

Exam anxiety and mental health report

Supporting pupils through exam
pressure, with expert advice for
helping Yr 11s cope this exam season

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How did the ‘new normal’ impact Y11s?

In the last few years, there has been enormous disruption to exams and learning as a whole. The Covid pandemic meant students and teachers had to grapple with a new reality of rolling lockdowns, school closures, home-working, exam cancellations and the introduction of teacher-assessed grades (TAGs).

And although children of all ages will have felt the impact of the pandemic, for pupils sitting their GCSEs over the last few years, there’s been the added pressure of preparing for milestone assessments – a naturally stressful event – during a time of heightened national uncertainty and social isolation.

For some, these challenges were made even tougher by the digital divide, with an estimated 9% of families lacking access to a laptop, desktop or tablet at home. Evidence suggests that the impact of all of this on teens’ mental health has been significant.

Department for Education figures revealed that over 77,000 children had been assessed as having a mental health need by councils on 31 March 2021; an increase of 25% on the same measure two years before.

The NHS, meanwhile, reported a 77% rise in the number of children needing specialist treatment for severe mental health issues, with over 400,000 under-18s referred to NHS England for serious concerns like self-harm and eating disorders between April and October 2021.

Anxiety and resilience

In 2021, the Oxford University Press (OUP) surveyed more than 8,000 children aged between 7 and 14, from 85 UK schools, asking them to choose the top words they would use when discussing health and wellbeing. Tellingly, children chose “anxiety” as their word of the year for 2021 (with 21% of the vote), followed by “challenging” (19%), “isolate” (14%), “wellbeing” (13%) and “resilience” (12%).

It’s interesting to compare this to teachers’ responses – 31% of teachers chose “resilience” as their top word.

In this report, we delve into the findings of our post-pandemic mental health survey, looking at the key wellbeing factors – including the pandemic, among others – that they believe are affecting Y11s preparing for exams. We’ll also bring you actionable advice from educational psychology experts on how to help Y11s cope with exam pressure, manage stress, and stay resilient in the face of daily challenges inside and outside of school.

In 2022, we surveyed over 4000 UK secondary school teachers to understand their perceptions of how mental health issues at KS4 have changed since the pandemic.

Exam anxiety and mental health survey 2022

Our survey, conducted in January 2022, saw over 4,000 secondary-level teachers respond, from all corners of the UK and different types of schools. With a range of different ages and levels of seniority represented, the survey offers a snapshot of teachers' perspectives

UK regions		
	East of England	12%
	London	12%
	Midlands	19%
	North West	13%
	South East	20%
	South West	11%
	Yorkshire & North East	13%

School type		
	State school (including academy sponsored, academy converter & LA)	91%
	Private school	9%

Ofsted rating		
	Outstanding	26%
	Good	56%
	Requires improvement	18%

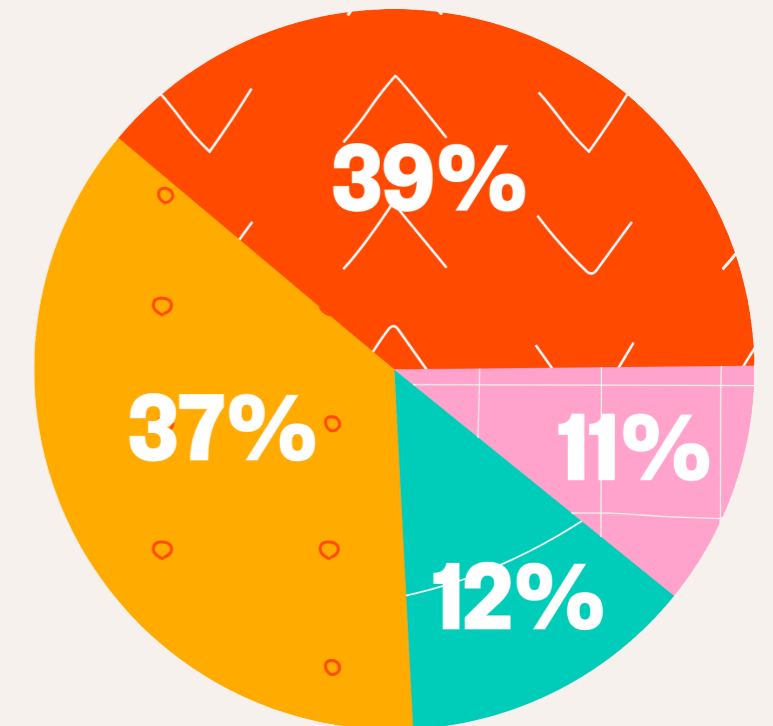
Gender		
	Female	71%
	Male	29%

Age		
	20s & 30s	49%
	40s & 50s+	51%

Teachers have spoken. Here's what they had to say about the state of mental health for Y11s in the run-up to exams

How do you think Y11 students are coping with exam pressure at your school, in terms of resilience, mental health and emotional wellbeing?

