

‘Big pressure on young shoulders’

AQE/GL tests

This guide has been produced by Action Mental Health to help parents/guardians support their children through the exam process.



With the AQE/GL season fast approaching, Action Mental Health is offering parents support to help their children prepare for the milestone transfer exams, and also tips on how best to cope with exam-related stress.

Experiencing these physical changes before and during an exam is normal and sometimes they can actually make us feel motivated to achieve, more alert, confident and enthusiastic. Stress, however, becomes a problem with it begins to make us feel tense, nervous, anxious, aggressive and panic-stricken. If severe or prolonged, stress can impair concentration and performance

There can be a lot of pressure on children to do well in exams and this can often leave them feeling overwhelmed and stressed out. Sometimes the demands to do well at school can be brought on by themselves or prompted by people around them. Feeling anxious at such times is understandable, but for some young people the pressure can become too much to bear.

When we feel stressed, scared or nervous our body responds by releasing stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones cause increases in heart rate, muscle tightening, blood pressure and a quickening of breath. These physical changes increase stamina and make you more alert, preparing you to either fight or flee from the situation you face.

Symptoms of excessive stress can include:



Headaches, dizziness and stomach upset



Preoccupation with thoughts of exams and inability to relax



Withdrawal from friends, family and hobbies



Constant tiredness due to problems sleeping



Loss of appetite or over-eating



Seeing only the negative side of things



Becoming more aggressive and short tempered with those around you



Feeling so low and desperate that children don't want to go to school, feel like running away or self-harming

A young girl with blonde hair, wearing a red and white striped long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans, is sitting on a light-colored sofa. She is holding an open book and looking towards the left. Behind her, a woman with brown hair tied back, wearing a dark red top, is sitting on the same sofa, looking down at a white document she is holding. The background shows a bright window with a green plant and a white wall.

If you think your child is feeling these symptoms it's important to encourage them to seek support as soon as possible - from you as a parent or another trusted family member, friend or teacher at school.

It doesn't matter who, it's just important they speak to someone.

You can also help your child to minimise exam stress in the following ways:

Develop a realistic revision timetable, by making a list of the subjects/topics they need to focus on. Feeling prepared and organised can reduce stress

During exam time it is important to manage time properly. Try to help your child maintain a healthy balance between practice papers and other activities they enjoy - taking time out will help them to relax and can take their mind off revision. Long periods of continuous study can overload young brains, making it difficult to concentrate and be productive. Remember to build regular breaks into revision schedules and be mindful that the average attention span lasts around 40 minutes

Engaging in some form of physical activity during the break is a good way to reduce anxiety levels and help them relax. Even something simple like walking up and down the stairs can be enough to move the body and refocus on a different subject;

Remember everyone revises differently. Some children might sail through practice papers easily following a short break after school - even ten minutes doing something relaxing first, is beneficial. For some however, waiting until after dinner before commencing revision, would be preferable. Compare how efficient they are at different times of the day and use different study methods, from practice papers to spelling drills out in the garden or even maths quizzes at bathtime;

You can also help your child to minimise exam stress in the following ways:

Ask for help from their teacher if there are things you don't understand.

Always offer encouragement and support – try not to criticise or place added pressure on them;

Praising and encouraging their efforts and achievements can be motivating and demonstrates your support for them;

Try to keep things in perspective and encourage them to do the same – remember that exam results are not the only indicator of a young person's capabilities.

Around exam time...

Be careful to ensure your hard-working child is getting enough sleep and going to bed at a consistent time each night. Just as your mobile smart phone needs recharged, your children need a sufficient nightly recharge to be working on full power and have the energy to face the next day. A child of 10/11 should get 10-12 hours of sleep per night, so it is important that this is prioritised, especially at exam times;

This is a good time also to talk about prioritising tasks. Be conscious as a parent about how many demands are placed on a child. Extra-curricular activities like sports and clubs may need to take a back seat in the run up to exams however, also be mindful that they may be an enjoyable and relaxing de-stressor for you child - try to strike the right balance;

Parents of worried, stressed or scared children should encourage them to talk about their emotions, ensuring them it is OK to be feeling like this. Some children may find relief by writing down or drawing pictures to express their feelings and in some cases children can find solace by talking to outside help like Childline;

Around exam time...

Mindfulness or simple breathing techniques can be used as a great de-stressor, helping kids relax when they are feeling overwhelmed and to promote better sleep as part of their bedtime routine;

Action Mental Health actively promotes the Five Ways to Well-Being and exam time is a particular period of people's lives that these simple principles are beneficial. Be active, give, keep learning and take notice - each of these points help lift a person's mood and improve well-being. This could be introduced as a family activity and will help alleviate general stress levels at a time when many family members can also be affected by it;

Every day encourage your child to do something they enjoy - but in this scenario computer games are not recommended!

On the day of the exam...

Make sure they have a good breakfast and drink water. Eating well and keeping hydrated can improve their concentration and also stop them feeling hungry in the middle of the exam;

Leave plenty of time to get to the AQE/GL school venue. Feeling rushed will only make everyone feel more anxious before the exam;

Make sure they have all the equipment they need and their required ID documents

If they are feeling anxious before the exam encourage them to try their breathing techniques; breathing slowly and deeply, even on the way over in the car, can be very helpful;

Remind your child to take time to read and re-read the questions thoroughly to ensure they don't overlook important information;

Encourage them to answer questions they are most confident about first, as this is where you are likely to pick up the more marks;

Tell them not to worry about what others are doing during the exam, this will only distract them

Encourage them to avoid lengthy discussions with classmates about how they answered the questions as this can leave them feeling worried and frustrated;

After the exam, it's nice to reward your child after by doing something they enjoy.

Results time

Getting exam results can be a worrying time. It can often seem like your child's future totally depends on that magic number, in the case of AQE, or the alphabetical grade they receive for their GL, that they find in their envelope in January.

Receiving disappointing results can feel like the end of the world, but it is important to remember that people's strengths and weaknesses lie in different areas and not everyone performs at their best under exam conditions. AQE/GL results do not have to define what your child does or who they are in the future. They have more options and opportunities to succeed in the future than you may think.

For further information on local organisations and sources of support, contact AMH MensSana on 028 9032 9150.

For further help, visit the Northern Area Mental Health Initiative hub at:
<https://northernareamhi.org.uk/>