

How to motivate students during exam time, according to psychologists

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As exam season begins, parents, caregivers and teachers will be looking for various ways to motivate students to do well in their studies. But the messaging you use to motivate them should depend on their level of confidence, according to research by psychologists.

Dr. Richard Remedios, Associate Professor in Student Motivation and Engagement, Psychology, at Nottingham Trent University's School of Social Sciences, has been working with colleagues to explore how [messages](#) are received by students studying for their GCSEs and A-levels in England. Current research projects include surveying students about what types of messages they receive from their [parents](#) and previous studies have explored the effects of motivational messages given by teachers.

Findings suggest that it is not about the message that is given, but how the message is received, and this is down to the individual characteristics of the student.

For example, a common motivational message used by educators is "if you do not work hard, you will not get the grades you need to go to university." This type of message is known as a fear appeal because it focuses on the consequence of not doing well. Research has shown that confident students experience fear appeal messages as a "challenge," whereas for unconfident students, these well-meaning messages are related to levels of anxiety.

In the parent research, initial findings have shown that students are motivated to make their parents proud, but this motivation is also related to worry. More promisingly, messages of reassurance, for example "passing your exams is not the be all and end all," are positively related to student confidence.

Students were also asked how much they agreed with statements such as "when your parents remind you about upcoming [GCSE/A-Level] exams, does it make you want to stop revising?"—confident students tended to disagree with statements like this, but unconfident students tended to agree. This suggests that constantly reminding students about exams can be problematic when the student is not confident in their

ability.

Dr. Remedios said: "Our work is different because rather than focusing on the motivational messages we know parents and teachers give—which are often well-meaning—we focus on how students experience messages based on their individual characteristics. So, a confident student is likely to experiences messages differently to a student who is not confident.

"The take-home message is that students are less likely to experience anxiety and worry if the messages they receive are based more on reassurance relative to when they are reminded of the consequences of not doing well. In other words, when well-meaning parents say, 'If you do not work hard, you will not get the grades you need to get college/university,' this actually creates worry in many students.

"However, confidence changes the way [students](#) experience motivational messages. The good news is that parents and teachers usually know the person they are trying to motivate very well and so, if you know they're not confident, then try not to pressurize them by focusing your language on the consequences of failing."

Provided by Nottingham Trent University

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