- Better than the last couple of years
- About the same
- Worse than the last couple of years
- Much worse than the last couple of years



49% feel that Y11s are coping 'worse'

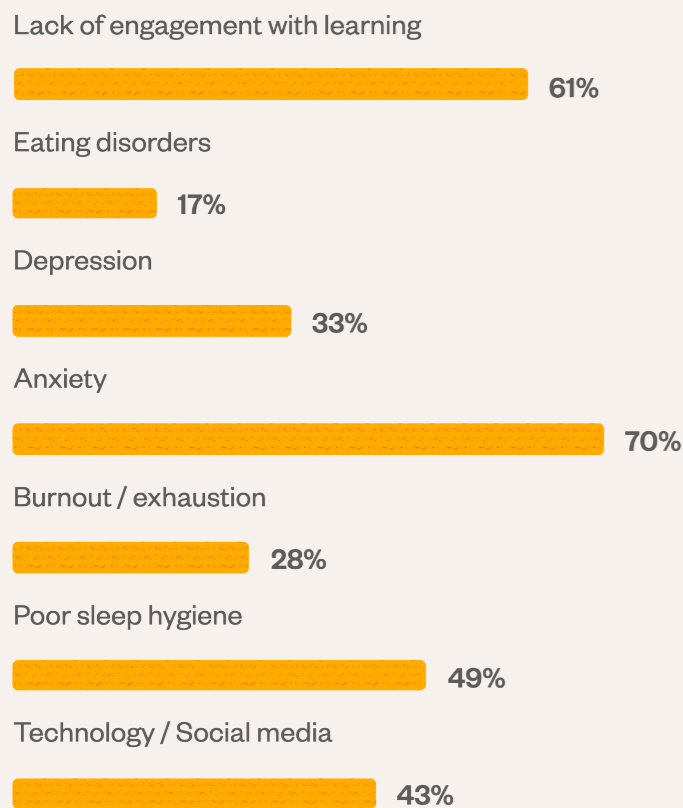
The results were clear: almost half of teachers felt that Y11 students are coping worse with exam pressure this year. This is a big leap from our January 2020 survey, before the start of the pandemic, when only 29% of teachers said that exam pressure had worsened in the past few years.

Although there could be any number of reasons for this jump, it seems likely that it's

partly due to ongoing uncertainty around the pandemic – as well as the fact that 2022's assessments will be the first GCSE exams to go ahead under 'normal' conditions since 2019.

These results were largely consistent across all regions in the country. However, teachers in schools with the highest proportion of students with free school meals (FSM) were more likely to report that their students were coping 'worse', compared to their colleagues in more affluent schools – at 53% and 43%, respectively.

Which mental health and wellbeing issues have worsened with your Y11 students since the start of the Covid pandemic?



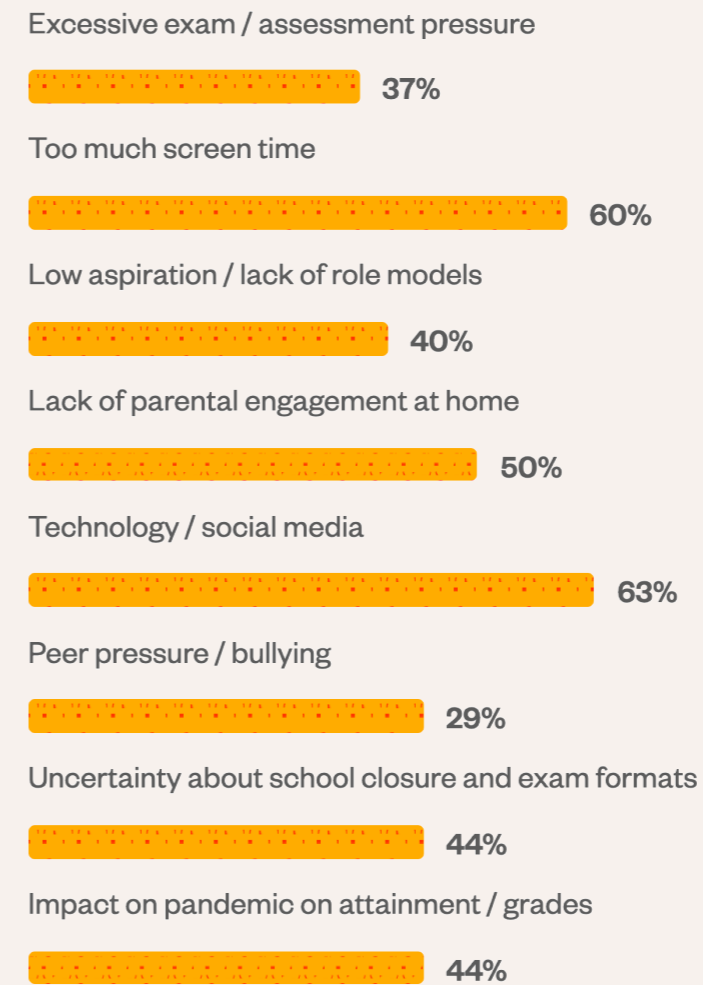
Disengagement on the rise

Reflecting on the specific wellbeing issues affecting Y11 students, we asked teachers to single out the problems that they felt had notably worsened in the past two years. Echoing our 2020 survey – and the OUP’s ‘word of the year’ – anxiety emerged as the biggest concern, highlighted by 70% of teachers, compared to just under two-thirds two years ago.

