

What to say and what to avoid if you want to help teenagers combat exam anxiety

May 23 2023, by Laura Nicholson



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

GCSE exams [are under way](#) and many students will be [feeling the pressure](#) to get the grades they need to pursue their education or employment goals.

[They may be experiencing exam anxiety](#)

, which is linked to [lower performance in exams](#) and [lower well-being](#).

Teachers and parents want students to perform at their best and be emotionally well. So it's useful to know there are ways to encourage students and ease anxiety during this time—and things to avoid saying.

My colleagues and I have carried out research on the different things that [teachers](#) say to students about GCSE exams. We have found that the language used is important, and how students perceive communication about GCSEs has [important consequences](#).

What teachers say matters

Some students react badly to communication about GCSE exams when the messages are focused on the potential negative outcomes. For example, a teacher might say, "If you do not work hard, you will not get into college." When teachers emphasize the risk of failing or not getting the grades they need, some students feel threatened, and this [increases their anxiety](#) and feelings of hopelessness about the exams.

Students who react in this way to failure-focused messages usually value their GCSEs but [do not feel capable](#) of getting the results they need. After hearing messages like this, students may withdraw from study-related activities both [emotionally](#) and [behaviourally](#), meaning that, for instance, they might not try hard in class. Research has found that they ultimately receive [lower GCSE grades](#).

Fortunately, teachers also have the power to encourage their students with their communications about exams. [Emphasizing the possible positive outcomes](#) that could result from exams, such as "If you work hard, you will get the grades you need" is a more beneficial route and might encourage students to be proactive in their preparation strategies.

In 2023, GCSE exams run until June 21—so students will be revising for some time yet. In light of our findings, if you are a parent trying to encourage your teenager to study, you could try pointing out the benefits of working hard, rather than the outcomes of failure.

Helping students to cope

When students suffer from [exam](#) anxiety, they [perform worse](#) in exams, compared to students of the same ability. One explanation for this, supported by research, is that anxiety and thoughts of failure distract the student and place an additional [load on their working memory](#) during their exam. In effect, this uses up the cognitive capacity that could otherwise be used for remembering the required information.

If your teenager holds unrealistic and negative self-beliefs, such as "I will fail no matter how hard I try," simply telling them that everything will be okay is not particularly helpful. Instead, you could point out that if things do go wrong, they will be able to cope and respond effectively.

There are options available if they do not do as well as they hoped—for instance, they could retake their exams at a later date and gain some [work experience](#) in the meantime.

You can also help your teenager to challenge their negative beliefs. You could ask them what evidence they have to support the beliefs and to think about times in the past when they succeeded rather than failed. If they continue to cite previous failures, you could point out that this may be because they have only been thinking about information that is [consistent with their beliefs](#). Encourage them to replace their beliefs with more positive statements, such as: "Chances are I probably won't fail." This [has been shown](#) to reduce exam anxiety.

When people have anxiety, they try to avoid the things that make them

anxious—in this case, exams. This avoidance tendency can manifest in procrastination about revising and making less effort out of a fear of failure. This further [increases exam anxiety](#).

One way to help could be to encourage your teenager to reflect on their revision and preparation strategy. If they believe their approach to be [ineffective](#), they could be helped to try a different method. When students [feel more confident](#) in their knowledge, their worries about exams reduce.

Helping your [teenager](#) to learn [relaxation techniques](#) such as [breathing exercises](#), [muscle relaxation](#) and [guided visualization](#) could also help to reduce the physiological symptoms of [anxiety](#) directly before, and during, the exam.

[Research has found](#) that using the above strategies is [effective in reducing exam anxiety](#) in GCSE students.

A further, very simple approach could be to ask [students](#) who are anxious about exams to [write down](#) their thoughts and feelings about the exam just before they take it. This might help to get distracting thoughts and emotions out of their minds. Writing worries down like this has been shown to [reduce distress](#), as well as [increase performance in exams](#) in people who are highly anxious.

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