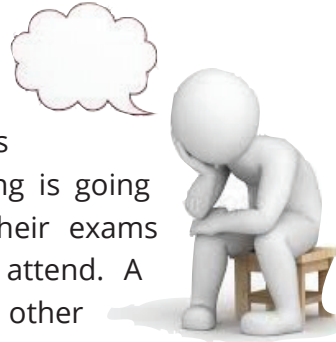


Activities such as **walking, reading, being outside with nature, listening to music, creative activities, exercise, ensuring regular breaks, mindfulness, soothing breathing, using imagery, talking to people and getting a good night's sleep** all work towards rebalancing the levels of stress felt by students.

UNHELPFUL THINKING HABITS

Often AGT students exhibit several unhelpful thinking habits which make them worry and panic about their future. Catastrophising is common and believing the worst possible thing is going to happen, for example that they will fail their exams and not get into the College they want to attend. A lot of students 'mind-read' and guess what other people are thinking about them, as well as use a lot of 'shoulds' and 'musts' which adds to the pressure they are already feeling. Discuss these different unhelpful thinking habits with students and encourage them to try and identify times when they are making them.



It is important to try to encourage students to focus on the positives in their life, what they are grateful for and the things that are going well. Often more time is spent thinking about things that are not going well or on things which they are struggling with, whereas we want them to change their focus of attention towards themselves. Encourage students to spend a few minutes each evening reflecting on the day and what has gone well as opposed to not so well.

Remember it's okay to feel stressed and we cannot avoid stressful periods in our lives. However, it is important to learn ways to manage this stress, be able to recognise when you are struggling and know how to balance the stressful periods with periods of recovery.

A GUIDE FOR STAFF TEACHING THE AGT STUDENTS

Being a student can be extremely stressful, especially during exam periods. From experience, I have often found that AGT students display similar characteristics, with students often exhibiting high levels of perfectionism and having corresponding negative thoughts about themselves and their future.

This information sheet is to be used as a guide only as obviously each student is different and will have their own individual ways of managing stress. It has been written making use of comments and recommendations made by student's directly and it has been highlighted how important it is for staff to receive basic training around mental health to enable them to help students who are feeling stressed during the exam periods.

PERFECTIONIST NIGHTMARE

Perfectionism in young people has risen, with many students never feeling good enough and fearing failure. Often students will set themselves unrealistic expectations and standards to achieve. If they reach these standards, they often believe they were not set high enough. Conversely if they do not reach those standards set, they do not feel good enough and feel like they have not achieved what they set out to.

Often this pressure is put on students themselves and does not necessarily come from school or family members. These standards should be talked about with students and discussions had with them over how realistic they actually are and how much pressure they are putting on themselves.

ACE ACTIVITIES

Rather than just focusing on achievement (A), it is essential for students to ensure a balance of activities in their life whereby they feel close to other people (C) and do things which they enjoy (E). Each of these activities produce different chemicals in student's brains, hence it also helps to ensure a balance in the brain's neurochemistry.

Often AGT students will spend a lot of time revising, therefore it is essential to stress the importance of taking time out and looking after themselves by planning enough recovery time to help them manage the stress of exams.

COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY

Young people generally do not like uncertainty and because taking exams involves lots of uncertainty this will be a particularly stressful time for them. In addition, most young people like to feel in control of what goes on in their life, however often there are times which feel out of control, with exam periods being one of them. Practising mindfulness, compassion and more acceptance around things being out of their control, is one way of encouraging students to manage these thoughts and worries.



RECOVERY PERIODS

During periods of stress it is essential to take time out wherever possible and learn ways to relax. When we are feeling stressed, we experience the Flight, Fight or Freeze (FFF) Response, which triggers the sympathetic nervous system and results in adrenaline and cortisol being released and our bodies going into 'threat mode'. During this time, the part of our brain responsible for our thinking and concentration is switched off, with us using the emotional part of the brain instead.

Often students can trigger feelings of panic through their thoughts and worrying about the upcoming exams. Even just the word exam can be enough to trigger the FFF response in students so try to be mindful of this when teaching students.

It is therefore essential for students to learn ways to self-regulate and calm themselves down when they are feeling stressed. When using the emotional part of their brain, students will find it difficult to concentrate and remember things, which will result in them feeling even more stressed.

We all have a personal stress threshold so it's important to encourage young people to be able to recognise this in themselves. Stress is okay if there is enough 'recovery' time to rebalance the system and activate the parasympathetic nervous system....