



SCHOOL ACTION PACK

Managing Exam Stress

A whole-school approach to supporting students
during the exam period



MANAGING EXAM STRESS

A whole-school approach to supporting students during the exam period

Contents

Information for Schools	3
What is stress?	3
5 tips to help your students manage their exam stress	3
Activities for Students	5
Activity 1: Exam and study stress assessment	6
Activity 2: Introduction to growth mindsets	7
Activity 3: How to manage exam stress	8
Student Handouts	9
5 steps to study success	9
ReachOut's exam slaying checklist	10
How to manage your time	11
5 apps for beating exam stress	12
Information for Parents	13
Help your teenager to beat exam stress	13

About ReachOut Australia

ReachOut is Australia's leading online mental health organisation for young people and their parents. Our practical support, tools and tips help young people get through anything from everyday issues to tough times – and the information we offer parents makes it easier for them to help their teenagers, too.

We've been changing the way people access help since we launched the world's first online mental health service nearly 20 years ago. Everything we create is based on the latest evidence and designed with experts, and young people or their parents. This is why our digital self-help tools are trusted, relevant and easy to use.

Available for free anytime and pretty much anywhere, ReachOut is accessed by 132,000 people in Australia every month. That's more than 1.58 million each year.



Each year, more than 220,000 students sit for their year 12 exams. Many of them feel that their entire future depends on their results, making this exam period potentially one of the most stressful times of all their years at school. But those of us who've been through it know that there is life after the year 12 exams.

This resource is designed to help you support your students (and their parents and carers) through the stressful exam period. It includes a suite of activities designed to help teachers or wellbeing staff to better understand the role that stress plays in students' lives. There are interactive activities that can be used as a catalyst for class discussion and to help those who may not be coping with the added stress.

The activities cover tips and resources on everything from encouraging students to adopt a growth mindset to suggestions for effective study habits.

We've also included some of our most popular content from ReachOut.com that you can photocopy and share with your students, as well as content from [ReachOut.com/Parents](https://www.reachout.com/Parents) that you can share in communications with the parent community at your school.



What is stress?

Stress is natural. It's our body's way of sharpening our focus, increasing our stamina and making us more alert so that we can rise to a challenge and face a tough situation. This type of stress is productive stress.

Unproductive stress, on the other hand, can cause health and other problems. It's important that we learn to relieve or manage unproductive stress.

HOW DO YOU RECOGNISE STUDENTS EXPERIENCING UNPRODUCTIVE STRESS?

Unproductive stress can manifest as health problems and an inability to cope. Signs include:

- ▶ trouble sleeping
- ▶ irritability with oneself and others
- ▶ trouble concentrating
- ▶ anxiety, panic attacks, depression
- ▶ feelings of isolation
- ▶ avoiding school (absenteeism)
- ▶ defeatist attitude ('What's the point?').

If students display any of these signs, it's a good indicator that they need to include some stress relief tactics in their exam preparation.

