

Plan to keep your stress in

Facing into the final four months before exams, now is the time to start getting yourself prepared both physically and emotionally

The expert



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Your exam alarm clock is on countdown to June, four intensive months are stretching ahead of you. What can you do to keep focused and perform when it comes to the crunch in June? The key for you now is: preparation, preparation, preparation and, yes, more preparation. Getting yourself mentally, physically, emotionally and materially prepared will give you more control and help manage stress and anxiety. Read on to understand some simple steps you can take to manage your stress and make it work for you.

Good stress versus bad stress

Remember, not all stress is bad stress. We need a certain amount of it to perform to the best of our ability. If we had no stress in our lives, we might stay in bed all day thinking: "Why bother?" Believe it or not, no stress or low stress can be as negative and harmful as excessively high stress. If you are too stressed it will have a negative impact on your health and performance, however, if you're too relaxed the same problems will arise.

Stress typically occurs when we believe we are unable to cope with or meet the demands we face. We are all susceptible to stress from time to time and the Leaving Cert year is a prime time for stress to rocket. Stress is highly individual and unique. It affects us all differently. This year you may experience 'stress' relating to difficulties with your subjects, teachers, parents, peers, homework, study, revision, relationships, siblings, money and so on.

You may feel burdened with pressure to 'live up to' expectations. When stressed your nervous system is acutely affected which is why you may be more susceptible to colds and sleep problems. Your heightened sense of awareness can trigger a stress response and start a stress cycle.

The stress cycle and stress signals

Stress can be subtle at first and build up to a fully-fledged attack that affects you on every level: physical, mental and emotional. There is a strong connection between these systems that create your level of wellbeing and health. To perform to the best of your ability you need to nourish and look

after all aspects of your health, wellbeing and study programme.

How do I know if I'm overly stressed?

Usually the first signs of stress are the physical ones, for example, funny tummy, irregular bowels, headaches, backaches, interrupted sleeping or difficulty getting to sleep, irritability, snappiness and a generalised feeling of fear. However, these physical signs are usually preceded by stressful thoughts and emotions we are experiencing either consciously or subconsciously. You may not be aware that you are fuelling your stress with anxious thought patterns. These thoughts feed your emotions and can lead to self doubt, worry and general anxiousness and lead ultimately to unhelpful behaviours. This is the typical stress cycle. Listen to the messages your body is giving you. It is important to recognise patterns of symptoms and look for ways to redress any imbalance.

Think of your mind as a computer. Make sure your software is working for you and leading you in the right direction. Be aware of your thoughts. If you are overly anxious or constantly berating your efforts, this will impact on your belief in your abilities which directly impacts your effectiveness and performance. It's true what they say, garbage in, garbage out. What you focus on expands, so make sure you are focussing on your positive strengths, talents and accomplishments. Do learn from past mistakes or failures, but don't dwell on them.

The mocks are a good opportunity to put this kind of thinking into practice. Give yourself credit for the parts where you did well and learn from the parts where you didn't. Do not get discouraged, work on improving them.

What do I do if I'm in a stress cycle?

You can reverse the stress cycle by adjusting your thought and behaviour patterns. Try to:

- ◆ Boost your belief in yourself to meet challenges you face.
- ◆ Plan your time and study strategy.
- ◆ Make simple behavioural adjustments to support your plan.

Remember, it is normal to feel a certain amount of stress this year. However, it is important to keep it in check. Unchecked stress can lead to isolation, feelings of loneliness, health problems, paranoia and in the extreme, suicidal thoughts. If you are experiencing dark thoughts, talk to someone immediately: your teacher, parent, friend or counsellor. Don't bottle it up.

How stressed are you?

As we have identified, being aware of stress is key. The best way to tackle stress is to meet it head on and identify simple steps to reduce it. Small steps can make a big difference to your perspective and coping abilities. If you can break tasks down into smaller sizes, you get a sense of progress and control. Identify the things that are making you stressed and recognise your symptoms. List what is within your control and outside of it. Make an action plan to address the things that you can influence and come to terms with those that are outside of your control now.

Stress buster tips



It's critical for you to pace yourself and not let stress build up.

◆ **Get your sleep:** Sleep deprivation will greatly reduce your exam performance and heighten your anxiety levels.

◆ **Get a study plan:** Don't leave everything to the last minute, and equally, don't burn out too early in the year. Think of your study time as one more correct answer in the exams. Last-minute cramming heightens stress and reduces performance – it is the biggest factor for "blank outs" in exams. Study boosts your confidence. It gives you a greater sense of control, as you are more prepared.

◆ **Know your goals:** This is the perfect time to restate your goals and get focussed. If you are clear about what you are working towards, your motivation will be high and crystal clear. This fuels your momentum, especially at difficult moments. You are doing this for yourself. Parents and teachers are on your side and want you to succeed, even if they seem difficult to communicate with now.

◆ **Believe in yourself:** keep fear and anxiety gremlins in check. Remember the law of attraction – what you focus on expands. If you find yourself constantly worrying and anxious, this feeds a vicious circle of worry and doubt. Your anxiety levels soar as a result, and your confidence, self image and behaviour are affected also. Your self image sets