HSC exam guide: how to help your kids through this stressful time

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Abstract
Final exams are a nightmare for most year 12 students, but crucial given they are decisive in getting into university. The period of preparation can be painful and hard. Students spend many hours studying and experiencing outstandingly high levels of stress and anxiety. There are ways parents and teachers can help diffuse some of the stress during this time, and things to look out for if your child is experiencing high levels of stress or anxiety.

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Final school exams will likely be the most stressful time in your child’s life to date. How can you help them out?

Final exams are a nightmare for most year 12 students, but crucial given they are decisive in getting into university. The period of preparation can be painful and hard. Students spend many hours studying and experiencing outstandingly high levels of stress and anxiety.

There are ways parents and teachers can help diffuse some of the stress during this time, and things to look out for if your child is experiencing high levels of stress or anxiety.

**Don’t ignore your children’s basic needs**

It is very common that students try to study all day and night, often sleeping only just a few hours, eating too much or skipping meals. However, healthy nutrition, sleep and breaks for rest and leisure time are indispensable for their physical and mental health.

Academic stress can increase unhealthy dietary habits such as less fruit and vegetable intake, more snacking and a reduced likelihood of eating a healthy breakfast, as well as leading students to be less physically active every day.

Make sure your kids eat healthy food regularly. A breakfast full of high-fibre and nutrient-rich whole grains, fruits and dairy calcium-rich products is considered fundamental for better
cognitive function in regard to memory and academic performance.

Having a good sleep during the night as well as daytime naps, for perhaps one hour a day between studying and testing, helps consolidate memories and enhance attention and learning. It is recommended that adolescents sleep around eight to ten hours a night.

Breaks and active leisure activity should be included in a students’ daily program. Short half-hour to one-hour breaks during study are good for the memory.

Unfortunately, some students study more than 14 hours per day during exam preparation, skipping sleep and free time. It is advisable that adolescents devote about 25% of their waking hours to homework and school work, leaving time and space for leisure activities and socialising.

Watching television can be detrimental for high school achievement but having frequent breaks involving moderate to vigorous physical activity, like playing sport, walking or running, ideally for 60 minutes a day, can reduce stress and foster academic performance.

Alternatively, listening to relaxing music after tests has been shown to decrease stress-related symptoms such as heart rate and blood pressure. Listening to music can have some benefits on spatial-temporal reasoning, but how it influences verbal learning is still in dispute.

Advice for parents: be there

What’s most important for students is the feeling that they have their parents and teachers next to them to support them emotionally. During exam periods students might experience thoughts of failure, a sense of inefficacy or helplessness, and a wish to escape the test situation. Stressed teens are also at risk of increased blood pressure, heart rate and respiratory rate.

Other signs of high levels of stress or anxiety are aggressive impulses, headaches, stomach aches, insomnia, changes in appetite and dizziness. When parents/teachers identify signs of stress in their children/students, they need to calm them down - which includes emphasising the positive consequences of the work they are doing.

Advice for teachers

Parents have an important role to play in supporting their kids

In some cases, anxiety may be caused by expectations that students have of themselves: due to comparisons with their peers and expectations that others have of them - including their parents. Parents should try to discuss these issues with their kids. Confirm that they should be motivated and try to do their best, but if something goes wrong or doesn’t work, together you will find different options for following their desired future career path.
Teachers' support is fundamental for students' success. It is important for students to feel free and comfortable asking questions. Teachers can help their students with “informal” tests throughout the year in which they summarise the essential information.

Testing cannot only be used to evaluate learning, but also to improve learning. Teachers can stimulate students to engage in practice testing activities, such as completing practice questions at the end of textbook chapters.

In contrast to conventional high-stakes testing, this type of low-stakes or no-stakes formative testing activity has been shown to be an effective means to improve learning, familiarise students with testing situations, reduce anxiety and achieve better performance on high-stakes exams. Frequent and repeated testing will help students retain more information and help teachers get an idea of each student's performance.

It is essential that teachers provide their students with positive corrective feedback such as individual advice on strengths, weaknesses and errors. Last but not least, teachers should advise students to use effective strategies to release their stress and focus on the tests, such as writing down their anxiety-related thoughts before the test, skimming the test problems before the start of the test to activate the required knowledge for the test problems, and closing their eyes when thinking about a complex problem to minimise distraction.

This is part of The Conversation's Exam Guide.