



SecEd

Guide to...

Beating exam anxiety

Key content

- Help your GCSE and A level students to prepare for their examinations
- Top tips for how students can revise effectively, including 'last-minute' advice
- Top tips for handling exam stress and anxiety – and keeping calm in the exam
- Overcoming the impact of Covid-19 on exam preparation
- Resources and useful links to sources of support and advice



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GUIDE TO...

Beating exam anxiety

Working together to get ready for examinations

As we embark on another busy term, I am sure that our collective focus continues to be about doing everything in our power to support and prepare learners ahead of this summer's exams.

For many learners, this will be the first time they have ever taken an external assessment, and I understand that this may feel like a daunting prospect for some.

We recognise the challenges that learners and teachers have successfully faced across the last two years and have worked closely with Ofqual, the Department for Education (DfE), and other exam boards to develop a wide-ranging support package in response to this.

On our student support webpages, learners can also find a range of handy tips, wellbeing blogs, and revision materials to help them through their exams

The package includes the release of advance information, optionality and modularity for certain subjects, all in line with DfE and Ofqual requirements. While it is important that students revise their whole course, these measures were put in place to help guide and support students' revision, helping to ensure they are as well-prepared as possible for their exams.

We are also fully aware of how the circumstances of the last two summer exam series may have affected grades and will

therefore ensure exams are graded in a fair, positive way to ensure students receive the grades they deserve.

To further support centres and students, we have expanded our provision of teaching and learning resources, including new blended learning modules, knowledge organisers, and exam walk-throughs – which have been designed to support the delivery of our qualifications and to help learners with their revision.

This is all in addition to the wealth of existing resources on offer, all of which can be accessed for free via our website. On our student support webpages, learners can also find a range of handy tips, wellbeing blogs, and revision materials to help them through their exams and to prepare them for the next steps in their lives.

While a return to exams will be a new experience for some, it does provide an opportunity for students and teachers to return to a tried-and-tested, effective and widely understood model of assessment; and I am confident that the summer series will enable students to showcase the knowledge and understanding they have gained over the last two years in a controlled and fair environment.

Thank you for your on-going support. I wish you and your students all the best for this year's exams.

Ian Morgan

Chief executive
Eduqas
www.eduqas.co.uk



Exam anxiety: Supporting GCSE and A level students

After a two-year hiatus caused by Covid, exams are back in 2022. Students in years 11 and 13 are due to sit GCSE and A level exams this summer and, for many, it will be their very first taste of high-stakes assessments.

As such, this summer will be the first time students have had to organise their self-study, manage their time, and organise their revision notes. It will be the first time they have had to revise for multiple exams, committing a vast array of knowledge to memory. It will be the first time students have had to contend with the often-confusing exam hall routines.

This summer will be the first time, too, that many students have had to navigate exam papers, following detailed instructions, identifying and interpreting the command words used in exam questions, and using the marks and space available

for each answer to understand where to dedicate their time and effort. All of which might cause increased levels of anxiety.

Some students thrive on the pressure of exams and excel under exam conditions. They like working in silence, without distractions, and are comfortable working against the clock. But many others do not. High-stakes assessments, by definition, cause stress and students if not helped to manage their anxiety and taught how to cope with the demands of terminal exams will likely flounder this year.

So, what can school leaders and teachers do to help students cope with exam pressure and to help them better prepare for success this summer?

In March 2022, *SecEd* broadcast a podcast in partnership with awarding body Eduqas and entitled *Beating exam anxiety* in which these



questions and more were debated. Podcast host Matt Bromley interviewed four experts:

- Dr Rachel Dodge, qualifications development officer at WJEC/Eduqas. Dr Dodge has a PhD in psychology focused on student wellbeing.
- Natasha Devon, an author, broadcaster and campaigner who delivers talks and conducts research on issues related to mental health. She is the author of *Yes You Can Ace Exams Without Losing Your Mind* (2020).
- Ben Hewitson, a sociology teacher at a high school in Suffolk who also supports students through their exams as part of his role.
- Fran Nantongwe, a teacher of social sciences in Norfolk who has worked with countless exam classes in a career spanning nearly 30 years.

