

# Managing Exam Stress



Mental Health  
Support Team

Buckinghamshire

# The Information on this PPT Offers



- an understanding of what stress and anxiety is
- an exploration of how our brain works
- an understanding of how to identify signs of stress or anxiety
- what can be done to manage anxiety and stress
- the resources, signposting and apps available



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## What is Stress?



*"Stress is the body's reaction to feeling under pressure. It is very common, can be motivating to help us achieve things in our life, and can help us meet the demands of home, work and personal life."*



# What is Stress?



- Stress is something everyone feels at times, and there are all kinds of stressful situations that can be a part of daily life. Low-level stress can even be helpful or motivational.
- Experiencing a lot of stress over a long period of time can also lead to a feeling of physical, mental and emotional exhaustion, often called burnout.
- Stress may be due to an accumulation of little tasks building up over time, or waiting for one big task (such as an exam!).
- Often the most stressful bit is the waiting.

# Exam Stress Self-Reflection



Can **you** answer these questions confidently?

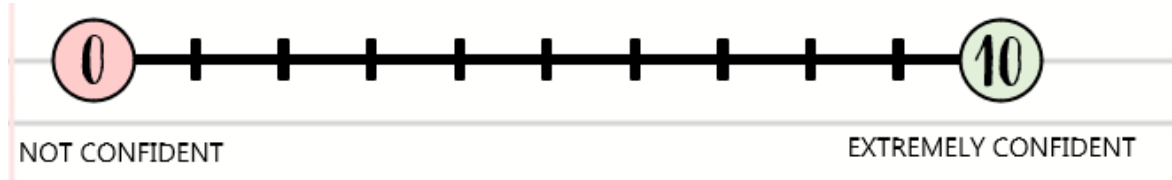
A. What is stress?

B. Why do we need stress?

C. How can **YOU** best revise?

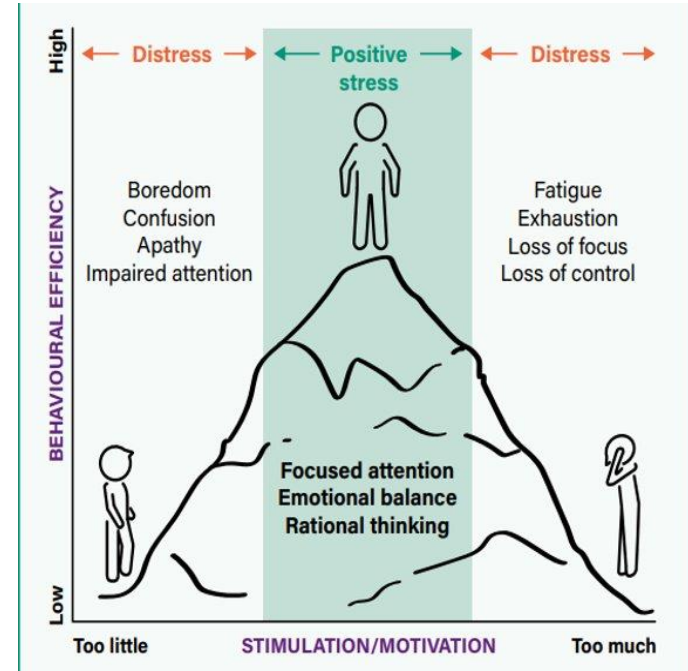
D. How is it best to **PREPARE** for an exam? (on the day)

E. Do **YOU** know where to find help and advice about revising?



# Understanding Positive Stress

- Increased stress results in increased performance – *up to a point*.
- However, that **point differs for each of us**.
- We need to be sensitive to the early warning symptoms of stress.
- Stress requires a large amount of mental energy, which can lead to us becoming ratty, depressed, tired, and unable to think clearly.



# What is Anxiety?

- Anxiety is a **NORMAL** emotion
- It can be helpful and enhance performance
- Anxiety becomes a problem when it is more **SEVERE** or **FREQUENT** and **INTERFERES** with everyday life

FIGHT



FLIGHT oohlala!