However, ‘lack of engagement with learning’ was also called out by 61% of teachers as a growing problem, a proportion that was slightly up (from 55%) in 2020. Interestingly, there were significant regional differences in perception on this factor: 49% of teachers in London and 55% in the South East felt disengagement had worsened, compared to 71% in the North West.

Although the exact reason for this disparity is unclear, it could potentially be due to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on this region. As of May 2021, the North West had reported [more Covid infections per capita](#) than anywhere in the UK, with likely knock-on effects on pupil and staff absences – and inevitable increased learning disruption.

What are the most significant damaging factors for students’ emotional wellbeing today?



Pandemic uncertainty: still causing strain

In our 2020 survey, teachers highlighted ‘lack of parental engagement’ and ‘too much social media and passive screen time’ as the biggest harmful factors for their pupils. That’s a trend that continues this year, with all three factors chosen by over 50% of teachers.

However, it’s clear that uncertainty surrounding the pandemic continues to be a big source of concern. Almost half (47%) of those surveyed felt that worries about school closures and changes to exams were damaging students’ wellbeing.

In a similar vein, the same proportion of teachers agreed that their Y11s were under emotional strain due to anxiety about the impact of the pandemic on their grades – despite Ofqual’s assurances around [providing advance information on exam topics](#) to ease the revision burden.

Digging deeper into these results, there were some noticeable differences of opinion both at a micro level - between teachers of different subjects – and at a macro level, between different UK regions.

Maths and Science teachers were less likely to call out attainment concerns as a key worry for their students (both at 44%), compared to their colleagues in the Arts and Languages, at 61% and 59%, respectively.

Zooming out to look at trends across the whole country, in the North West, Yorkshire and the North East, ‘low aspirations and a lack of role models’ emerged as some of the biggest concerns (for 47% and 48% of teachers) – compared to just 30% in London.

Toolkits

So, what can teachers do?

Regardless of regional nuances, the survey results send a clear message: exam anxiety is at an all-time high. So, what can teachers and educators do to support students who are feeling overwhelmed with exam pressure, and what actions can they take to help them ease this burden?

To help answer this question, we've asked experts in the field of test anxiety to share their advice on what teachers can do to relieve some of the pressure.

These toolkits offer 3 different perspectives on mental health and GCSE exam pressure, from educational psychology experts - including actionable tips and advice.



Test Anxiety: what can teachers do about it?

Prof. David Putwain, Professor of education at Liverpool John Moores University

What is Test Anxiety?

While many students can experience finding a specific exam a worrisome experience, or experience anxiety around exams for isolated periods, this isn't the same as exam anxiety or 'test anxiety'. Test anxiety is the tendency to experience most (or all) exams as threatening and react with high levels of anxiety, with characteristics such as:

Cognitive signs

- Going blank during an exam
- Difficulty concentrating
- Remembering answers after an exam has finished
- Negative thoughts about past performance in exams
- Negative thoughts about the consequences of failure

Affective signs

- Feeling excessive tension
- Feeling excessive panic
- Feeling excessively overwhelmed
- Feeling not in control

Physiological signs

- Fast heartbeat
- A dry mouth
- Jelly/wobbly legs
- Dizzy or faint
- A tight or churning stomach
- Sweating

Test anxiety can also show up in disengagement, procrastination in starting revision, or a withdrawal of effort from studies. This isn't to say that all disengagement and effort withdrawal is due to test anxiety, but it can be a reaction to fear of failure for some.

Although many people talk about 'exam stress' and 'exam anxiety' as if they were the same thing, it's important to understand the differences between them. Exam stress isn't always a bad thing. Some students thrive under pressure; it is motivating and drives them to perform better than they would have done otherwise. In contrast, other students choke under pressure. These are the students for whom exam pressures can become problematic, leading to test anxiety.

Is it a problem?

Educationally speaking, there's a robust body of studies conducted over the last 50 years showing that test anxiety is associated with lower exam performance – and that this is largely due to anxiety interfering with working memory function and capacity.

Working memory has a limited capacity to process information, and anxiety directs attention away from the exam and onto worries, making it harder to concentrate, recall information, and think about how to organise an answer to a question. Many highly test-anxious students describe this experience as 'going blank', despite having spent time diligently revising.

Importantly, students of all levels of ability can experience this, and it's not unique to high or borderline ability sets. The estimated difference between high and low test-anxious students in GCSE grades for Science, English, and Maths is two grades per subject.

