



Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families



Exam and assessment stress

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What is exam and assessment stress?

Exams and assessments often cause some anxiety. A certain level of anxiety can be helpful; the body's warning system (the release of adrenaline) can help increase our motivation to prepare and achieve.

Sometimes, however, this warning system can be overactivated. When this happens, anxiety is more difficult to manage and might lead to marked differences in mood. This can then impact negatively on exams and day-to-day life, and can lead to problematic anxiety and low mood or depression.

Exam and assessment stress can stop young people from doing things that they are normally able to do. For example, they might find it more difficult to stick to their usual sleep or eating routines. Or they might find it difficult to do things that they normally enjoy doing, like socialising with friends.

There may also be wider contextual factors in a college student's life that exacerbate exam and assessment stress, and make them more vulnerable to exams and assessments becoming a significant disruption to their everyday life.

Contextual factors may include:

- housing worries
- strained relationships with others
- lack of support network
- finance worries
- having dependent children of their own
- worries about progression routes
- issues with jobs if they are currently employed.

Everyday triggers that might make exam or assessment stress feel worse include:

- media reporting of exams
- pressure from friends and family.

Signs to spot in students



Early signs that exam or assessment stress is becoming an issue for a student include:

- noticeable low mood
 - expressing hopelessness about the future
 - not enjoying activities that they previously enjoyed
 - withdrawing from friends
- tiredness
- complaining of physical symptoms – e.g. headaches and stomach pains
- not eating or drinking frequently
- noticeable anxiety
 - reassurance seeking
 - reduced eye contact
 - talking quickly
- avoidance
- irritability.

How to start a conversation with a student if you're concerned

A good way to approach a student that you are worried about is by asking them for a 'check in'.

Keep the conversation relaxed with a curious stance, and an open mind. Try to ask open ended questions rather than inadvertently appearing as though you already know how they are feeling and what is going on.

For example:

- "I was thinking about the exams/assessments that are coming up, and wanted to check in with you and see how you were getting on."
- "How have you been feeling recently? I know you've got a lot on your plate."

Listen, accept and validate all emotions that might come up. Try to normalise these, and let the young person know that this is a common reaction amongst others going through the same thing. It is helpful for young people to know that they are not alone and others also experience similar feelings.

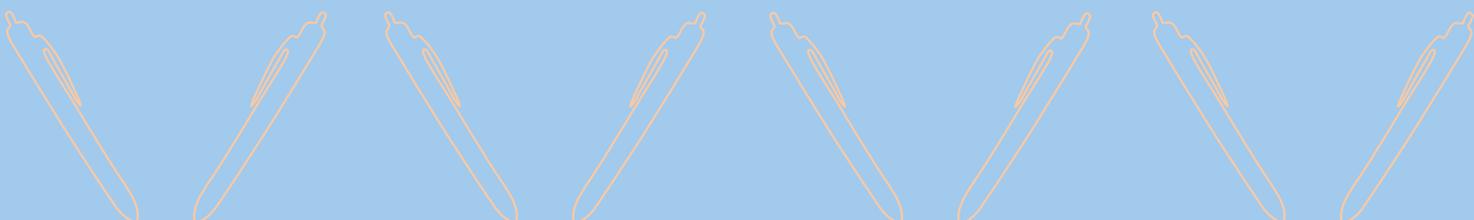
Listen to all worries that are concerning the young person. The most obvious worry might be about exams or assessments, but there could be lots of additional contextual worries that are also impacting on them.

Book in another time to check in with them. Let the young person know that they can contact you and use you for support if and when they need to.

Practical solutions

There are practical solutions that college staff can employ to help a young person deal with their exam and assessment worries.

- Review their revision timetable:
 - Are they doing too much? Or too little?
 - Are they struggling to fit in space for revision around other commitments?
 - Do they have regular breaks for food and sleep?
 - Do they have time to relax, e.g. exercise or read?
- Help students begin to notice when they are getting anxious or low in mood:
 - Remind them of the physical symptoms of anxiety; e.g. tight chest, heart beating fast, sweating, racing thoughts, stomach pain, feeling dizzy.
 - Help them recognise thinking traps that they may fall into; e.g. "I'm going to fail this exam," "I've always been bad at things like this."
- Offer coping strategies that they can use either proactively, or reactively when they have noticed a physical symptom:
 - Deep breathing techniques
 - Thought challenging, "What evidence do I have to support my thought?"
 - Grounding techniques:
 - 5,4,3,2,1; Acknowledge 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch around you, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, 1 thing you can taste.
 - Have a hot or cold drink.
 - Go for a mindful walk in nature and listen to the sounds around you.
 - Other self-care suggestions; there are [90+ suggestions](#) on the Anna Freud Centre's website.



Who else to involve

If you are worried that a young person is at risk, always follow your setting's safeguarding policies and procedures. Involve your designated safeguarding team as a matter of priority who will contact other services as necessary. If the young person is at immediate risk, ensure that they are taken to their GP or A&E as a matter of urgency, depending on the severity of the concern.