FREEZE



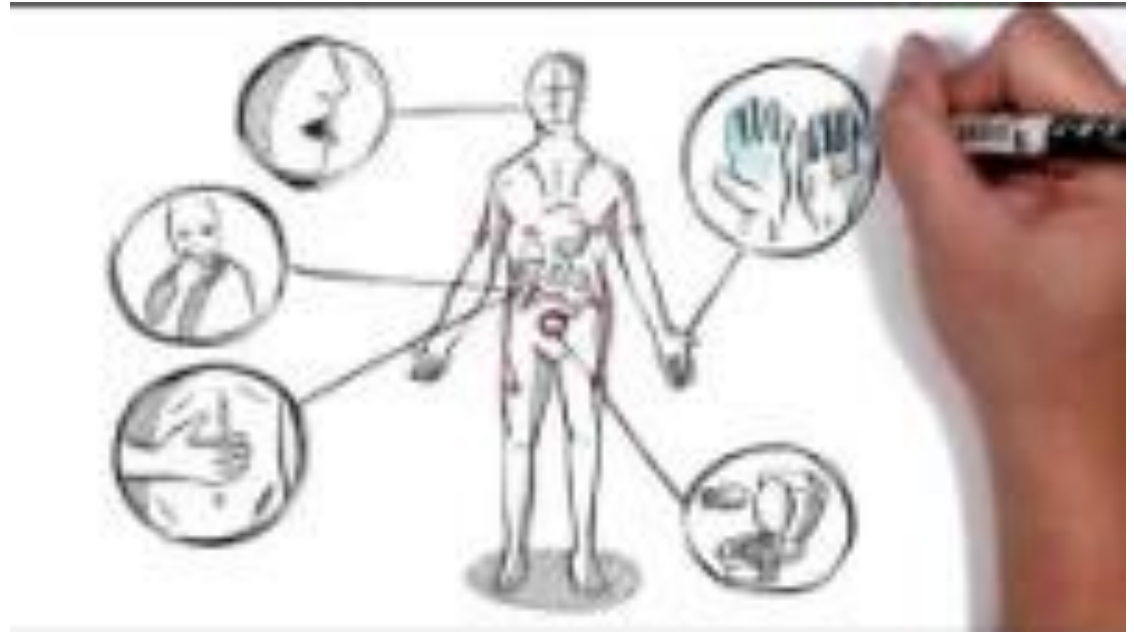
## Why do we Feel Anxious?



- Humans have historically survived by needing to fight or escape from predators (eg, tigers).
- In order to survive we needed to adaptively prepare our body for action. We now call this **fight, flight or freeze** response.
- We continue to have this instinct when we perceive something to be threatening or dangerous.



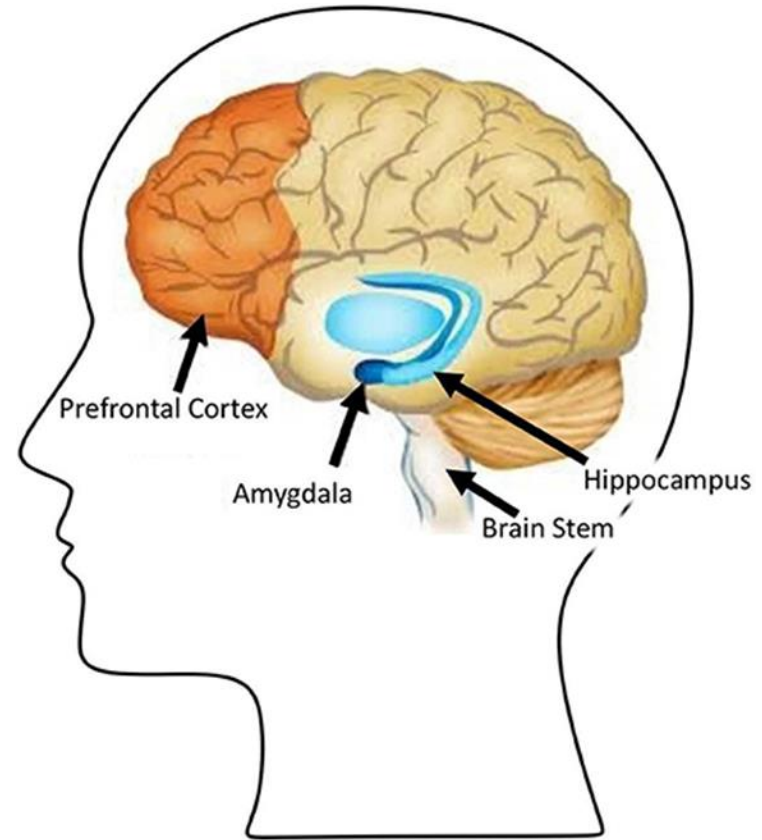
# Fight, Flight or Freeze!