There has been far less research conducted into links between test anxiety and wellbeing, but the studies that have been conducted point to highly test-anxious students being less satisfied with school. There's also some overlap between high levels of test anxiety and more serious forms of clinical anxiety such as panic disorder and generalised anxiety disorder. One study found, with 96.6% reliability, that highly test-anxious students met the criteria to be diagnosed with a clinical anxiety disorder.

Another, somewhat sobering, statistic from a study of adolescent suicide in England over a 16-month period in 2014-15 found that exam anxiety was specifically cited in coroners' reports in 15% of cases. These findings show that test anxiety isn't something that should be lightly dismissed as a routine part of education or taking high-stakes exams.

What can schools do about it?

Although the proportion of students recently reporting high levels of test anxiety doesn't appear to have increased significantly over the past decade, there's a much greater awareness among school practitioners of students who are unable to cope effectively with the demands of high-stakes exams.

This is partly a result of greater numbers of students asking for alternative exam arrangements and partly raised consciousness among students and adults of wellbeing and mental health issues. Schools I've worked with have tried a variety of approaches to support students, including yoga, mindfulness, resilience training, pet therapy, and quiet time.

These can definitely be effective approaches to general stress management, but their effectiveness for managing test anxiety will be limited unless they specifically address the root causes.

Fortunately, there are a number of simple and straightforward steps that schools and education practitioners can take to support test-anxious students.

1. Make exams 'normal'

Evidence suggests that test anxiety is less likely to develop when exams in formal settings are part of the normal routine of school life. Exams taken under standardised conditions could be incorporated into the school testing regime from Year 7 onwards so that the theatre and ritual of exams becomes normal.

2. Avoid assumptions

Don't assume that you'll know which students are highly test anxious. Students who show outward signs of panic and anxiety during exams won't be the only ones. There will be others who strongly internalise their anxiety and who may not talk about it. You might wish to consider taking a 'test anxiety temperature check' alongside existing measures of wellbeing that your school is using, or screening students to identify those who need additional support.

3. Start the conversation

Talk to your students about stress and anxiety, what they are, how to recognise them, what are their triggers, and specifically that exam pressures are nothing to be scared of. Everyone can learn effective ways of coping with pressure and managing emotions like anxiety. This could

be done in a whole-year assembly, wellbeing days (if your school has them), or through PSHE lessons (or their equivalent). Diaphragmatic breathing is an effective approach to reducing immediate feelings of panic and can be used, for instance, at the beginning of an exam. It does, however, require practice and could be easily incorporated into wellbeing days or PSHE lessons.

4. Help students structure revision

A common feature of highly test-anxious students is that they have low confidence in their ability (sometimes this can be subject-specific) or in their ability to perform during exams. If your school doesn't teach students about specific ways to revise, and how to plan revision, and importantly how to judge whether revision is effective, these would be excellent ways to help anxious students build confidence. Feeling more in control of learning will help to reduce test anxiety. Showing students how to revise in a cycle of self-regulating learning (set goals, revise, test, review goals) can provide the structure some students need to underpin their revision.

5. Communicate sensitively

Consider what messages students are being told about GCSEs or A-Levels in lessons, assemblies, or through official school communications. Heavy handed messages about the importance of working hard to avoid failure have been shown to motivate some students but are triggers for anxiety in others. The effectiveness of such messages depends on them reaching the right students and so may not be best used with whole classes or year groups.

6. Think about additional support

Consider whether to provide additional support or intervention for students who are highly test anxious. If this intervention is to be effective, it must specifically target the causes of exam anxiety. Your educational psychology or CAMHS service may be able to help or advise with this. Educational Mental Health Practitioners, being rolled out from 2020 onwards, may also be able to assist with (and maybe even deliver) such interventions, although this role hasn't been clearly defined yet.



Professor David Putwain

Professor of education at Liverpool John Moores University

David Putwain is a Professor of Education at Liverpool John Moores University. He is a former teacher who has been researching the psychological factors that influence learning and achievement (including test anxiety) since 2003. He has a particular focus on motivation, emotion, engagement, and the learning environment.

Promoting resilience and better mental health at GCSE: approaches for teachers

Doctor Jo Taylor, Educational Psychologist, London Borough of Waltham Forest

As an Educational Psychologist working in East London, the headline results from the teacher survey, discussed earlier in this report, reflect my own experiences of increasing concerns around anxiety – and fit with the current policy landscape. So, what do we do about it?

Defining anxiety and mental health

While anxious feelings can often be an appropriate response to the environment (e.g. GCSE exams in year 11) and even helpful (e.g. keeping us alert for that exam) they can also be difficult and unpleasant. Over time, chronic anxious feelings can negatively affect our wellbeing – so it's an important area to discuss.

When we talk about mental health in schools, naturally lots of questions can arise for teachers and school staff. Is it my job? Am I qualified to help? Will I make it worse? We also all understand mental health through our varied lived experiences and reference points. So, in schools, it's important to have a common language for talking about mental health and a shared understanding of terms. I like the definition from the World Health Organisation (WHO):

“Mental health is not just the absence of mental disorder. It is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”

For me, this highlights how mental health is not just the absence of mental ill health, but is about fulfilling potential and experiencing wellbeing. When we use this definition, mental health becomes everyone's daily responsibility and the aims align with those of school. I think most staff would agree that their job is about helping children to fulfil their potential (even if they disagree on how to achieve this).

