Preparing for the exam: managing stress for Year 12 students

This October, thousands of Year 12 students will be sitting their Year 12 exams. Whilst a bit of stress can be beneficial in motivating you to study, too much can affect your performance and most importantly, your health. Stress can make you feel overwhelmed, anxious, and moody and frustrated which can then affect your ability to concentrate and eat and sleep well! Here are some strategies that you may find useful to limit your stress levels so they don’t get the better of you. However, if you feel you need to speak to someone about how you are feeling, please do! Speak to a family member, close friend, or your teachers about how you are going. There are also organisations to help you if you need to speak to a trained professional, such as the organisation ‘Headspace’. They have online counsellors or you can arrange to speak to someone in person. Find out more about them at http://headspace.org.au/about-us/

Work out a home support plan

- Decide how others living with you can best support you during this period. Give them things to do like help you to revise, listen to you answer a question out loud, or to give you emotional support and encouragement.
- Give them a copy of your exam timetable so that they know when your exams are coming up. This is important in case you lose your copy, but it can also help them assist you to get to the exam on time!

Manage your self-talk

Stress is often related to feelings of fear and is caused by the fearful thoughts that you often tell yourself otherwise known as self-talk. Examples of negative self-talk could be:

- “What if I can’t remember….?”
- “What if I don’t do well enough…?”
- “I will never be able to do all of this revision in the time I have…..”
- “There is no point sitting the exam, I don’t know anything”

To manage your stress, you first need to listen to what you are telling yourself. Ask yourself, what is causing the stress? If you are feeling stressed because you haven’t covered a particular topic, work on it as soon as you can. There is no value being stressed about things you can’t control or manage. If you have a look at some of the statements above, they are all fear statements. Fear of not passing, fear of not remembering, and fear of the outcome. Negative self-talk also assumes that things are always
permanent, and can’t be changed, like “I can never remember this”. This further adds to your stress because it doesn’t allow you to focus on what you can do to change.

Here is an example of a student using positive self-talk:

“Okay, what am I worried about? I’m really hazy about outcomes 3 and 4 of the course. I’m pretty confident about the first two outcomes. I think I need to talk to my teacher about 3 and 4 and ask for some advice. After dinner, I’ll download some previous exams from the VCAA site and have a look at the questions and at the examiners’ reports on the questions”.

You can see here that the student isn’t focusing on the fear, but focusing on finding a solution or solutions to actually help them. Focusing on the fear will only lead to more stress! And, if you can’t find a solution, remember, talk to someone and tell them how you are feeling.

Remember, during your revision time; focus on what you can control. So, when you hear these statements going over and over in your mind, ask yourself- “What do I fear?” Then, tell yourself that you are doing everything you can to remember what you need too for the exam, and get your best possible result.

**Learning to control the physical aspects of stress**

- Practice relaxing techniques like deep breathing, where you breathe in for a count of 7, then out for a count of 7. Do three rounds of this breathing technique.
- Remember, physical exercise is an important stress release, so slot at least 30 minute exercise breaks into your study program.
- Try not to focus on doing one subject per day, but do a mix of subjects each day so you don’t get bored studying the same thing and get ‘brain drain’.
- Don’t force yourself to study when you are tired. Sleep is just as important as studying. Take at least a five minute break every hour of study that you do.
- Catch yourself out when you start to get stressed, and ask yourself “Is it useful for me to be stressed now?” You know that getting stressed out is not going to help. If you feel yourself becoming stressed when doing a task, try to write down or say all that you know about the task. If you have already become stressed, ‘bail out’ for a short time, and then return when you have relaxed.
- Try meditation. You can download free apps such as ‘Headspace’ at [https://www.headspace.com](https://www.headspace.com). Other useful apps for mental health can be found at: [http://au.professionals.reachout.com/apps-and-online-tools/other-mental-health-issues](http://au.professionals.reachout.com/apps-and-online-tools/other-mental-health-issues)

- Have a look at the website called Reach out, that has developed a campaign called ‘There’s Life after Year 12 exams’. The campaign is located at [http://thereslifeafter.reachout.com/3/](http://thereslifeafter.reachout.com/3/)

Good luck!