5 tips to help your students manage their exam stress

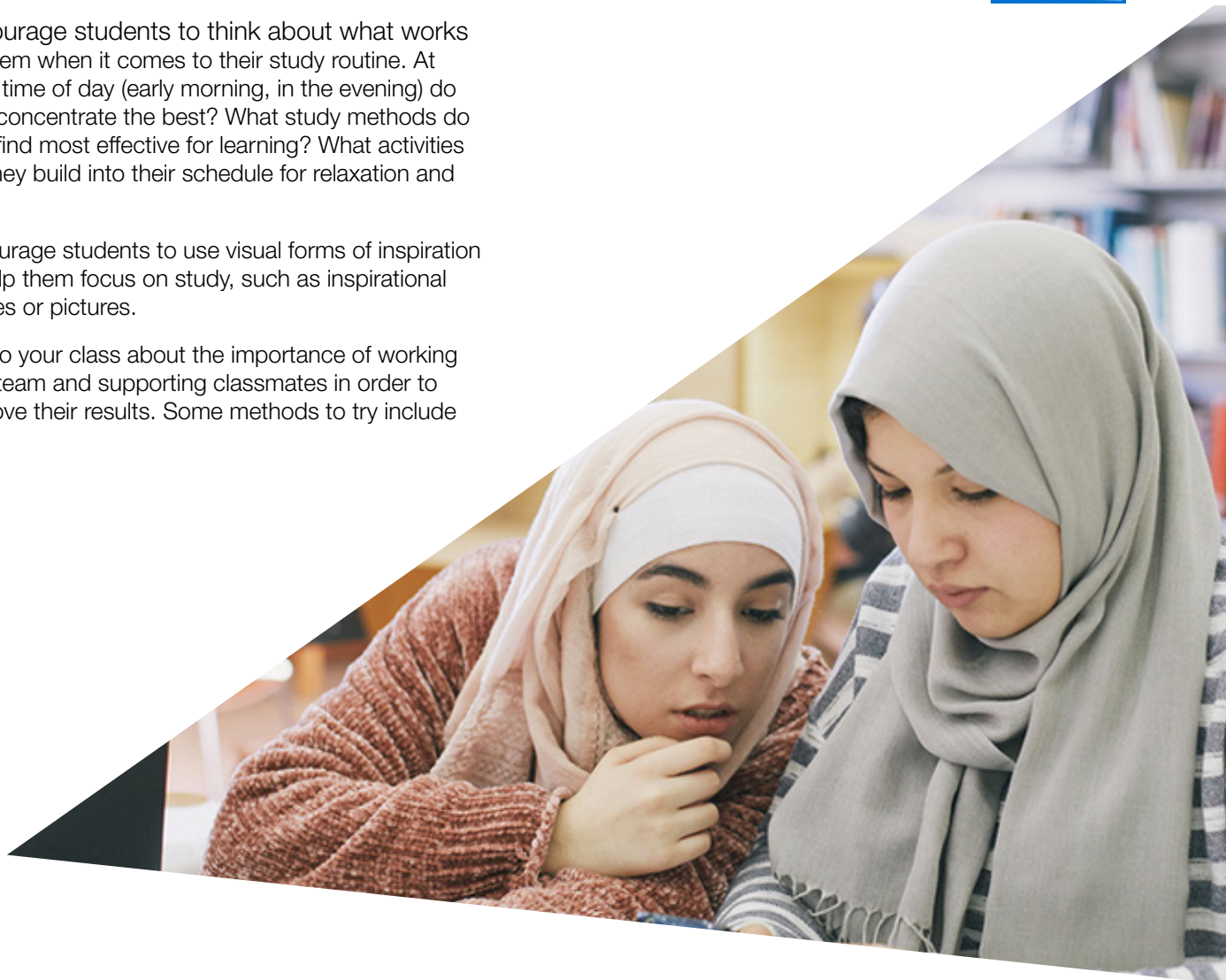
1. ADOPT A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

Of course, stress isn't an issue only for year 12 students. So, it's important to adopt an integrated, whole-school approach. MindMatters provides schools with a systematic and comprehensive approach to supporting student mental health and wellbeing through the implementation of mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention strategies.

You can find out more at [mindmatters.edu.au](https://www.mindmatters.edu.au).

2. ENCOURAGE A POSITIVE CULTURE

- ▶ Encourage students to think about what works for them when it comes to their study routine. At what time of day (early morning, in the evening) do they concentrate the best? What study methods do they find most effective for learning? What activities will they build into their schedule for relaxation and fun?
- ▶ Encourage students to use visual forms of inspiration to help them focus on study, such as inspirational quotes or pictures.
- ▶ Talk to your class about the importance of working as a team and supporting classmates in order to improve their results. Some methods to try include



setting up study groups, or working out a system where students review each other's work against the marking criteria.

- ▶ Reassure students that failure isn't the end of the world. Mistakes indicate areas for improvement, not that they won't succeed.
- ▶ Help students to keep some perspective on the exams. Remind them that they are more than their final score. Encourage students to chat to people who have been there, such as older cousins, teachers and family friends. They're sure to confirm that there is life after the year 12 exams.

3. HELP STUDENTS PLAN AHEAD

It's important that students plan how the lead-up to exams is going to look, what they will study and when.

One example is to set study periods at 30–50 minutes, followed by a 15-minute break. At the weekend, this

cycle can be repeated two to four times through the afternoon and evening. Help students to prepare a study timetable, and encourage them to display it prominently as a reminder.

Reassure students that a certain amount of procrastination is normal, but encourage them not to let it overtake their plan.