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEHwB1PG\\_-Q&t=61s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEHwB1PG_-Q&t=61s)

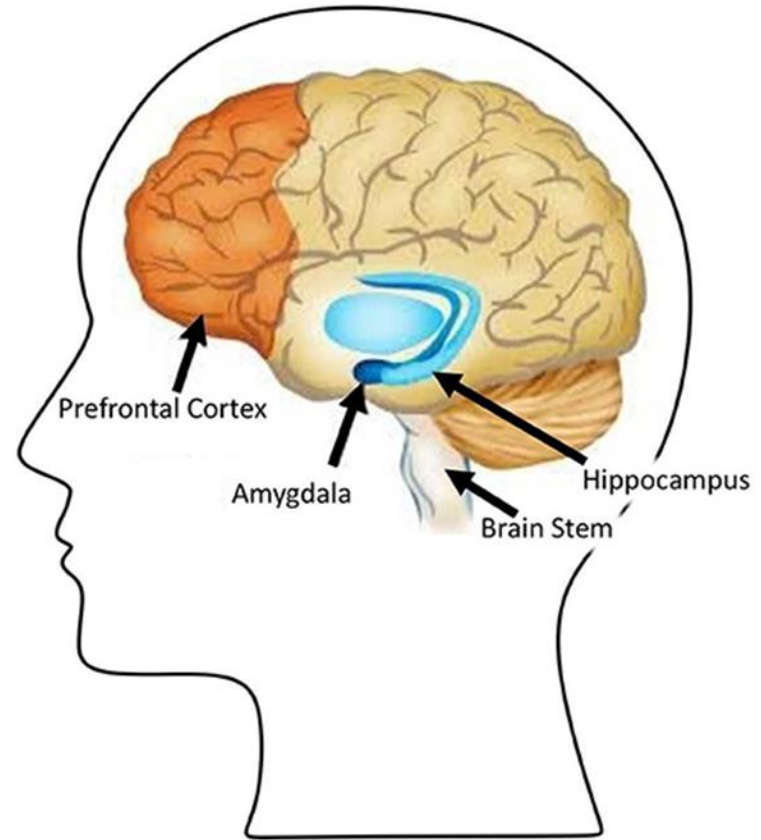
# Our Brain

- There are **three** parts in our brain.
- We need them to **work together**, to access memory.
- When you're 'over' stressed – they **stop working together**



# Our Brain

- For the pre-frontal cortex to work our amygdala needs to be calm. Then it will focus anything worth remembering to the hippocampus.
- When we get stressed, our **amygdala** is activated and our **prefrontal cortex** shuts down.
- Responding in flight, fight or freeze mode from our **downstairs emotional brain** is not helpful unless we are under *real threat*.

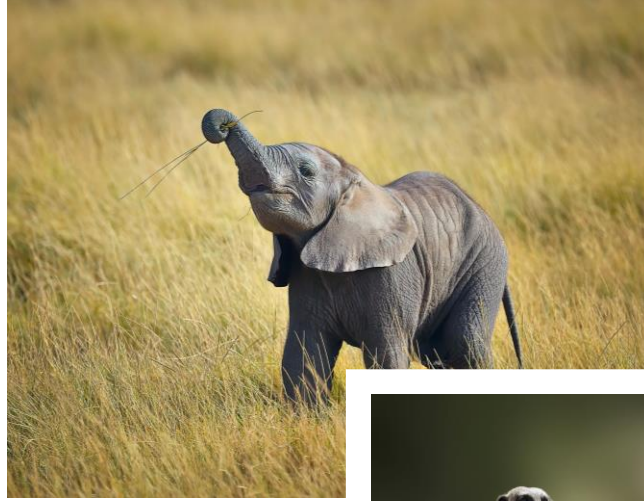


# Our Brain

Elephant brain – hippocampus: creates, stores and processes all our memories and important facts.