It's natural to be concerned about the students you look after. Often when I speak to staff, they describe feeling worried and overwhelmed when they're faced with supporting students with their mental health. I've found the following approaches and tools have been useful across the different schools I've worked for.

Consider the specific context of the child

When a child is presenting as anxious, it can be hard to know how worried to be. Some questions you can ask yourself will help to put behaviour in perspective: how long have they been acting like this? What impact does their anxiety seem to be having on them? Who else has noticed?

The answers to these questions will help staff to get past their immediate response to being faced with an anxious child (this might be shock, empathy or annoyance) and to consider the bigger picture of that child's specific context. Recent events might provide a clue to behaviour, and they also might help you to put support in place in advance of a pressured time.

Let's imagine two students who have the same exam coming up; both are experiencing some anxiety. You know that one of them was recently bereaved. Your response to each might be different because you've taken the context into account when considering the support you put in place. This might seem like simple stuff – but, in the heat of the moment, it can sometimes feel difficult to zoom out and view the picture of the whole child. I meet experienced, dedicated staff everyday who 'know' that context is everything, but without that moment's pause, can miss vital insight.

Don't make decisions in isolation

When considering how you can help, the first thing to note is that you shouldn't feel like you have to do it alone. Firstly, you might have noticed something which made you worried about a child, but you might not be the best person to act on it – other staff members might

have a better relationship with that child or see the student more regularly.

In addition, it can be useful to combine what you've noticed with information from other people. Your contribution might be the final piece of the puzzle for someone else, or they might give you information which changes what you think is the best course of action. This will already be a feature of most school's safeguarding policies, but I've lost count of how many teachers have described feeling like they're carrying worry about a child alone. And, if you talk to your colleagues, it means you're more likely to avoid the 'waking up at 2am remembering a fleeting interaction' scenario.

Develop resilience by balancing risk with protective factors

The field of resilience research has changed a lot over the last few decades. Researchers started by thinking about resilience as a personal trait, but now think of it as a social process of 'harnessing biological, psychosocial, structural and cultural resources to sustain wellbeing'.

This definition puts the emphasis on wellbeing as an 'asset' and focuses on the process of 'harnessing resources' – rather than simply relying on children to pull themselves together. Risk of developing mental health difficulties isn't spread equally across students and this means that your support probably won't be either.

Risk factors are things which might make someone vulnerable to experiencing mental health difficulties. Importantly, risk factors aren't causal in isolation but they are cumulative. The more risk factors a child is exposed to, the higher the likelihood they have of experiencing issues with their mental health. On the flip-side, protective factors are the

processes which promote wellbeing, “tilting the balance” to mitigate risks.

Practically, this means the more risk factors present in a child’s life, the more protective factors they need to balance out that risk. This is where school staff come in:

because every day you do things which promote student wellbeing and these small things – which you might not even think about – are protective factors which can add up to make a big difference.

Adopt the Resilience Framework

One tool that’s really useful for helping adults to introduce more protective factors around a student is the Resilience Framework (Hart & Blincow, 2012).

Shown in the table below, the Resilience Framework outlines different, evidence-based options for introducing protective factors around a child. Importantly, these options can be introduced in any order, so – no matter what a child’s specific difficulties – positives can be added to help “tilt the balance” towards wellbeing.

Resilience Framework (Children & Young People) Oct 2015 – adapted from Hart & Blincow 2007 www.boingboing.org.uk					
	BASICS	BELONGING	LEARNING	COPING	CORE SELF
SPECIFIC APPROACHES	Good enough housing	Find somewhere for the child/YP to belong	Make school/college life work as well as possible	Understanding boundaries and keeping within them	Instil a sense of hope
	Enough money to live	Help child/YP understand their place in the world		Engage mentors for children/YP	
		Tap into good influences	Solving problems		Support the child/YP to understand other people’s feelings
	Being safe	Keep relationships going	Map out career or life plan	Putting on rose-tinted glasses	Help the child/YP to know her/himself
	Access & transport	The more healthy relationships the better		Fostering their interests	
		Healthy diet	Get together people the child/YP can count on	Help the child/YP to organise her/himself	Calming down & self-soothing
	Exercise and fresh air	Responsibilities & obligations	Highlight achievements	Remember tomorrow is another day	Foster their talents
	Enough sleep	Focus on good times and places		Lean on others when necessary	
	Play & leisure	Make sense of where child/YP has come from	Develop life skills	Have a laugh	There are tried and tested treatments for specific problems, use them
	Being free from prejudice & discrimination	Predict a good experience of someone or something new			
		Make friends and mix with other children/YPs			
NOBLE TRUTHS					
	ACCEPTING	CONSERVING	COMMITMENT	ENLISTING	

Using the framework to support a specific child

You may be able to bring a child to mind who you would like to support. Imagine organising a meeting with key staff members and their family. During this meeting you can use the Resilience Framework to celebrate what is already going well (e.g. circling them on the Framework – keeping it asset focused!).

