



**MINU
BUDHIA**



Feeling anxious before a big exam may always be a part of student life, but letting that anxiety turn into stress does not have to be. An essential part of understanding how to deal with exam stress is to first figure out why you feel it. So, what actually causes stress?

THE MOST COMMON REASONS STUDENTS CITE FOR EXAM STRESS ARE:

- ◆ Parents and teachers expectations. Do your best. You can't pluck stars.
- ◆ Your own expectations. Don't be so hard on yourself. Take it easy.
- ◆ The desire to get into a particular stream or course of study after the examination. Getting anxious will lead you nowhere.
- ◆ The feeling of being under-prepared.
- ◆ Comparison.
- ◆ Fear of forgetting everything during the exams. If you are stressed you will definitely forget, so RELAX!
- ◆ If anything else is worrying you, keep that worry in a different compartment of the brain, so that you can deal with it later. Think about these reasons... Which of them apply particularly to you? Sometimes experiencing exam stress gets in the way of actual, productive studies, resulting in a huge waste of time. Here are ways to not only study hard, but STUDY SMART!

It is that time of the year again when the students of the city are gearing up for the board examinations or their annual examinations.

Even today, when anyone mentions exams, I get very, very anxious. Just the thought of it sends my heart racing and my palms begin to sweat. As a child I had severe exam phobia — I would barely eat anything and couldn't sleep for more than three-four hours at night. On the nights when I would go to sleep on time, I would ask my mom to wake me up after a couple of hours. During non-exam times I even had nightmares about giving exams!

I must say, I'm quite lucky that my parents never placed any sort of pressure on me to score high marks. As long as we studied regularly at home and did our best at school, they were okay. In fact, I think this lack of pressure is what inspired me to study hard and always get second or third place in my class.

An established phenomenon, exam stress is not something that only affects a handful of struggling students. From toppers to mediocre students to those barely passing, the pressure to perform academically and score good marks affects all. And it's not just students, even parents have reported rising levels of anxiety during their child's examination time.

However, while a certain degree of stress and fear about performance can have a motivating impact, often one gets to hear of cases where exam stress has become extreme. While in some situations it disrupts routine activities, it has even resulted in irreparable damage. The fear of parental reaction to failure or bad marks, the feelings of guilt and shame at not having lived up to exceptionally high expectations, or the fear of not being prepared have even caused the loss of lives. Even Bollywood has shed light on this matter — in the film *3 Idiots* an engineering student Joy Lobo dies by suicide after the college dean refuses to extend the project's deadline for submission.

There is usually a rise in the number of children, adolescent, and college student suicides during exam seasons. In 2019, at least one student died by suicide every hour in India. At least 4,000 children in the age group of 14-18 years died by

HEALTH

END EXAM ANXIETY

The way to deal with the fear of examinations is to recognise the stress build-up and tackle it sensibly

suicide after they failed to clear academic examinations between 2017 and 2019. And going back a few years, between January 1, 1996 and December 31, 2019, India lost more than 1.7 lakh students to suicide!

STRESS, SYMPTOMS AND SOLUTIONS

A little bit of stress is a good thing. In addition to keeping you on your toes, it is actually known to improve cognitive function, which helps you study better. In fact, learning to manage low amounts of stress helps children become well-adjusted adults both at work and at home.

Acknowledging and accepting the fact that you will feel some kind of stress is key to staying healthy during exams. The key here is to not let your stress levels get to the point where even the thought of exams induces panic. Thus it's important to be aware of some physical and psychological symptoms which crop up in our lives during extended periods of duress. (See box 'Symptoms of Stress')

SMART SUCCESS — TIPS FOR STUDENTS

- ◆ **Learn to recognise when you're stressing out.** A break or a chat with someone who knows the pressure you're under will help put things into perspective.
- ◆ **Avoid comparing your abilities with your classmates.** Those "Oh my God I've only read the chapter three times" conversations are such a wind-up. Everyone approaches revision in different ways, so just make sure you've chosen the method that works best for you. Make a realistic timetable and stick to it.
- ◆ **Sleep well.** Wind down before bed and don't revise under the blanket. Your bed is a place of rest, not a desk. Get your sleep, even if it is three-four hours as it improves memory and concentration. Taking power naps can help too.
- ◆ **Tea and coffee are good for concentration but not in large amounts.** Eat one nutritious meal and one comfort meal of your choice.