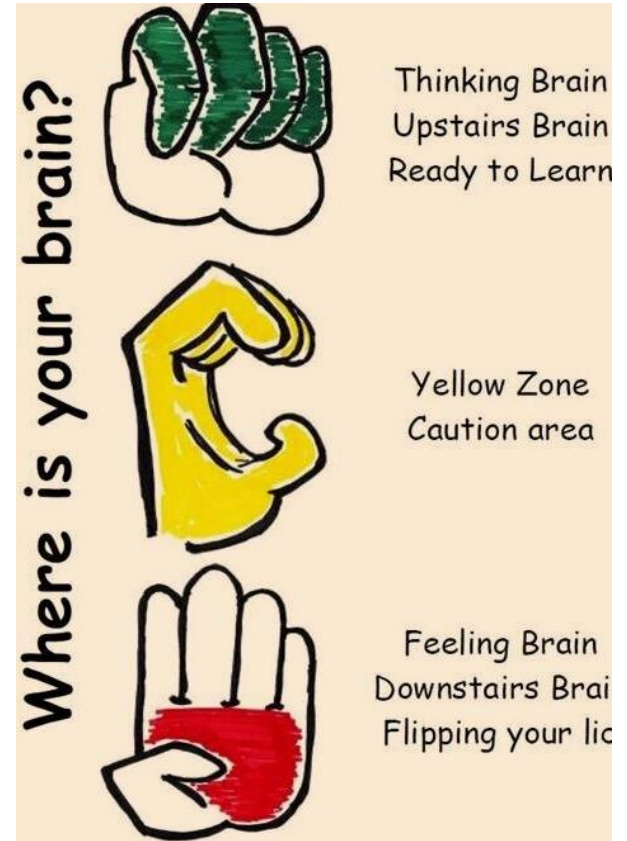
Meerkat brain – amygdala: this is our internal alarm system. It warns us of any perceived dangers.

Owl brain – pre-frontal cortex: this is where we process information so we can compute, analyse and reason.



# The Hand Model – Flipping the Lid

- Knowing your own brain is key
- Knowing when the 'warning wobble' is coming
- Learning to identify your own signs of stress
- Learning techniques to calm your brain



How do you know  
you are Feeling  
Stressed?



# Example of an Anxiety Cycle



## CAN CONTROL

### Thoughts

"I am going to fail"

"Everyone is revising more than me"

"I can't do this"

"What's the point"