You could then think about what outcome you would really like for the child over the next term, or year. Holding this in mind, as a group you can think about which processes on the framework might move you all toward this outcome. This can then inform you making a simple plan, for home and school.



Doctor Jo Taylor

Educational psychologist, East London

Doctor Jo Taylor is an Educational Psychologist working in East London, providing psychological services to a PRU, Alternative Provision, secondary school and two primary schools. He has a doctorate in Professional Educational, Child & Adolescent Psychology. Dr Taylor is a Teach First Ambassador ('10), Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and the proud founder of a handful of charities, social enterprises and projects. His professional focus is on tackling social inequality, mostly through applying psychology to education and social change. In 2015, he was recognised as a Queen’s Young Leader: a global award from HM Elizabeth II for social change.

Using the framework to develop school systems

Organise a meeting with a pastoral team or senior leaders. Consider which protective factors the school is already facilitating, circle them and annotate with the specific related school systems (e.g. affirmations assembly, parent coffee morning, sports day, etc). Next, highlight two or three which you think are particularly important to focus on, and bullet point the steps which would help the school to provide them.



What can students tell us about their experiences of exam pressure?

Tamsin McCaldin, Doctor in Educational Psychology, University of Manchester

Although media interest and research around the impact of exam pressure has increased in recent years, little has been done to capture the voices of students themselves. At the University of Manchester, I conducted a study which followed a group of students through their GCSEs and interviewed them about their experiences. The findings, summarised here, hopefully offer a glimpse into Y11 students' viewpoints - and how to better understand and support them through exams.

How do students describe experiencing exam pressure?

Students in the research predominantly described two negative emotions: 'panic' and 'stress' - with panic being the most intense emotion. This involved overwhelming unpleasant feelings which were usually only present for a short time, and often triggered by a specific event such as a revision exercise, or a discussion about exams.

One student, Demelza, described panic as, "a moment where it seems like everything's just crashing down on you, and you're not just feeling a little bit worried, you're actually feeling just intense panic." Another, Leena, said, "it's just the worst feeling. The world is ending and you'd basically do anything to get out of there," while Ethan described it as, "you're just terrified, like 'Oh my God this is so scary right now.' Not nice. Terrifying."

Interestingly, no students explicitly used the term 'anxiety', but the feeling of panic was described in similar terms to 'test anxiety' as defined in previous research - and was associated with procrastination and avoidance of revision and other exam-related work.

Stress was the most commonly discussed emotion, and while it always felt negative and unpleasant to experience, unlike panic, students didn't always perceive this as something which was "bad for them". Hanna described it this way: "So if you've got too much stress, it's like all too much on top of you and you just feel bad and that and you can't do anything, and that's not going to help. But then, like, if you have just a bit of stress it's like... you know it's important."

Other students agreed that "too much" stress was something which made them feel "awful", "upset", or like "you're low-key killing yourself". Demelza described "too much pressure" as making "you feel you can't do it at all." At different times, however, stress was described as something which had a positive impact on the students. Orla described feeling stressed, "and it's horrible but you know that you need at least a little bit, just enough to make you work harder."

Crucially though, whether stress was perceived as "too much" or "just enough" was not easy for students to interpret - and even when they thought that the stress they were experiencing was "good for" them, it still felt unpleasant to experience it.

What factors affect student emotions around their exams?

Throughout the interviews, students described a number of factors which either increased or decreased their negative emotions. Of these factors, many related to the behaviours of the people around them, including teachers.

Factors which increased negative emotions

Vague exam messages

This involved parents or teachers telling students to "go and do some revision" or to "get to work on their exams" without suggesting a specific action they could take. Sophie described being given vague exam messages: "sometimes she'll just see me sat down and say, 'what are you doing? You need to go and revise. Go and revise right now' and it's like, 'what exactly do you want me to do?' It just totally stresses me out."

Students also felt they were told to start revision before they were given any guidance on how they should be revising. For many students, messages like this contributed directly to feelings of panic.

The dramatisation of the exam

Students described feeling as if their GCSEs were, "a massive deal" and, "the biggest thing we'll ever have to do". They discussed parents, teachers, peers and the wider media coverage of GCSEs as dramatising the exams and making them seem, "really scary," and "the worst time we're ever going to have in being at school".

The dramatisation of GCSEs that students experienced made them feel as if they would not be able to cope with them.

Failure focused behaviour management

All the students reported their teachers using messages focused on exam failure as behaviour management. Owen described a situation in his English class: "when everyone's mucking about there's a point when [the teacher] will be like, 'Okay, you have to focus now, you have to stop doing whatever and concentrate because otherwise you're not going to learn what you need and you'll fail these exams.'" Even if these messages were directed at other members of the class, students still described them as increasing their negative emotions.