4. SUGGEST SOME PRACTICAL STUDY TIPS

- ▶ Students should have a clean, organised area to study in.
- ▶ Use a music playlist or mobile phone to time study periods.
- ▶ Switch phone to flight mode (or turn it off). Use it only during scheduled breaks.
- ▶ Write study notes by hand, rather than type them. (Research shows that this assists learning.)

- ▶ Record study notes, then replay them frequently.
- ▶ Stick study notes up around the house.
- ▶ Practise completing past exams. (Provide these as test exams, and make time to review students' completed exams and to provide constructive feedback. Encourage students to revise and re-learn things they've already studied. This will help the information to sink in.)

5. ENCOURAGE A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

- ▶ Encourage parents and carers to provide regular, healthy meals. The brain needs glucose to function effectively. Load up on complex carbohydrates for breakfast, and especially prior to exams.
- ▶ Encourage parents and carers to talk to their children about going easy on the substances. Caffeine, cigarettes, coffee, NoDoz®, alcohol, marijuana, dexamphetamine and any other drugs are actually a short-term fix, and will probably make them feel much worse and cause under-performance later.
- ▶ Encourage students to set aside 30 minutes a day for exercise, even if it's just going for a walk.
- ▶ Encourage students to get enough sleep so that they can concentrate the next day.
- ▶ Ensure that students' study plan includes breaks and days off. Balance is key.



Activities for students

The content below is for whole-year groups and for use in individual classrooms. These activities are designed to be interpreted as you consider appropriate for your own classroom. As stress can be a tricky topic, it's important that you create a supportive learning environment for your students. Here are some things to remember:

- ▶ Collaborate with your students to develop a group agreement that sets the parameters for class discussions.
- ▶ Reflect on your own role in discussions. Act as a facilitator of the conversation, to help generate many viewpoints, rather than as the director of the conversation.
- ▶ Let your students know that you value everyone's contributions.
- ▶ Use a range of questioning techniques that open up discussion, rather than trying to get quickly to the right answer.
- ▶ Recognise that some students may not feel comfortable sharing. Explore ways of dealing with this, such as using 'think, pair, share' activities.
- ▶ Explore ways to ensure that all students have an opportunity to speak, such as by using talk tickets.

ACTIVITY 1: EXAM AND STUDY STRESS ASSESSMENT

Main theme: The main aim of this activity is to have students reflect on their current levels of stress so that when the concept of growth mindsets is introduced, they can see how their mindset can affect them both positively and negatively.

Lesson overview: Students undertake a self-assessment to understand what stress is and how it affects them on an individual level.

Key learnings: By the end of the lesson, students will understand:

- ▶ the role that study/exam stress plays in their lives
- ▶ what stress does to the body, and how serious its effects can be
- ▶ where the stress or pressure they feel is coming from.

Materials needed: White/blackboard and [What Stress Can Do to Your Body](#) video.

Check in:

- ▶ Before starting the *Exam Stress* pack, give the students a moment to think about their experience so far with exam stress. (They will revisit this later in the pack.)
- ▶ Draw two circles on the board (one big one and one smaller one inside). Label the small circle 'Things you can control' and the big one 'Things you can't control'.
- ▶ Give each group 5–10 post-it notes and have them write down words they associate with exam or study stress.
- ▶ Have the students put the post-it notes in the circles that they think match their word association.

Investigation and application:

- ▶ Watch *What Stress Can Do to Your Body*.
- ▶ Start a class discussion by explaining the stress bell curve.

We all experience stress and anxiety differently. It's good to feel some stress, as this can help to enhance our performance. However, too much stress can affect not only your performance at school but also your life more generally. Feeling no stress at all could mean that you have disengaged from doing your best.

- ▶ Discuss with students the stress bell curve and the things that have come to light from the circle activity.
- ▶ Highlight that there are things we can and cannot control, but also that there are things we can do to ensure that stress doesn't affect us in a negative way. The following activities will expand on these strategies.

ACTIVITY 2: INTRODUCTION TO GROWTH MINDSETS

Main theme: The main aim of this activity is to introduce the concept of growth mindsets to students, so that they can realise their goals and build resiliency. Teaching this concept to young people will help them understand themselves better and improve their stress response. It will give them control over their efforts and their results, especially if their results aren't what they expected.