### Behaviours

Get too much sleep or not enough sleep

Avoid school, revision or homework

Avoid seeing friends or socialising

Spending more time alone

## CAN'T CONTROL

### Feelings

Overwhelmed

Sad

Angry

Upset

### Physical

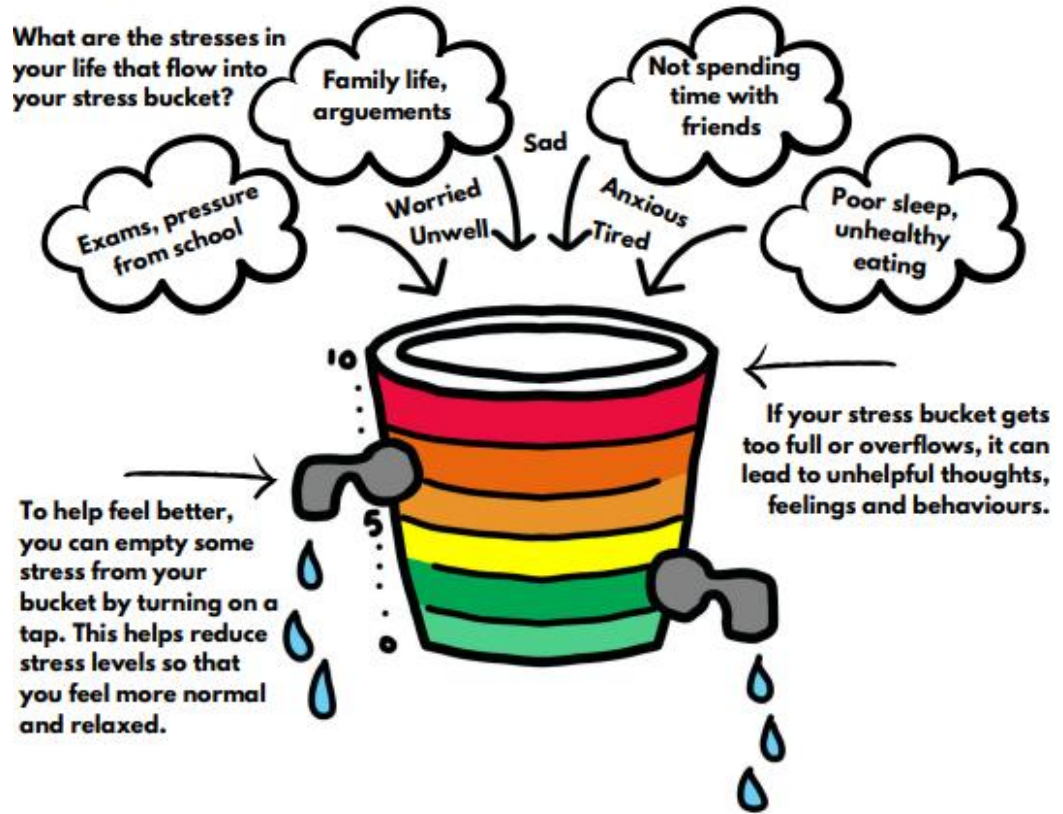
Headaches

Feeling sick

Feeling tired

Lack of appetite

# Stress Bucket



# Stress Bucket



## **Increasing stress/ stressors**

Homework  
Arguments  
Listening to the news  
Family life



## **Coping strategies/ reduced stress**

Going for a walk  
Calling a friend  
Playing a video game  
Do some gardening

# General Tips



REST IS CRUCIAL AND SLEEP



WRITE YOUR WORRIES DOWN



GET OUTSIDE



PLAN YOUR TIME



QUALITY OVER QUANTITY



THE SPACE YOU WORK IN

## In More Detail...



### **Make a revision timetable.**

- You can ask school for support or create one with your family or your friends. Find what works best for you, big breaks or shorter breaks. You can also use apps such as the Pomodoro technique.

### **Study in the way that works best for you.**

- You can draw diagrams, mind maps, write notes, create flash cards: whatever works for you. You can use white noise or apps to boost your focus such as the Forest or Flora app.

### **Revise in a place that is best for you.**

- You might prefer studying in your room when it's quiet. You might prefer studying in the local library or a local café, alone or with friends.

***Remember to not compare yourself with your peers. Everyone studies in different ways and you need to find the best way FOR YOU.***

# Positive Self-Talk



- The way we feel strongly contributes to how we behave.
- If you constantly tell yourself “I am rubbish, I can’t do this, I am going to fail” then most likely you are not going to want to work/revise.
- Evidence shows that positive self-talk reduces stress, because we feel more able to approach situations and tasks with a better mindset.

HEALTHY SELF-TALK	
NOT THIS	>>>> THAT
I'm so dumb.	Whooops, I made a mistake.
I give up. I'll never be able to do this.	This is really hard, but I'm going to keep trying
I never get anything right.	I haven't figured it out yet.
I'm going to fail.	I tried my hardest.
I can't stop.	It's okay to take a break.

# What to do Before or During an Exam?



## General Tips



- Prepare what you need the night before.
- Allow yourself enough time to arrive at school promptly.
- Remember to be aware of what is within your control and what is not. You've done your best and you have made it to the exams!
- Connect with people or stay away from them. It's up to you!
- Try a breathing exercise.
- Try a grounding exercise.

# Adjust your Breathing & Ground Yourself



## Stay Grounded Using Your 5 Senses

Relax Your Body, Take a Few Deep Breaths and Focus on the Following...