Factors which decreased negative emotions

Actionable exam messages

Any messages which contained specific and detailed actions which students could take, either at that particular moment in time, during their revision, or during the exam itself, reduced negative emotions.

This included specific revision strategies or guidance around the structuring of exam questions. Hanna described actionable messages this way: "It's more helpful if some teachers weren't just saying 'go and revise'. What am I going to revise from? Just read the whole book? Is that even revising? How do you know it goes in my head like that? It helps when someone tells you to do this bit and this bit and then that bit."

For students to perceive exam messages as actionable they had to be explicitly presented as such. The best actionable exam messages were described as messages which gave specific "step by step" actions, and explicitly linked these to the exam.

Familiarisation through experience

Students described familiarisation with the process of doing exam questions or taking mocks as reducing negative emotions. This included the practicalities of how to deal with the unfamiliar processes of the exam such as how to find their seat, and how to fill in exam booklets with centre and candidate numbers. Sophie described it this way: “Obviously if you know what’s coming, then it’s less daunting and stuff, so getting used to being sat there, knowing what it’s going to be, what they expect of you in the exam, that kind of thing.”

How might teachers use this information?

Although the factors which contributed to emotions were common to all students, the sources of these factors (parents, peers, teachers, etc.) and how exactly they were presented were highly individual. Similarly, although students experienced broadly similar emotions, the way in which these feelings changed over time varied between individual students.

However, despite the individual nature of these experiences, all the students were able to examine and describe how they were feeling and the factors that were contributing to this. Teachers who would like to better understand the perspectives and needs of their students, should open a dialogue with students about exam emotions.

In terms of day-to-day practice, teachers can increase the positive emotions of all their students by making an effort to avoid messages which focus on failure, and giving specific and structured revision advice, with evidence of how the advice links directly to the exam.

Lastly, it’s worth noting that, although the focus here is on negative emotions around exams,

many students also discussed positive feelings. By addressing some of these panic-inducing factors, teachers have the potential to not only decrease negative emotions for their students, but increase positive emotions such as confidence and calmness.



Doctor Tamsin McCaldin

*Doctor in educational psychology,
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Tamsin is a former secondary school teacher, and is currently a lecturer in education at the University of Manchester. Tamsin’s research is in the area of student experience and exam stress.



Case Studies

At MyTutor, we work with over 1,000 schools, helping GCSE and A-level students to build exam confidence through tailored one-on-one or small group tuition. Here are just a couple of their stories.

Promoting resilience at The Urswick School

Hackney, London | With perspectives from Naomi Dews, Assistant Head Teacher
Kingsgrove, Stoke-on-Trent. Perspective from Will Wilson, Deputy Headteacher.

At a glance

- 24 Pupils
- 258 Lessons
- 3.5x Grade improvement

This year, MyTutor has worked with 20 Year 11 students from The Urswick School in Hackney, London, to provide extra one-to-one support for pupils in Maths. The after-school lessons, which took place in school, once a week, have helped to boost pupil confidence, encourage resilience and improve attainment.

What challenges are you trying to overcome in your school?

“Our main challenge is deprivation. Roughly 80% of our pupils receive free school meals, and many students don’t have a private, personal space to work at home. For most of our children, having tutoring funded by their parents isn’t an option. In working with MyTutor, we found that, for our children, having someone that was invested in them – and who could spend dedicated time with them, focusing on their Maths – made a huge difference.”

Which students were selected for the programme?

“We focused on those that had lots of potential, but for various reasons weren’t quite getting there. The group included children with a range of target grades, but largely those who we thought should be getting at least a Grade 4, but were currently on 2s and 3s.”

What are the biggest benefits of MyTutor for your students?

“For our students, it’s the fact that the lessons are structured for them. They don’t necessarily have a quiet space & equipment required for the programme to work at home, so we were able to provide them that environment – and then the tutor was able to provide them tailored support.”

“The one-to-one aspect of the tutoring is a big benefit. There’s much less of an embarrassment factor telling someone one-to-one that you haven’t understood something, rather than trying to say it in front of a class of 30. There’s also no pressure on the tutor – in the way that there might be for a classroom teacher – to move on from a topic because the rest of the class has got it.”

“For some of our students, having someone to spend as much time as they need on a topic, filling in those gaps and then building their confidence, was really helpful. And once they believed they could do it, that was half the battle won.”

Logistically, how did you find setting up the programme?

“We’ve found it really straightforward. We basically told our on-site IT team what we wanted in terms of equipment, and then the weekly sessions have been supervised either by myself or by the Head of School. Although we’re physically in the room, we haven’t needed to do very much to facilitate the lessons – we can spend that time getting on with other tasks.”

“It was also really useful that the tutoring was available at times that suited us. As well as our main programme with 20 pupils, we also offered it to some of our GCSE resit students, who were on different timetables. The fact that we could have two different programmes running at different times to suit different student groups, was really helpful.”

What impact have you seen in terms of academic progress?