It's important to familiarise yourself with any local support services that are available in your area and ensure you understand the pathways for referring students.

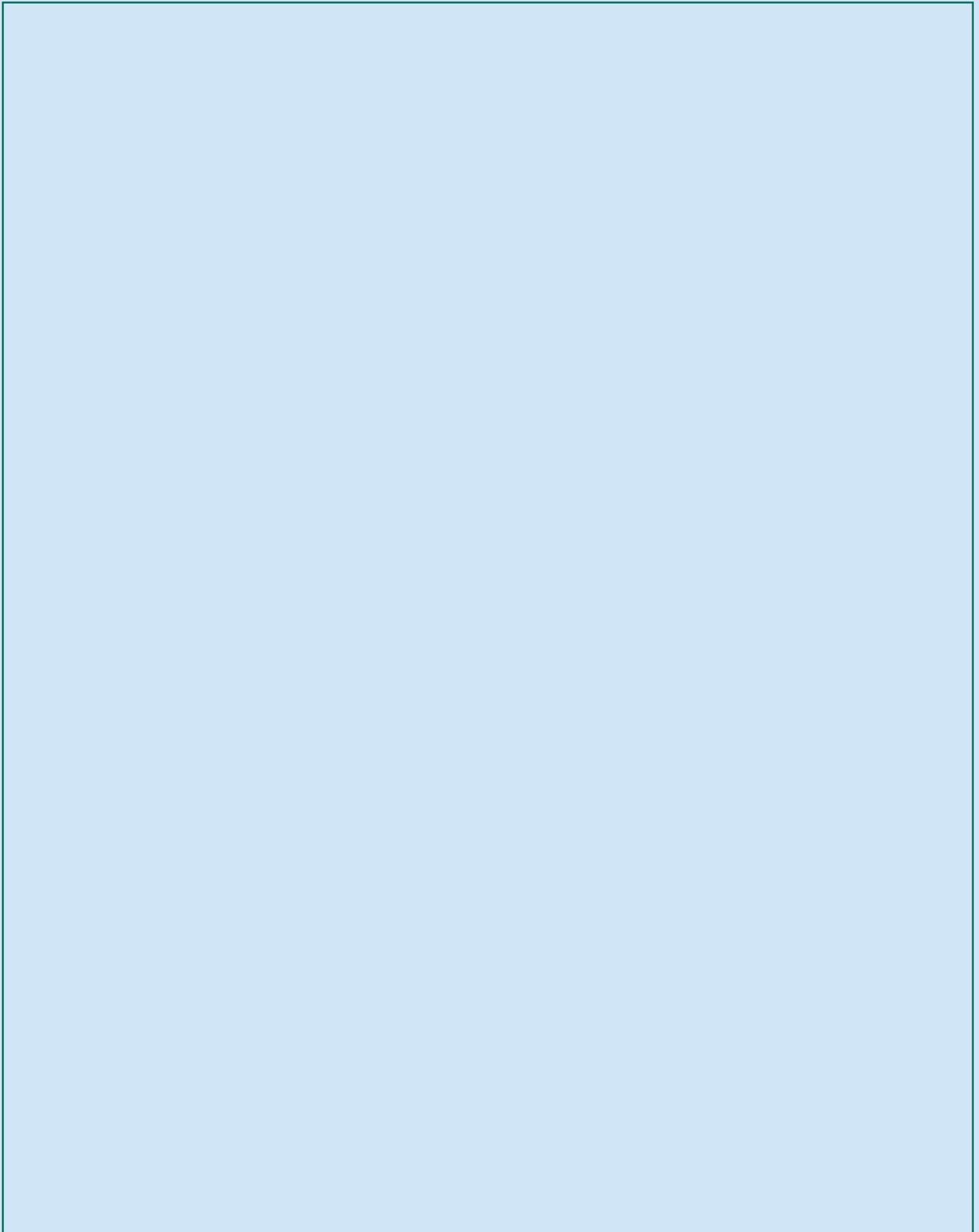
Young people can find mental health support and guidance on the [On My Mind](#) section of the Anna Freud Centre's website.

Some national organisations who may also be able to offer support include:

- **Student Minds:** supports students to look after their mental health, and provides information and advice for parents. The website provides details about local services offered by universities, and young people can also access their peer and group support programmes
 - studentminds.org.uk
 - info@studentminds.org.uk
 - 0113 343 8440
- **National Careers Service:** provides information, advice and guidance to help young people make decisions about learning, training and work. Webchat available via the website homepage. Opening times: 8am - 10pm, 7 days a week.
 - nationalcareers.service.gov.uk
 - 0800 100 900
- **Student Space:** provides mental health support to students. Find what support is available at your university here. Webchat service available. Opening times: 4pm - 11pm, 7 days a week.
 - studentspace.org.uk
 - students@themix.org.uk
 - 0808 189 5260
 - Text STUDENT to 85258 (24/7)



Notes and reflections

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