

How to talk to your students about exam anxiety

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In this blog, we offer strategies which teachers might find useful to help reduce their students' experiences of exam anxiety. While some examples might seem obvious, research reminds us that these approaches can be successful with students – many of whom will be encountering high stakes exams for the first time and may lack experience of dealing with these feelings.



Choose motivation strategies carefully

Teachers sometimes point out negative consequences in order to motivate distracted or disengaged students. They might say that if students do not concentrate, they will fail to achieve their target grades, or not get into the college or university they want.

Research shows that these 'fear appeals' can be motivational if students find the work, they are doing important and they have a strong belief in their own ability. However, when students do not have a strong belief in their own ability then fear appeals are likely to have a negative effect on motivation and can increase students' anxiety. Unless you know that a particular student is likely to have a positive reaction to a fear appeal it is better to avoid using this as a motivational strategy. Instead, it is better to point out positives, such as the possibility of performing well in the exam as a result of completing homework or revision.

Normalise emotions

Emotions such as stress and anxiety are natural and helpful indicators which communicate to us that there is something in our environment to which we need to respond. It is important that students know that

these emotions are normal and there is no right or wrong way to feel. When students describe emotions around exams, try to 'normalise' this by listening calmly. Ask for more information and convey empathy by acknowledging their point of view but avoid reacting too positively or negatively.

Teachers can embed this by talking openly about the sorts of emotions students might face around exams, including stress and anxiety. You might consider discussing your own experiences, if appropriate, or the anonymised experiences of previous students. This can help students to understand that some stress around exams is normal and is not necessarily something which should be overly concerning, or which will have a negative future impact. This can help to reduce the intensity of their emotion and support them to build resilience.

Give specific revision guidance

Students often describe uncertainty around their exam preparation and revision as a big factor in their experience of exam stress. In particular, they report that people often tell them to revise, without first telling them how; what a programme of revision looks like and how to adapt that as exams approach. A student's lack of certainty over revision planning can lead to them to choose inefficient methods, procrastinate or avoid revision altogether, leading them to feel less prepared and with increased anxiety.

Of course, students need to learn for themselves the revision techniques that work best for them. However, it can be useful if teachers introduce students to a range of different techniques suitable for their subject area. Planning for revision proactively can avoid negative beliefs about their ability to revise and confusion about what revision actually is.

Give students advice on how to succeed

Teachers have often been through the exam process with a number of different classes and have a wealth of knowledge and experience. For students, this is the first and (usually) only time they will experience a particular set of exams. When giving students advice, teachers should consider providing evidence from their experience, as this will encourage students to see its relevance to their situation. It also helps students to hear, more generally, that their teacher has done this all before, that every year a group of people sits exams, and that their teacher is aware of what has worked best for them.

Talk about future options

For GCSE and A level students, the exams they are taking are the gateway to another stage in their life: to another stage of education, into training or work. Because of this, uncertainty around the future can be a source of stress for some students. Students experiencing anxiety around their future can often feel that not getting the grades they want will be 'the end of the world'.

Schools are rightly concerned with encouraging students to achieve their target grades and can present aspirational careers as a source of motivation. However, some students can feel reassured by information about what their options might be if 'plan A' doesn't come to fruition. Giving students a range of realistic information about their possible futures, including options for retakes and alternative paths into further education or careers depending on the grades they achieve, plays down a black-and-white view of 'passing' or 'failing' the exams. Talking realistically about futures allows students to concentrate on their exam efforts knowing that, whatever the outcome, the exams will not be 'the end of the world'.

Encouraging your students to talk about their emotions as they approach their exams and helping them to see that their responses are normal can help them manage any anxiety they may be experiencing in a more positive way.