“The vast majority of our students have made real progress – every student has improved either within a grade or improved by a grade. And I’m confident that MyTutor has helped to contribute to that result, whether by improving their confidence, encouraging them to do more work outside of class, due to the content of the lessons, or just because they care that we’re invested in them.”

What has the feedback from students been like?

“It was really clear, for some students, that the tutoring has made a genuine difference. Probably our biggest success story would be a male student, who we knew had lots of potential, but was sitting on a Grade 2 in his mocks in December. He then got a Grade 6 in his GCSE in June – and building his confidence played a big part in that.”

“Once you can make a student see that they can do it in one subject, that they can turn it around once, it’s easier for them to build on that resilience and carry that positive attitude into other parts of their lives.”

“We all come across times in life when everything’s not quite going how we might want it to, and I think this experience has really helped our students see that if they persevere at things, and if they don’t quit, it can make a difference.”

Would you recommend MyTutor to other schools?

“Yes, because we’ve seen it make an impact. There are some interventions that we’ve run that have been quite time-intensive from an administrative point of view, or have been quite hard to get pupil buy-in. But one of the things that’s made this a success is that the pupils bought into it.”

“It gave the students a chance to practice with someone who could give them immediate feedback – not just on whether an answer was right or wrong (as you might find with other online programmes) but also why it was wrong.”

“The other thing that was really beneficial – certainly for our more vulnerable students – was that the lessons are all recorded. So some of the students would go back to the recordings once they’d gone through a topic with a tutor, and rewatch them, pause them, try the questions again – in a really safe, non-judgemental environment.”



Boosting attainment with Bohunt Education Trust

With perspectives from Gary Green, Head of Virtual School

At a glance:

- 1,952 pupils
- 10,211 Lessons
- 3x progress

What are the biggest challenges you face at your trust with your pupil premium students?

“Covid was a big challenge for the Trust last year. Lockdown had a disproportionate effect on the most disadvantaged, particularly with regards to access to devices and bandwidth, increasing the challenges of children with more significant barriers. We were quick to provide devices to every pupil in need across the Trust and had online platforms in place immediately to support remote learning. We also worked to identify gaps and adjust our approaches responsively. Through this, we identified the need to provide further targeted support for some pupils, through online tutoring”

Why did you choose to work with MyTutor?

“We had worked with MyTutor in one of our schools before and had seen the results of personalised tuition, and wanted to expand tutoring for both during and after school hours.”

Which steps did you take to make sure the programmes would be a success?

“We implemented MyTutor across every school with a blend of 1:1 and 3:1 tutoring. The amount of tutoring support was proportional to the size of each school and the number of disadvantaged pupils.

Each school appointed a Tutoring Lead, and the Leads came together in a core group to share best practice and to explore implementation methods. We looked at delivering tutoring in school compared to out of school, and how to build it into the curriculum. Then we provided tight guidance on appropriate pupil profiles who the tutoring should be targeting, making very clear that the programme was intended to support hard-to-reach pupils, rather than high motivation children with smaller gaps.



The weekly attendance reports and evaluation allowed us to keep an eye on participation and adapt our approaches to maintain high levels of engagement. There was a lot of adaptation, particularly early on.”

What was your experience of working with MyTutor?

“MyTutor has been highly adaptive in terms of when and how we provide tuition. They’ve been complete partners – different schools have different needs and different pupil profiles and MyTutor worked with all of them, working very swiftly to adapt. It’s been very much a “we”. I was also keen to explore the peer effect. The tutors are within a few years of our pupils, and there is a lot of research to back up peer mentoring as a potential motivator.

Fundamentally, MyTutor have been superb partners throughout this; we knew that from working with City Academy Norwich. We had a very good experience with them being solutions-focused, very supportive to the schools, adapting their approach to meet our needs, and very keen to innovate with us. MyTutor did a number of things, such as launching bespoke sessions through summer school for us.

There were tutors and graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds running sessions who shared their own stories with our kids, delivering inspirational talks to our pupils. It was about MyTutor’s ability to influence things at scale, and the systems and support for that, but also a genuine commitment to thinking outside the box and looking at their own roadmap and working with us about what else they could do to support what else we’re trying to achieve.’

What kind of impact did the programmes have on attainment?

“The tutoring has provided a significant capacity to support pupils with the greatest gaps within a broader suite of approaches, so while it’s just one intervention, it’s a very good intervention. We saw success stories across every school. Most notably, we found that where attendance is higher, success is greater.

Looking at the average progress made across schools in our first year, pupils who attended MyTutor lessons made at least 3x the progress of a control group.”



Learn more about MyTutor

MyTutor is an online tuition platform, trusted by 1300+ secondary schools in the UK. We match students with subject specialist tutors from top UK universities to reinforce classwork, fill learning gaps, and achieve their target grades.

GCSE pupils who work with us make on average 1 whole grade of progress after 10 tuition sessions and over 80% say it’s improved their confidence ahead of exams. If you’d like to find out more about how our programmes work, book a call with the team.

Let’s chat

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