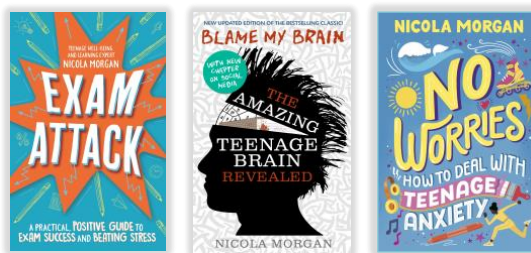


# SUPPORTING YOUR EXAM STUDENTS

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From Nicola Morgan,  
The Teenage Brain Woman  
and author of many books to support  
young people (and parents!) through  
adolescence



What can you do to support the exam students in your lives? How to help enough but not too much? How can stress levels be just right: allowing best performance but not paralysing with nerves? Discuss my ideas with your teenagers. (My website has advice specially for them.)

## 1. See the student – what do *they* need?

Some need a push to work, others to take more breaks. Some need help with planning. Some procrastinate more. Some are scared to ask for help or don't know how. Some struggle to take in instructions; or read questions carefully; or concentrate in noise. Some have mental, emotional or physical challenges. Talk (and listen) to them and their teachers to understand specific needs.

## 2. Build a good environment

Discuss how to create the best work-space you can. Space to work undisturbed could be a library, grandparents' house, spare room, or their own room. Can you regulate noise, comfort, light? Separate work from sleep? Small changes can have big effects. Think creatively.

## 3. Your household as a team

For a few weeks only, the student's needs come first. Do you need to agree rules with family members? Quiet times/areas? Whole family quiet periods? Can all agree to put phones away at certain times? Can you offer to test the student or create games together that will help them enjoy at least part of the work and feel everyone is with them? Build mutual respect. Discuss how it's going and how everyone feels.

## 4. Show trust and respect: be the background support, rather than “nagging”

Have the pep-talks and agree rules/routines early and then step back. Most students do not need constant reminders that time is running out. Gentle nudges: “These are your exams – you can do this”. “I'll let you work – but don't forget you can ask for help.” Praise effort and focus.

## 5. Teach anxiety management

Anxiety is natural and *not* a problem; some nerves at the right time will help performance. But we need strategies for managing it and to know when to use those strategies, particularly when we need to relax or sleep. We need both prevention and intervention techniques. Most importantly, everyone needs to learn how to lower heart and breathing rates at times of stress. See my book *No Worries* and my anxiety handouts.

## 6. Fuel the brain

They need enough food (this is no time to diet or restrict) and it needs to be the best it can be. Use your skills (and great ideas on social media!) to create nourishing snacks and meals they'll love. Treats are good but too much sugar does not help brain function or sleep. Plan ahead what they could eat on exam mornings, when they're likely to feel too anxious to be hungry. My book *Exam Attack* has details and you'll find free resources on my website. See my recipe for “brain bars”!

## 7. Create routines

The brain loves routines: they help us feel in control, stay on track and know what to do. Routines during day and evening also help healthy sleep patterns. Help teenagers build routines that suit them. The illustration shows a study leave routine created by a Scottish exam student called Lauren. Consider the next point, too.



## 8. Breaks help brains – time-table them

The brain works better when it takes breaks. Some students don't take enough – others too many! A break from work should involve a different activity – no more screen time after working on screen. Ideally, be active and get fresh air; maybe have a fuelling snack. Switching between tasks is also good but not a substitute for a complete break. Let the student discover what feels right but I suggest 10min breaks every 45mins of work and longer breaks at lunch and tea-time. Another way to manage this is to use a timer (internet search "Pomodoro technique") that keeps work and breaks on track. Some apps also block social media/notifications etc. But the main message is: breaks = better learning! Schedule a few half or whole days off, too, and make the most of them.

## 9. Promote sleep

Teach importance of good sleep and help them prioritise it. Work must stop at least 1.5 hours before desired sleep time. Teach importance of winding-down routine – "sleep hygiene". See my book, *The Awesome Power of Sleep*, and various free resources on my website.

## 10. De-escalate stakes – failure is not the end

Is your teen very worried about "failure"? Talk about this in advance; discuss what it would mean and reassure that it won't change how you feel about them. Anything can happen and even the best prepared student can have a bad exam or a bad day. It's vital that they don't think this would be the end of the world. There many more opportunities to be successful. So, talk about it and then park it. The message is: "Work hard and try your best – that's all that matters."

## Overall tip: Be the sports coach

Preparing for exams is like preparing for a big sporting competition and you are one of the coaches. As well as developing skills and competition tactics (ideally leave this to schools), a coach has to work on anxiety, sleep, nutrition, relaxation, general health, mentality and motivation. Talk to your teenagers as though they were your athletes: you want to bring out the best in them and you are their support team. But always remember: these are their exams, not yours.



Nicola Morgan works extensively with schools, as well as with families. Her books and talks have helped young people around the world build their mental strength and navigate adolescence. Ask about **Live Q&A** sessions for schools and subscribe free to NicolaMorgansBrain on Substack to keep up-to-date with all the opportunities she offers. Her books are widely available and there are links to Bookshop.org (supporting independent bookshops as well as Nicola herself) on the books pages of her website.

[www.nicolamorgan.com](http://www.nicolamorgan.com)

Substack and Instagram: NicolaMorgansBrain  
X/Twitter: @NicolaMorgan