Lesson overview: Students are introduced to the concept of growth mindsets. The activity will help them understand that they can take control of their attitude towards study and high school as a learning experience. For a more in-depth resource on growth mindsets, see [Embracing the "F" Word](#).

Key learnings: By the end of the lesson, students will understand:

- ▶ what growth mindsets are
- ▶ how growth mindsets can help them manage study stress.

Materials needed: [Mindsets](#) information sheet.

Teachers tip: When working with students to develop growth mindset thought patterns, ask them to add the word 'YET' to the end of any sentence where they are thinking or saying that they can't do something. For example: 'I can't understand that English text YET', or 'I can't answer that maths question YET'.

Check in:

- ▶ Hand out or display the *Fixed vs Growth Mindsets* information sheet.
- ▶ Explain the following:

A mindset is a series of self-perceptions or beliefs that people hold about themselves. They determine the person's behaviour, outlook and mental attitude.

*A **growth mindset** is one where a person's self-belief is that they can develop abilities through dedication and hard work; through adopting a 'learn at all costs' attitude. Success is seen as being due to 35% ability and 65% effort.*

*A **fixed mindset** is one where a person believes that traits such as intelligence and talent are set at birth. A person with a fixed mindset lets failure or success define them. Success is seen as being due to 65% ability and 35% effort.*

(Pick out any extra points that you think apply to your class.)

Investigation and application:

- ▶ Open up the discussion to the class. Ask them: 'Who can think of an example where a person may be viewing the situation from a fixed mindset?' (For example: someone who thinks they could never run 10 km because they feel unfit, or someone who believes they would never be able to make a speech in front of their class because they are too nervous about public speaking.)
- ▶ Ask students to think about how the person in the example situation could have shifted their mindset to a growth mindset. Ask them to write down a 'before-and-after' scenario.
- ▶ Finally, ask students to come up with some ideas in groups, or as a class, about how this mindset could impact their approach to their exam or general studies.

ACTIVITY 3: HOW TO MANAGE EXAM STRESS

Main theme: The main aim of this activity is to have students understand that there are practical, actionable techniques they can use to manage exam stress. The activity will also remind them to take time to live their lives outside of their final exams and school. It's helpful and important at this time to maintain connections with friends and to take breaks.

Lesson overview: Students understand that they can use practical strategies to control their exam stress.

Key learnings: By the end of the lesson, students will understand:

- ▶ exam stress as something that everyone experiences and that can be managed
- ▶ practical strategies for beating exam stress.

Materials needed: [Coping Strategies for Exam Stress](#) and [Study Hacks](#) video and [5 steps to study success](#) handout (page 7).

Teachers tip: This activity is designed to support students to think about their individual experience. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach that will work for everyone, so challenge your students to think about areas where they could improve and how to do that.

Check in:

- ▶ Explain that exam stress is a normal part of high school and of growing up, but that it doesn't have to become overwhelming and all-consuming.

Investigation and application:

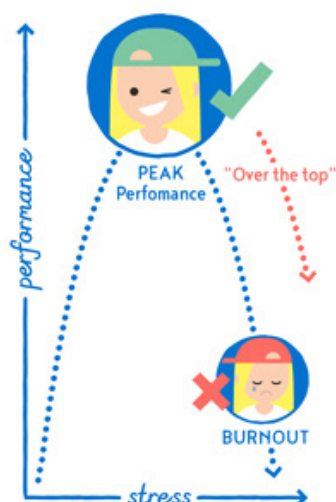
- ▶ Watch the *Coping With Exam Stress* and *Study Hacks* video. Ask students to write down two or three points raised in the video that resonated with them. In small groups, discuss the points raised.
- ▶ Hand out the *5 steps to study success* information sheet.
- ▶ Using the handout and what they learnt from the video, ask students individually to come up with five implementable strategies for beating exam stress. (They can be as big or small as they want.)
- ▶ Bring the class back together and encourage them to share their ideas with each other.
- ▶ Finally, ask them to reflect on what they have learnt, and to compare this with what they thought at the beginning of the pack. This should allow them to reflect on the practical strategies they have learnt and to feel more equipped to deal with exam and study stress.