- 5 Things You Can See 
- 4 Things You Can Feel 
- 3 Things You Can Hear 
- 2 Things You Can Smell 
- 1 Thing You Can Taste 

## The Day of the Exam..



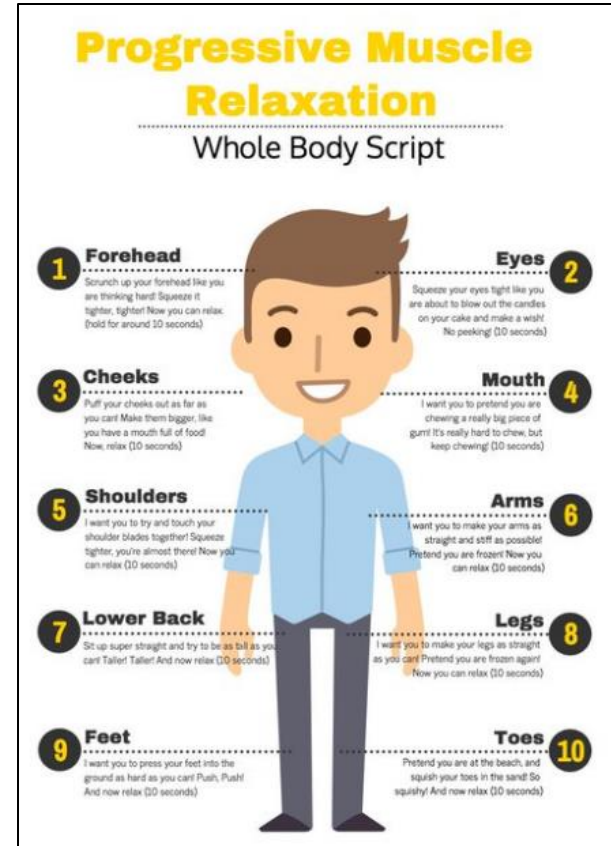
- Have a **solid** exam day routine
- Do what helps you though – not what others do to help them
- Eat breakfast – something small is better than nothing
- Wake up early to avoid a rush or unnecessary panic
- Pack the night before, so only a small check is required on the morning of the exam
- Stay away from others, or be around others, it's up to you.

***“When I get into the car, because I’ve been listening to music just before, I usually have a track in my head. There are all these nerves that you have, and [music] really helps me keep that out.”***

Before the  
Exam Starts..



- Try to relax your entire body.
- Slowly tense and relax your muscles throughout your body.
- You can learn this and do it from your exam chair.
- This is a good activity to do alone, when the hall is entering and sitting down.



# After the Exam...

- Relax, exams are a mental workout.
- After the exam, do whatever works for you.
- Undertake a post exam de-brief – *only if that works for you!*
- If you have another exam that day – don't just go straight to revision
  - Take a break
  - Go for a walk
  - Use distraction techniques
- Move back to revision – ***AFTER A BREAK***



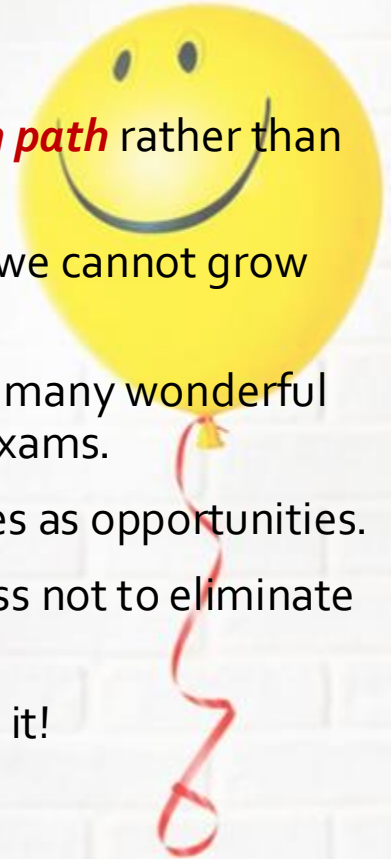
## COOL DOWN AFTER WORKOUT



## Keep Things in Perspective



- Success in life follows an *up and down path* rather than a straight-line path.
- 'Failure' is not pleasant but without it we cannot grow and learn how to succeed.
- Exams aren't everything. There are so many wonderful things about you not determined by exams.
- There is always a Plan B – see obstacles as opportunities.
- Remember the goal is to manage stress not to eliminate it.
- Speak up – ask for support if you need it!



# USEFUL APPS

## FOR PROCRASTINATION:



FLORA



FOCUS PLANT



MY STUDY LIFE



TODOIST

## FOR WELLBEING:



SMILING MIND



HEADSPACE



CLOCKWORK  
TOMATO –  
POMODORO  
TECHNIQUE

ATMOSPHERE:  
RELAXING  
SOUNDS