👉 *Using the specification as a checklist for revision helps you focus on where you actually need that revision to be* 👉

The Covid context

Before discussing general advice for how teachers can support their students to prepare for their exams and handle any anxiety or stress, the panel discussed Covid and the consequences of the pandemic for this year's exams cohort.

Asked what the impact of Covid on students' preparedness for exams has been, Mr Hewitson said that his year 13 students this year are lacking examination experience: "Not only do their two years come down to these exams, they've never really been through this process before and so that adds an extra air of stress and anxiety. You can have as many mocks as you (like) in the classroom, but mocks don't replace (the real fear that you get) on the morning or afternoon of an exam."

Ms Nantongwe has several year 13 classes and said that "a lot of the students who are experiencing extremely high anxiety have this issue that they really haven't sat very many formal exams".

Furthermore, she said that two years of blended

learning seem to have affected students' ability to concentrate: "They just worry that their concentration won't hold out – they're so used to online learning where they can mute the microphone or turn their cameras off. In the mocks, some students literally ran out of steam, their stamina just did not hold up."

Ms Devon had also begun to notice a reduction in attention span, even before Covid struck: "Young people were telling me, for example, that their homework was taking them far longer ... and that was in turn impacting their sleep – the amount of sleep and quality of sleep that they could get – which is, of course, a really fundamental cornerstone of good mental health.

"When you interrogate that further, the reason is that they're trying to multi-task. So, they are doing their essay, but they also have chat windows open they have their phone next to them with notifications switched on."

Ms Devon emphasised the importance of self-regulation in the use of social media: "One of the tips that I give," she continued, "is to try and ringfence time when they're studying and to have an agreement with their friends that none of them are online between this hour and this hour, so that they are not trying to have their leisure time and their work time co-existing, because then they're not fully invested in their work, but they're also not fully getting the joy out of social media, and it is supposed to be a joyful thing."

Meanwhile, advising schools to avoid an entirely deficit model and to counter media messages of a "lost pandemic generation", Ms Devon said she has been asking young people to consider what they can do now that they could not do two years ago.

THE SECED PODCAST: BEATING EXAM ANXIETY

This March 2022 episode of the *SecEd Podcast*, produced in partnership with Eduqas, offers a wealth of practical tips and advice for how schools and teachers can help students to prepare for their GCSEs and A levels this summer. Listen via: <https://bit.ly/3D6Nt5T>

She continued: “One of the answers that I’m given is that they learned how to motivate themselves to work from home and that will serve them not only when they’re on study leave (but) also if they choose to go to university; it will also help in the world of work.”

However, Ms Nantongwe warned that, in her experience, some students “have gone the other way” and are less independent now, less able to manage their time and motivation, and they may need support in this regard.

Asked how awarding bodies like Eduqas can help, Dr Dodge said that research by the charity Mind had recently highlighted that one in three young people believe their mental health got worse during the pandemic. As a result, Eduqas has been trying to have open conversations with learners about their anxiety.

She said: “You can do loads of mock exams, but students have so many worries about what it’s actually like to take an exam and I think that there has been a great rise in that situational anxiety. I think we need to allow learners to ask any question about what it’s going to be like in the exam – no matter how silly those questions may seem.

“Nobody likes taking exams. But if we can compare exams to other things that learners are doing, like learning to drive, then they might see it in a slightly different way. It’s quite common when you’re just about to do your driving test to be taken on the test routes and that’s just the same as doing a mock exam (and walk-through).

“I think when we explain the skills that students are expected to use in an exam and how that can be compared to everyday practical situations, that can reduce the anxiety that they’re experiencing.”

Supporting students academically

Citing a recent roundtable event run by the British Psychological Society, Dr Dodge said that one lesson to emerge was that “learners are taught to revise but they’re not always told how to revise”.

She explained: “Revision is not always intuitive, and one size does not fit all. We need to introduce different techniques to students, allowing them to find what works best for them.

She continued: “We also need to allow learners to really understand what that exam paper is going

“A much better use of the first few minutes of your exam time is to do a quick mindfulness activity to bring yourself out of flight or fight to ensure that you are focused enough to perform your best”

to look like. We can do past papers, talking through the instructions on the front of the page, looking at the time allocated, having an open discussion with students (about the fact they) don’t have to do it in the order that the exam paper is set out.”