5 STEPS to STUDY SUCCESS

We've done the homework on studying so you don't have to. These are your scientifically proven steps to study success.

1 NOT ALL STRESS IS BAD

While it's often given a bad rap, the right amount of stress can actually motivate you to get stuff done. The key thing is to recognise when stress has tipped over from being a motivating force to an overwhelming emotion.



2 20-MINUTE STUDY RULE

No one can study for six hours straight and be effective. Break up your time into twenty-minute chunks for the most effective use of your brain.

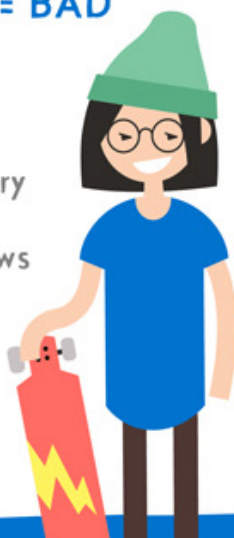


3 SAY IT OUT LOUD

The best way to really remember and learn is to talk about what you're learning out loud, without using any notes.

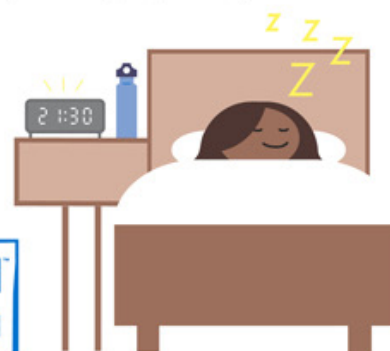
4 BREAKS = GOOD, CONSTANT DISTRACTION = BAD

Taking planned and timed breaks will help you remain on task, but checking your social every 5 minutes is a sure-fire study fail. Research shows that it can take up to twenty minutes to refocus on your task once you've been distracted.



5 SLEEP IS YOUR FRIEND

If you get a good night's sleep before your exam, you are scientifically proven to retain more of what you studied the day before than if you stay up crazy late.

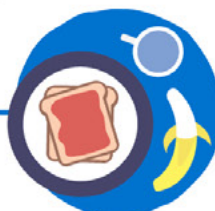


REACH
OUT.COM

NIGHT BEFORE

EXAM SLAYING
CHECKLIST

On THE DAY

**CHECK**your exam location
and start time**EAT**a decent
brekky**DO**a light revision
of your notes
(don't go overboard)**PACK**

your bag

**LAY**

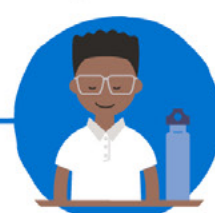
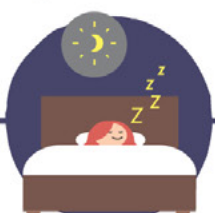
out your clothes

**ARRIVE**

a little early

**SET**

your alarm

**AVOID**any people that
stress you out**VISUALISE**yourself being
calm and confident
in the exam room**TAKE 2**minutes and
practice deep and
slow breathing**GO**to bed early
enough to get a
good amount of
sleep**GET**comfortable in
your assigned seat
and then get to
workREACH
OUT.COM

How to manage your time

The amount of work you get at school or uni can seem daunting, but there are tools and tactics you can use to plan your time. If you set goals, make plans, write notes, limit distractions, make time to chill and get help when you need it, you can get everything done.



So little time...

If you're studying, it can sometimes seem like there's not enough time to do it all, but there are tools you can use to plan your time effectively.



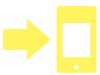
Make plans, score goals

Set out a list of what you want to achieve, and for each item, write down what you'll need to do. Make it manageable and achievable. The idea is not to freak yourself out, but to chart a course to where you want to be. As you work through the list, you'll see yourself approaching and reaching your goals.



Write it down

Write down appointments, notes and ideas in a diary or notebook, and use a wall planner so that important dates (or just planned fun times) don't pass you by.



Limit distractions

The internet is pretty great, right? We agree. But with instant messaging, social networks and email, it provides a heap of ways to procrastinate and distract yourself. Limit your time chatting and fooling about to your breaks, and shut down these distractions while you're studying. The same goes for talking and messaging on your phone. You'll get a lot more done.



Take breaks

If you plan study into every single minute you've got, you'll probably end up stressed and unhappy. Make sure you've got time to do things you like that relax you. Whether it's sports, video games, music or anything else, don't let it go just because you're studying.



