Coping with exam stress – For young people with type 1 diabetes

Who is the leaflet for? What is its aim?

This leaflet is for young people between the ages of 13 and over who would like some advice about coping with exam stress.

Feeling anxious about exams?

Anxiety is normal and can sometimes help you to think and work faster. However, if you find that anxiety is too overwhelming, then your exam prep and performance could be affected. Becoming aware of what makes your anxiety better and worse means you can learn ways to manage it and do the best you can with your exams.

How can stress affect your diabetes?

Research shows that high blood glucose levels during revision and exam times can make it harder to revise effectively.

It's important to keep an eye on your blood glucose levels and do more tests/corrections to make sure you get the most out of your revision and perform at your best on the day. You may need to test/correct during your exams.

Be prepared and talk to school/college before your exams. The diabetes team will be able to provide a letter to support this and can talk to your school if you would like them to.
Top tips for beating stress

1) Looking after your physical and mental health

• Get a good night sleep: get as much rest as you can; 6-8 hours a night are recommended. Even if you cannot sleep, give your body a chance to rest. Try to have a wind down period before you go to bed, preferably not watching TV or being on tablets/phones. These stimulate your mind at a time when you need to try and sleep. For more information on getting better sleep please ask a member of staff for the Sleep leaflet.

• Eat and drink well: make sure that you continue to have a good diet. Eat regularly and drink plenty.

• Living with diabetes also means checking your blood glucose regularly and taking corrections when needed. When you have good blood glucose control it will be easier for you to revise and your performance will be better during the exams because you will find it easier to concentrate.

• Fit in daily exercise and make time to have fun and relax. Exercise helps to relax your muscles if you are feeling tense and anxious, uses up some of the extra adrenaline you have, and increases your circulation to keep you more alert. Try having frequent short walks during your revision periods.
2) Pace yourself

- It’s important to pace the amount of revision you do in one go as you can only absorb so much information at a time.

- Set yourself a revision timetable with regular breaks and stick to it as much as possible.

- Be realistic about what you can do with the time you have allocated for revision. Studies have shown that studying for 20 minutes at a time, followed by a 10-minute break is ideal for optimum learning.

- If you notice that you are getting distracted, get up and take a short break.

- If your mind is wandering repeatedly, try studying in very short bursts of time, bringing the time down to one that feels manageable, for example, 15 minutes at a time.
15 minutes when you can concentrate is better than three hours of staring into space and then feeling guilty or anxious.

3) Make it fun and find ways to relax

- Make your learning fun as much as you can. If you have someone to study with then use the opportunity to test each other on what you’ve learned so far.

- In between revision, practise relaxation exercises. Relaxation is a skill that has to be learnt, no-one is born knowing how to do it.

- The practice of meditation, mindfulness or relaxation can be useful in helping you to focus on your breathing and bringing a sense of calm.

There are apps which have been created in order to help you to relax:

- Simple habits
- Calm
- Hospichill
- Shleep/ELS
Progressive muscle relaxation:

When we feel stressed or anxious, our muscles can automatically tense in preparation for a ‘fight or flight’ response, where we might need to respond quickly. Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing each muscle group for three to five seconds, and then releasing, helping you to notice the contrast between tension and relaxation. This can be done whilst sitting in a comfortable chair, or whilst lying down.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Instructions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arms and hands</td>
<td>Clench your fists and push your arms straight out in front of you. Tense for three to five seconds, then relax/release the muscles and flop your arms/hands down next to your chair/on your chair.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Legs and feet</td>
<td>Push your toes downwards, gently raise your legs and stretch them out in front of you. Tense for three to five seconds, and then relax.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stomach</td>
<td>Push out your tummy muscles, take a breath and hold it for three to five seconds. Then relax the muscles.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shoulders</td>
<td>Scrunch up your shoulders. Tense for three to five seconds. Then relax.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neck</td>
<td>Push your head back against the chair or bed. Hold for three to five seconds. Then relax.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face</td>
<td>Screw up your face, squeeze your eyes tight and push your lips together. Hold for three to five seconds then relax.</td>
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4) Beat the negative thoughts

- Stress can make you have negative thoughts, such as “I’m going to fail, I can’t do it”.

- These can sometimes get in the way of your revision and your confidence in succeeding.

- It’s important to put these thoughts into perspective. Sometimes writing them down and challenging them (out loud) can help. For instance, try saying out loud, “I am not going to fail because I have worked hard, I can get through these exams”. Some people find it helpful to say it out loud to themselves whilst looking in a mirror as well.

- Remind yourself of your past successes, especially what you have achieved in exams and assessments.

- You could try displaying positive and encouraging images around your work space; Or carrying supportive words, phrases, photos with you in your pocket, bag or book. Have a quick look at these if you feel yourself panicking when you’re out.
And finally…

Remember, exams are tough - they are not meant to be easy. Reassure yourself by doing all you can to help yourself through them. And there are lots of people around you who are here to help. Don’t feel alone. We are thinking of you and want to help you.

The key points to remember:

- Sleep well
- eat well
- drink well
- relax well
- exercise well
- test well
- organise well
- plan ahead
FAQs:

1. What if I only get a few hours sleep and I’m tired in the morning so can’t work?

Don’t panic! Try and carry on as normal and be reassured that you’ll probably get a very good night sleep that night. Challenge yourself to keep going for as much of the day as you can manage but don’t worry if you have the odd ‘off’ day. There will be other days when you will feel that you can make up for these ‘off’ days by working really hard.

However, if you find that you are having ‘off’ days a little too often, so much so that you are getting behind with your revision, try making a diary: make a note of your diet, sleeping pattern and activities. This might help you to pinpoint what it is which is causing you to not be able to concentrate and be productive. Try and be pro-active and open to changing your routines if it might help you to be more productive and relaxed.

When you do try and make changes, remember not to expect an instant improvement. Your routine can take a few weeks to settle down, so try not to dismiss the change if it hasn’t worked immediately.
2. What about my diabetes?

The main thing to remember is to check your blood glucose levels frequently and correct properly for the food you are eating. Having more stable blood glucose levels will help you to feel more alert, and better in yourself, helping you to focus and concentrate better for your exams and revision. Your diabetes team will be able to inform you on how best to make sure you can function at your best for you.

If you find that you are struggling more and more, go and see your GP. Having exams can cause you lots of stress. This can raise your body’s cortisol levels because it needs to work harder to keep you going. More cortisol can result in higher blood glucose levels, and also can make you feel hungrier and therefore wanting to snack more. This might make it harder for you to control your blood glucose levels and weight.

Don’t forget you can also speak to any of your teachers. Your school can work out a way of helping you by offering a little more support which might make a huge difference to you being able to get through your exams.

Good Luck!
Contacts/further information

For more advice on managing through exam time please contact:

- Any member of the children’s diabetes team on 01223 348576
- The psychology team on 01223 217957 or harriet.garfield@addenbrookes.nhs.uk

References

- Oxford University Hospitals
- Diabetes UK
- Addenbrooke’s Paediatric diabetes department

Document history

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Notes:

Use this page to write anything that was particularly helpful for you from this leaflet and any ideas you have had which might help you to feel more relaxed during exams