Dr Dodge advised that teachers and students also use the exam specification as a checklist of what they need to learn: “Using the specification as a checklist for revision, pushing yourself out of that comfort zone and looking at the areas that you’re not so good at, not only reduces the amount of revision, but helps you focus on where you actually need that revision to be.

“At Eduqas we’ve developed lots of resources about what our command words (used in questions) mean, what they tell you about how to answer that question and so on. There are so many resources on our website such as past papers and mark schemes, examiners’ reports, as well as loads of things that students can do.”

Mr Hewitson said that one of the “success stories” of the pandemic has been encouraging and empowering students to use online resources to help them with their studies, to break-down exam questions and look at command words, working out how to construct an introduction using sentence starters, and so on. He said that there was lots of help and advice online, including on YouTube, not only on exam course content but also on exam technique.

Asked how he helps students to develop study skills and revision techniques, Mr Hewitson said that his school uses morning form-time to cover ➤

these explicitly: “We deliver half-hour sessions a few times a week in which students are introduced to different revision techniques – whether it be colour pen technique or mind-maps or flashcards – so they develop an understanding and appreciation of the variety of different kind of revision techniques that are out there.

“Introducing these things into form time takes the pressure away from subject teachers (and helps students to see that the same techniques can be) applied to a range of subjects.”

Ms Nantongwe agreed and said that at her school they explore different forms of information retrieval such as quizzing, including multiple-choice options and revision crosswords.

Eduqas has developed a variety of exam walk-throughs, Dr Dodge explained: “There are loads of resources about how to break-down the specification into revision lists.

“Different subjects will do this in different ways and we’re very lucky that all of our resources on our website are free and created by subject specialists and former teachers. The resources are accessible to everybody.”

Supporting students pastorally

The panel also discussed the mental health aspects of sitting exams. Ms Devon said the two aspects – academic and pastoral support – were heavily inter-related: “Young people seem to have bought into that binary choice between nurturing their mental health and performing their best in exams. (But) the evidence doesn’t support this – it shows that your academic performance and your mental health have a symbiotic relationship.

“If you’re really invested in an element of your studies (then this) has a positive impact on your self-esteem, confidence and mental health. If you are able to reduce stress and anxiety and optimise wellbeing then this improves your ability to retain information, problem-solve and think creatively, because ultimately it is all your brain.

“We need to stop compartmentalising it and acknowledge that supporting young people’s mental health will also have a positive impact on their academic performance.”

To achieve this, Ms Devon said teachers should take time each day to mediate the stress and anxiety

“*Allowing ourselves to have a sense of control actually improves our wellbeing. Even if that control is ‘I am going to take a break at this time’*”

that we experience: “This is the mental health equivalent of brushing your teeth, we should be ringfencing time each day to empty our ‘stress bucket’. And there are three particularly effective ways to empty your stress bucket: One is physical activity, (two) is creativity, and (the third) is relaxation.”

She continued: “These are the three things which are squeezed inevitably out of the school day when schools are under pressure.” One way to counter this, she said, is to do “a quick mindfulness session each day in form time”. Doing this, she said, will give students the skills to calm themselves when in the examination hall.

“What I say to young people is that a much better use of the first few minutes of your exam time is to do a quick mindfulness activity to bring yourself out of flight or fight to ensure that you are focused enough to perform your best. But mindfulness is not a skill that you can just pull out of the bag on exam day – it takes practice.”

Elsewhere, Ms Devon urged schools to focus on helping students to “discover their intrinsic motivation”. “The evidence shows that people who understand their intrinsic motivation not only have a higher level of wellbeing, but they also make better decisions throughout their lives because they make decisions with their intrinsic motivation at the forefront of their mind. And when your intrinsic motivation is being served you feel more fulfilled and generally happier, so again it’s a really good thing to get them thinking about at a young age.”