If you need help, get it

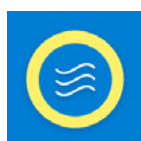
Time-management is a skill. Like any skill, some people are better at it than others. If you're struggling with it, talk to someone who can help – teachers, friends, family, lecturers and counsellors.

5 apps for beating exam stress



1. My Study Life

This app is kinda like a digital diary, and it's designed to help you keep on top of due dates and study schedules. It's totally free, and can be used to track deadlines: just input an assignment name and the date that it's due, and the app will remind you as often as you like. Best of all, it can synch up across a whole bunch of devices – and is even accessible offline, so it won't chew up all your data.



2. ReachOut Breathe

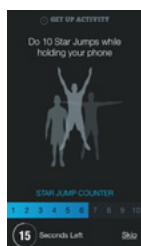
You know that terrible, tight sensation you get in your chest whenever you start to feel anxious? It's caused by stress affecting your breathing, creating exactly the kind of pain that the ReachOut Breathe app is designed to help you with. The free app helps you to slow and maintain your breathing, while also measuring your heart rate. As a result, it's not only good for exam time; it's useful for dealing with stress in general.



3. Habitbull

One of the hardest things to do when preparing for exams is getting into a good study routine. It's just so easy to get distracted by the internet, friends, your phone or games. After all, you've got stacks of time! No need to rush studying, is there? But before you know it, you're cramming the night before a test rather than preparing for it weeks in advance.

Enter Habitbull. A motivational app, Habitbull allows you to track and input good habits, even giving you a score based on how well you're keeping up with routines. It's great for noticing patterns in your behaviour, too: maybe there are specific days when you're more alert than others, or maybe you tend to work better on the weekends rather than on school nights.



4. Recharge

When you're studying hard for an exam, often the first thing to go out the window is your sleep cycle. You stay up late, you wake up early... And even if you're not spending all night studying, you're spending all night thinking about studying, which is just as disruptive.

Recharge can help with that. The app helps track your sleep schedule, gives you some activities to do in the morning to get the blood pumping, allows you to track your mood, and – maybe best of all – comes with a super-loud, super-effective wake-up alarm.



5. Pause

Mindfulness – an anxiety-calming skill that helps you monitor worried thoughts – is a hard thing to master. Practising mindfulness doesn't have to be boring. In fact, Pause, a free app, has been designed to turn mindfulness into a kind of game.

Pause gets you to focus on small blobs as they fly across the screen while calming music plays. This might make it sound simple, but that's because it's meant to be. By getting you to focus on very basic shapes, Pause can increase your concentration, slow your breathing, and generally calm you down if you're feeling stressed.

Information for Parents

Parents and carers play a vital role in supporting their teenagers through exam time. However, it can be difficult to know how best to support a teenager to manage their stress. It's important to let parents know of the tools and support available to them to help them help their teenager.

We've developed newsletter copy to engage parents in student wellbeing throughout exam time. You can include this copy in your school newsletter, social media channels and website. You can also help parents by printing the fact sheets from the links below and circulating them at school events where parents are in attendance.

Help your teenager to beat exam stress

It's normal for teenagers to feel stressed out in the lead up to exams, particularly those teenagers in year 12. Your teenager may feel anxious about just one or two exams, or every exam may cause them increased stress.

Stress around exam time doesn't impact only on the person sitting the exams; it can also be difficult for the whole family. It's important to learn how to support your teenager during exam time, in order to help them manage their stress and to reduce any tension at home.

ReachOut Parents has over 140 fact sheets and practical tools. Here are a few that will help you to support your teenager with exam stress:

- ▶ [7 tips for helping your teenager manage exam stress](#)
- ▶ [A parent's survival guide to year 12](#)
- ▶ [How your teenager can manage distractions](#)
- ▶ [A parent's story about beating exam stress](#)



For more evidence-based practical support and tips on mental health and wellbeing issues for parents, head on over to ReachOut.com/Parents.

The service also provides an online community forum so that parents can connect with each other to share experiences in an anonymous, supportive space.



ReachOut Australia
Level 2, Building B
35 Saunders Street
Pyrmont NSW 2009

ReachOut.com/About