★ **Find out which is the best time for you.** Morning or evening? Are you a night bird or a morning person? Study during that time of the day.

★ **Don't rush during the exam.** Concentrate on and tackle the questions you know the best. If there's a question you're not so sure about, attempt it last.

★ **Steer clear of any exam 'post-mortem'.** It doesn't matter what your classmate wrote for Question 3(b), it's too late to go back and change your answers. Plus it will just make you worry even more. Once you are out of the hall, forget about what you just wrote and concentrate on the next exam you have.

★ **Take deep breaths.** Before starting your exam, take 30 seconds to calm down. Inhale and exhale consciously and repeat a positive phrase or a prayer in your mind.

★ **Fix a place to study.** Creating a positive, motivating study space is essential. Find the quietest room in the house, away from all distractions, and set up a table there.

★ **The 3Ps — Preparation, Practice, Positivity.** To prevent last-minute panic, you've got to prepare a detailed plan of action in advance. Include information such as 'reading for the first time', 'written practice', 'third revision' etc. To stay positive and motivated, put up posters, quotes or good wishes from your loved ones in your study area.

★ **The 3Rs — Ritual, Rest, Review.** Have a fixed method or process of studying that works for you. Whether it's reading out loud, writing it down, quizzing with another person — adopt your own style. When making your timetable, schedule study slots, revision slots, breaks and sleep time.

★ **Use the Pomodoro Technique.** An excellent time management tool, this method helps break large tasks into smaller chunks. For example, when you start a chapter, set a timer for 25 minutes and start studying. When the timer rings, take a five-minute break. Repeat this pattern four times and then take a 30-minute break.

PRACTICAL PATH: DO & DON'T FOR PARENTS

★ **Do watch out for signs of stress.** You don't have to be a helicopter parent, but keep a track of your child's sleep and eating habits during the prep months, and especially during the last couple of weeks leading up to the exams.

Have one meal of their choice at least with your kid and discuss simple, everyday things that make them happy.

★ **Compliment them for small things so that their self-esteem remains high.** No criticism at this time.

★ **Do create a fear-free conversation zone.** Have regular conversations with your child or teen where you motivate them to do their best but also reassure them that a bad score does not mean they are a bad child. Instead of talking about high expectations, talk about both positive and negative outcomes and how you'll deal with both as a supportive family. Re-emphasise that you always have their back, no matter what.

★ **Do consider getting your child professional help.** A child might have panic attacks, fainting, vomiting, he may refuse to give exams.

★ **Some red flags:** hyperactivity, short attention span, having difficulty in reading, writing or maths despite trying hard. You might have to consult a doctor. But beware of over diagnosing.

★ **Do let your child choose their academic stream or career.**

★ **Play a small board game or a sport together to destress.**

★ **Don't force your child to study every day.** At the end of the day, your child's exam is their responsibility.

★ **Don't compare your child with other children.** "Your elder brother got 98 per cent." This depletes their self-confidence.

★ **Don't lose sight of the fact that there is life beyond and after exams.** Things might seem intense right now, but it won't last forever. This exam is not the end of the world.

I'd like to end by telling students to have faith in yourself. It's just another exam, it's just another day. I wanted to be a doctor when I was in school. Today, I'm a psychotherapist and social entrepreneur instead and I'm still impacting lives. My dream of healing people is one I am living — only the path has changed.

You are unique and the best!
All the very best!

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SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Physical:

- ★ Headache
- ★ Stomach cramps
- ★ Loss of appetite
- ★ Loss of sleep

Psychological:

- ★ Feeling low
- ★ Being snappy and irritable
- ★ Having a short temper
- ★ Worrying about trivial issues
- ★ Low concentration
- ★ Low self-esteem