Dr Dodge added that, to help reduce anxiety, schools could teach students about self-control: “Allowing ourselves to have a sense of control actually improves our wellbeing. Even if that control is ‘I am going to take a break at this time’ or

'I am going to choose tonight to have a bath instead of doing my revision' – it's all about taking back the control. I think another thing (is to) communicate with parents about how they can support their children during this time. Eduqas has produced a range of articles for parents on spotting the signs of stress and what they can do to support their child.

"I think some parents worry (and so) nag too much, so they need help getting the balance right – knowing when your child needs to take a break, encouraging them to go and stay connected with their friends, and listening to them. It's about having that conversation about the benefit of still doing your sport and the benefit of still seeing your friends. A lot of parents feel that they have to tell their children that they can't go out and that's not healthy."

Indeed, in an article post on the Eduqas website entitled *Useful tips for protecting your mental health*, Dr Dodge offers the following advice to students:

- **Take a break:** It is easy to spend time on your phone mindlessly scrolling. Take a break and try other activities that will distract you, this could include reading a book, going for a walk, or how about trying mindfulness?
- **Spend time outside:** Spending time outside is a good way to unwind after a full day of learning.
- **Maintain your routine:** A good routine helps us to feel grounded and gives us a sense of normality. Get up at the same time every day and do something that makes you feel good as soon as you wake up.
- **Maintain a healthy body:** We are all guilty of turning to unhealthy snacks during stressful times, but it is best to limit these snacks and try to maintain a healthy and balanced diet. Get outside for a walk or run. Alternatively, there are apps and online videos to help you exercise at home. Why not try yoga, which doesn't require specialist equipment?
- **Don't neglect your sleep:** Sleep is important, and it is recommended that we have at least seven hours a night – this will support your cognitive functioning, you will have more energy, and you will be able to stay focused for longer.
- **Control:** Focus on what we can control, from your routine to your choice of reading materials.



- **Take time to unwind:** Always make time to relax with activities you enjoy – reading a book, watching a boxset or playing a video game. Or try something with those you live with, such as baking together. It will give you a healthy distraction.

After the exams

The podcast ended with a focus on post-exam support, in terms of the immediate aftermath as students file out of the hall and naturally analyse their performance, but also the longer term consequences once exam results are known and students consider their next steps.

Ms Nantongwe said it was important that teachers are available to students after the exam and Mr Hewitson added that although "there isn't an awful lot we can do to change the outcome, we can be there to listen and to offer advice and a bit of reassurance for students".

He added: "I often recount anecdotes from my own personal friends who, even those who didn't do very well on exams, went on to be successful. There is life after exams."

Further information

- ▶ **Dodge:** *Useful tips for protecting your mental health*, Eduqas: <https://bit.ly/eduqas-mh>
- ▶ **Eduqas:** www.eduqas.co.uk/hereforyou

Additional advice and resources

Eduqas offers a range of free resources to help prepare students for exams and to help alleviate some of the natural anxiety that some students inevitably experience before, during and after they take exams.

These resources are available to all school staff whether they teach an Eduqas qualification or not.

The materials include knowledge organisers, walk-throughs, blended learning resources, and a variety of tools to help students plan their work – from weekday planners to revision flashcards.

The knowledge organisers are available for all subjects examined at both GCSE and A level and encompass a broad range of content. For example, for A level English language there are organisers on open class words, phrases, and spoken language.

These organisers cover key words and

definitions, and exemplars in the form of sample analyses of extracts from texts. For GCSE computer science, meanwhile, there is a detailed organiser covering the whole course, and separate documents on individual components, such as networks, data organisation, the principles of programming, and so on. All the organisers are written in easily accessible language and are laid out on the page in a way that is conducive to self-study and retrieval practice.

The knowledge organisers are great tools to give to students to help them revise but are also handy for teachers to guide their planning and teaching, ensuring they cover – and repeat and reinforce – key content. The organisers can also be used as a starting point to help students create their own organisers as a retrieval practice activity.

