

## MANAGING EXAM STRESS

### What is stress?

The word stress can be used to describe feelings of unease, worry and fear experienced when we are presented with an event or situation that we feel we cannot undertake successfully. It includes both the emotions and the physical sensations we might experience when we are worried or nervous about something. We can feel nervous in a lot of situations and these might be different for everyone, some examples are when: sitting an exam, our appearance and relationships.

### How does it 'feel'?

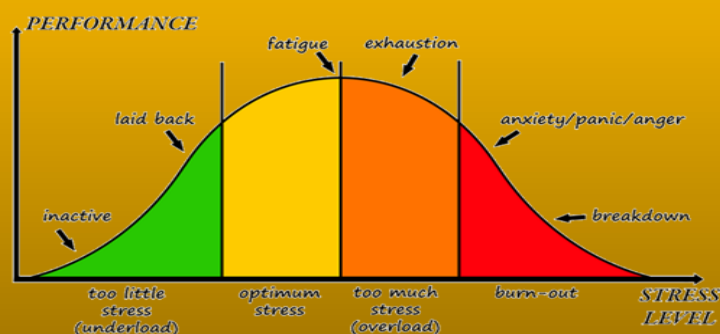
We feel stress in four ways:



1. **Emotions:** anxious, nervous, tense, detached, feeling like something bad is about to happen.
2. **Thoughts:** Difficulty concentrating, thoughts racing, mind jumping from thing to another, going over the same thoughts and worries again and again.
3. **Physical signs:** Sweating, dry mouth, dizziness, heart pounding, breathing changes, chest feels tight, stomach-ache.
4. **Behaviour:** More irritable than usually, avoiding situations which cause fear, starting jobs and not finishing them, eating more or less than usually, pacing up and down, difficulties sleeping.

### Can stress ever be helpful?

Stress is something we all experience from time to time. It is a normal and natural reaction to situations that we see as threatening or frightening to us. There are also occasions when a degree of anxiety can be helpful. It can keep us focused, alert and energised at times when this may be important, such as sitting an exam, running a race or going on stage. In such situations our level of performance may be boosted by a certain amount of stress.



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## When is stress unhelpful?

When feelings of stress are very strong or last a long time and affect your daily life, they may be unhelpful. When we have been experiencing intense worry for a long period of time, our 'thinking brain' may be negatively impacted affecting our engagement with learning, performance and achievement.

## TOP TIPS

**What can I do?** (some ideas that might help you manage stress when it is becoming 'too much')

### 1. Notice

Notice when you are worrying or feeling anxious! This is the first step in making things better. If you feel the signs of stress mentioned earlier, or you notice you are thinking thoughts like those listed earlier, then take note of these.

Symptom monitoring



10- High stress, at risk of physical and emotional symptoms

5- Moderate stress, building up

0- Low stress, feeling fine

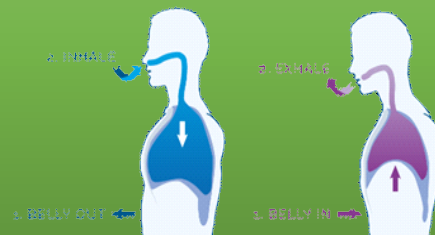
### 2. STOP

Stop momentarily and bring your attention to the here and now

Take 3 slow and deep breaths

Observe and label 3 sounds around you.

Proceed with whatever you need to do



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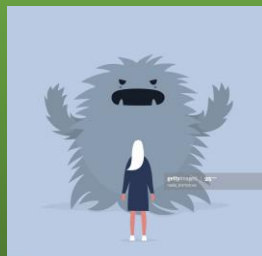
### 3. Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Stretch out your muscles for five seconds and then let them go floppy and relaxed. This is easier if you have somewhere comfortable to sit. Make sure you include all your muscles, even your face, forehead, back and stomach.



### 4. Fight Your Fears

Try to notice when you are avoiding things and try to tackle these fears one at a time. Avoiding gives temporary relief but can make it worse later.



### Other things that might help:



- Reduce your intake of coffee, tea, and other stimulants (*stimulant is a substance that raises levels of physiological or nervous activity in our bodies*).
- Eat healthy foods, rest and exercise regularly.
- Share your experience with somebody you trust in school, a parent or a friend.
- Think about ways that have helped you cope at previous difficult times.
- Try to be strict and limit your 'worry time'. Think about your day and find a time in it when it would be okay to worry – no more than five or ten minutes is needed. When you find yourself worrying at a time when you have other things to do (like at bedtime, or while you are trying to concentrate on something else), tell yourself to stop and put off the worries for later.