms they discussed in their group to the rest of the class. Before the feedback commences, ask two students to create a master list on the whiteboard/flipchart of everything that has been shared. Emphasise that as we are all different, everyone experiences stress in a slightly different way so we all need different coping strategies.

Optional extension

Create a 'vocabulary of stress': words that a person may use when they are feeling the pressure, to which the Exam Buddy app might need to recognise and respond.



How do you feel? (5 minutes)

This is a before and after self-assessment activity. Students reflect on how they feel about the topic of exam stress at the beginning of the lesson and again at the end of the lesson, to see whether their feelings have changed.

Students should answer the question 'How do you feel about exam stress' by picking an emoji that expresses their feelings. To help them choose their emoji, ask them to think honestly about the following yes or no prompt questions. Use these differentiated questions as prompts:

Lower

- Do you know how to spot when you're stressed?
- Can you think of ways to relax and de-stress?
- Would you say you're confident about revising for exams?

Higher

- Do you know what you want or need to achieve in your exams?
- Do you have a revision plan that will work for you?
- Do you know where to get help and advice about revising?

Alternatively, students can place themselves on a 'confidence line' drawn on paper, with 'not at all confident' at one end, and 'completely confident' at the other. The emojis (or confidence lines) can be shown to the teacher using mini white boards or handed in on cards at the end of the lesson.

This is a self-reflection activity - students should never be asked to share personal information with their peers.

Core activities



Exam Buddy – tips and advice database (15-20 minutes)

The app needs to have a database of tips and advice for managing exam stress. It could be sorted into three sections: stress before, during and after the exam.

1. Start by watching the [▶ How to ace an exam](#) film or the [▶ Dealing with exam stress](#) film on Rise Above. Students can use the tips covered in the film, as well as adding their own suggestions and expanding on the ideas covered in the film to create their tips database.
2. Next, students should browse the Rise Above website (riseabove.org.uk) in their groups to find lots more ideas and films about exams, stress and revision. Explain to students that Rise Above was created by young people for young people, and that it's a safe and anonymous space for them to find helpful information and talk about the things that matter to them. Allow students to browse the site independently. Be on hand to answer students' questions if needed.
3. After compiling their database, each group shares their tips and advice with the rest of the class in turn. Other students can ask questions and offer constructive suggestions.

Help students identify that many of the suggestions need time to put into practice – and that takes planning and organisation.

- When is the right time to put each idea into action?
- Which ideas need to be put into practice well in advance?
- Which tools (e.g. sticky notes, a diary, study buddy) can someone use to help plan and do their revision?

See the [Managing exam stress: tips and advice sheet \(for teachers\)](#) for the kinds of ideas students should be coming up with. Emphasise to students the importance of talking to a trusted person if they are experiencing stress. They can talk to teachers, tutors, parents, siblings, friends or classmates. It is important to get help and not suffer in silence!



Optional: Exam Buddy – features and functionality (10 minutes)

The app will have a forum where people can ask each other for advice. Distribute one of the example posts, below, to each group. Students should write back to the young person in the style of a message board post and suggest solutions to their problems. Each group should share their answers with the rest of the class.

- My best mate always seems to have done loads more work than me. It's making me stressed out. – Sam
- I'm sure I'm going to fail, no matter how much work I do. What is the best way to revise? – Jack
- During exams I get freaked out by the first question if I can't answer it, and then I get stuck. – Niamh
- I get a headache nearly every day. I keep thinking about what my parents will say if I don't get the right grades. They'll be so upset and disappointed. I'm finding it hard to focus and actually revise. – Nav
- My exams are over but I'm so worried that I can't sleep. I need to find out what I got but it won't be for weeks! – Alex
- How do I make sure to leave enough time to answer all the questions in the exam? – Harry
- Sometimes in exams I break out in a cold sweat and start breathing really fast. I'm starting to panic it will happen this time. – Jas
- I'm struggling to manage my time and fit all my revision in. It feels like there's far too much to do. I keep forgetting to eat lunch. – Millie

Plenaries

Use these plenary ideas to summarise learning and identify next steps.

Optional: Vote now! (10 minutes)

As an option if time permits, students can present their app ideas to the rest of the class, including the name, look and feel, features and functionality. Once everyone has finished presenting all students must vote, but they are not able to vote for themselves.



How do you feel? (5 minutes)

Students think back to the emoji or confidence line that they shared at the start of the session in answer to the question 'How do you feel about exam stress?'

Now they should choose another emoji, or position themselves on the confidence line again, to answer the same questions, using the following prompt questions to help them:

- Have your feelings about exam stress changed since the beginning of the lesson?
- Do you feel more confident in preparing for exams and handling any exam stress?
- Do you know where to get more ideas or help if you need it?
- Can you spot when you're starting to get stressed and know what you can do to deal with it?

The emojis (or confidence lines) can be shown to the teacher using mini white boards, or handed in on cards at the end of the lesson.



I can! (5 minutes)

Students should imagine they are with a friend who is becoming stressed about exams. They should complete one or two 'I can' statements that identify how they can now help, and share them with the rest of the class.

- If someone I know is stressing about planning their revision, I can...
- If I see someone who needs to take a break from revising and relax, I can...
- When someone I know needs to get help with their revision planning, I can...
- If my friend gets stressed in the middle of an exam, I would advise them to...

Before the end of class, remind students about the importance of asking for help if they need it, and encourage them to visit Rise Above (riseabove.org.uk) in their own time, along with other helpful websites and sources of information.



Extension ideas

Remember that the learning doesn't stop now. Each Rise Above lesson can be followed up using the extension ideas below:

Vox pops and other video or audio

Students can create video clips of their ideas, interview their friends and create a vox pop compilation, or develop video clips which capture role-played examples of what can happen and how to respond.

Leaflets and artwork

Students can share their ideas by creating leaflets or posters that provide help and advice in their own words, and which draw on what they discover on the Rise Above website. This can include advice or creative responses like poems, rap lyrics, photos and visual art to convey students' messages.

Displays

Students can draw on their ideas to create displays of written work, images or video clips for your foyer. This is a great way to share students' learning and creative responses with other students and with adult visitors to your school.

Student-led assemblies

Students can develop their ideas into presentations, video clips and role plays that they can build into an assembly for a year group or the whole school. This can stand alone or link to displays and peer-led learning sessions.

Peer-led learning sessions

Students can develop activities and materials that they can deliver with younger students. These can take place in tutor time, timetabled lessons, out of lesson time or as a suspended timetable activity.