Seven tips for last-minute exam preparation

Here are some tips from Eduqas to get students prepared and ready for their exam

- **Nothing new!** The last minute is not the time to experiment. Stick to what you know and what you have practised – go with what worked for you in the past.
 - **Take a nap:** Studies show that getting enough sleep (6.5 to 8 hours) is a vital way to consolidate key information. Try this routine: come home, a quick power nap (20-30 minutes), and then get your head stuck into some studying before making sure you get a good night's sleep.
 - **Make your own exam:** Engineer your own exam by going through all of your materials and looking for possible questions. Don't go easy on yourself – imagine you're the examiner and you will find where your strengths and weaknesses lie.
 - **Get yourself together:** Get yourself fully ready the night before to prevent unnecessary rushing and panicking on the morning of your exam. Gather all of the equipment you need and lay out your clothes ready for the morning.
 - **Ditch the caffeine:** An evening coffee can affect your ability to reach the deep stages of sleep that are critical for memory-formation.
 - **Get your cardio in:** If you've got time, try and squeeze in a power session before 7pm the night before your exam to get the blood, oxygen and nutrients pumping through your brain. This helps improve your memory and problem-solving skills. It doesn't need to be anything too intense.
 - **Hydrate:** Drinking water is directly linked to your brain function. Keep away from the energy drinks, as they could contribute to increasing nerves the next day. Aim for up to 10 glasses (two litres) of water a day. Keep a bottle with you, take frequent sips.
- For more tips like this, see the Eduqas article *10 top tips for the night before your exam*, available at <https://bit.ly/eduqas-tips>

Eduqas also provides “exam walk-throughs” which are designed for students and are an ideal tool to help take exam preparation to the next level. The walk-throughs are a more in-depth way to practise exams, offering practical hints and tips on how to effectively approach questions in examination papers.

Using questions from past exam papers, each PowerPoint document, which includes audio help and audio script in the notes, walks students through a mock exam paper, helping them to revise and practise useful exam techniques into their exam practice.

Students can practise exams, complete a “mock” paper in a single sitting, tackle one or two questions at a time, or revisit some parts of the presentation to reinforce their learning.

Eduqas has also worked closely with practitioners to design and develop blended learning modules to support teachers and students. Each blended learning video, available as an open-source file on the Eduqas website, contains interactive self-study content.

The resource is designed to complement traditional face-to-face teaching with an online learning pack that allows students to learn at their own pace. It can be used as revision by students, as part of catch-up or for flipped learning.

Further information

► For more revision resources and advice from Eduqas, visit <https://bit.ly/eduqas-seced>

The importance of exercise

Eduqas’s subject specialist for PE, Sean Williams, advises students to incorporate exercise into their exam preparation routine.

- **Exercise and your brain:** One simple way of relieving stress is to get in a quick fitness session. When we exercise, our brain produces a host of chemicals that help improve our mental performance. These include serotonin and dopamine – which are “feel-good” chemicals linked to boosting moods and improving focus and concentration.
- **Exercise and memory:** A direct effect of regular movement on the memory includes its ability to increase the size of the hippocampus, the area of the brain involved in verbal memory and learning.
- **Exercise and energy:** Exercise can boost your energy levels, giving you the focus you need to remain motivated and concentrated during revision sessions. Any activity that increases your heart rate and gets the blood flowing will get those endorphins going – even if it is just having a dance around to your favourite song.

► For more tips from Sean, see the Eduqas article *Wellbeing: Exercise, revision and you*, available at <https://bit.ly/eduqas-exercise>

Sources of support and advice for stressed students

For students who are struggling, there are many different sources of support.

- Childline offers support on its website to help young people handle exam stress and anxiety: <https://bit.ly/3CTQeaA>
- Young Minds has a range of wellbeing resources for young people, including a guide for handling exam stress via <https://bit.ly/3qfc2sl>
- YoungMinds also offers lesson resources for teachers to help their students stay mentally healthy during exams season: <https://bit.ly/3qfZHUL>
- Eduqas has a range of articles on its website offering tips and support for students: <https://bit.ly/eduqas-advice>
- Welsh organisation Meic Cymru has a range of advice including tips for revision, ways to lessen exam stress, staying mentally healthy and more: <https://bit.ly/3lyNlxv>
- Dr Pooky Knightsmith has written in *SecEd* on how we can help students to beat exam stress: <https://bit.ly/3igoOCn>