



## Exam Success/Stress – a Parent Guide by Nicola Morgan



As our teens head towards GCSE's and beyond there always seems to be some revision going on. It's a normal part of school life but can be a cause of much stress and anxiety not just for our children but for us too in trying to offer the best possible support. Instead of waiting until we are in the thick of it I wanted to get Nicola Morgan's advice on best ways to support our teens during this period of their lives.

**Francesca Geens, Creator, The HappySelf Journal**

Exams have hit your household and you want to support your teenager through this high-pressure time. But what should – and shouldn't – you do? Exams have changed a lot since your day and the pressures seem higher. And today's parents are more involved. But is she working too hard or not hard enough? Is he too stressed or not stressed enough? Should you butt in or butt out?

### How important are exams?

For some people they will be more important than others but they are really not the only way to a fulfilling life. There are other paths and more opportunities than you might see right now. So your first task is to trust your teenager: try to be a safety-net, not helicopter. A helicopter hovers and swoops to rescue but a safety-net gives a person confidence without doing the job for them. Then, success is *theirs* and failure can be something to grow from.

But we all want to do our best. Let's see how to help that happen!

### Stress

Exams *should* be stressful. "Stress" occurs when the brain detects threat and sends adrenalin and cortisol to speed heart-rate and breathing, pushing more oxygen and energy and putting us into hyper-alert mode. So, stress is *for* super-performance. But ...

### Too much stress

... we are not built for constant stress over a long period. It wears us down, disrupts sleep, lowers mood and makes us under-perform. And exam students are vulnerable as they are under stress for many months.

This is a particular problem for ambitious students who *really* care. They put themselves under a lot of pressure and we need to avoid adding to that. My heart sinks when I go into some schools and see shouty posters saying "149 DAYS TO GCSEs!" Students know.





## Too little stress

But maybe your teenager doesn't seem stressed *enough*. Leaving revision till far too late?  
"Chill, Mum – I'll be fine?"

Careful: this student might be very anxious underneath, perhaps so worried that they can't face trying. Equally, some act laidback because their friends do. So, not *seeming* stressed does not mean they're not.

To support *any* young person, whether too stressed or not stressed enough, you need the Goldilocks, 'just right' stress level!

## How can you tell?

- ▶ Your teenager most likely has a healthy level of stress if they are able to do a decent work session and enjoy relaxation afterwards.
- ▶ They don't work obsessive hours but they are getting the work done.
- ▶ They are keeping in touch with friends and continuing with some sports and other activities (though it's reasonable to drop some during exam season).
- ▶ They are able to tell you or another adult how they're doing.

## How to find The Goldilocks Level

- 1) Know your teenager: ask how they *really* feel; choose your moments; little and often rather than One Big Talk.
- 2) Show interest. They might rebuff it but be firm and kind. "I'm really interested – can you show me [your time-table/list/whatever]?" When they show you, don't interrogate; instead comment positively and then ask a question. And don't do this too often!
- 3) Be available: let them know that if they're worried about anything, you will not judge or panic.
- 4) Know their revision and exam time-table. It's key to keeping everything calm but focused. If there's no revision time-table, try to find out why.
- 5) Know what the exams involve. And as they get closer, get your student to do exam-condition rehearsals of each type of question. Past papers are key.
- 6) Communicate concerns with the school early: teachers know if your teenager is on course. Trust them.
- 7) If over-work is the problem, explain that brains work better after a break. (My book, Exam Attack, has a lot on this.)
- 8) If procrastination or underwork are the issue, help them think how great they will feel if they know they did all they could.
- 9) If your teenager is panicking, help them break every task into smaller ones. Lists they can tick off are very encouraging.
- 10) Avoid rewards for results: rewards should be for effort and determination.



## Practical help

If you can provide these, it will make a big difference.

- 1) **A healthy diet that keeps them fuelled** – avoid sugar highs.
- 2) **Stationery and equipment** – ask the school if you don't have what you need.
- 3) **A comfortable workspace.**
- 4) **Quiet** – if impossible at home, a local library or someone else's house.
- 5) **Relaxing breaks** – but don't organise without warning: ask when would suit. Having something to look forward to helps mood and focus.
- 6) **Calm routine** – meals, relaxation and communal work-times help everyone. You can help with a bedtime routine, too. (See The Awesome Power of Sleep.)
- 7) **Relaxation and breathing techniques** – see my website or internet search 'belly-breathing'.

## Individual needs

If your teenager has dyslexia, ADD, ASD or dyspraxia, or another specific difficulty, they might:

- 1) Need extra help with planning and organisation.
- 2) Need support in asking teachers for help.
- 3) Need support with low self-esteem and negative thoughts.
- 4) Miss something a teacher says.
- 5) Need special techniques to deal with anxiety in the exam itself.



## Above all

An exam student needs your understanding, respect and trust. These are not your exams but theirs. You are just cheering from the sidelines. When they succeed, it needs to be their own success; when they fail, they need to know that they did their best and that you are still firmly on their side. You need them to be brave, confident and positive, before, during and after.



Good luck! Because, remember, they need luck, too. Some of this is not in their hands – or yours.



## Resources for further help

**Nicola Morgan's books**, particularly **Exam Attack**, **The Awesome Power of Sleep** and **Be Resilient**

**Nicola's website:** [www.nicolamorgan.com](http://www.nicolamorgan.com)

**Websites:** You need different resources depending on where you live so the best thing to do is internet search "best revision websites [my country/exam]" and then choose from a list drawn up by a school or college, not a company selling things.

## About the author:

Nicola Morgan, The Teenage Brain Woman, is a multi-award-winning author whose work on young brains, psychology and mental health is loved by teenagers, schools and families around the world. She has been a YA novelist, English teacher and dyslexia specialist and the mother of two teenage (now grown-up) daughters. Now, when not writing and dreaming in a garden office, she keeps herself physically and mentally healthy as a passionate vegetable gardener, decent cook and determined runner.



Nicola does talks, online or in-person, for conferences, schools, parents and public audiences. She has also created unique teaching materials, including videos, so that schools can have the benefit of her visits without the cost and coffee-making. Her latest book is **The Awesome Power of Sleep** and the next ones are **Be Resilient** and **10 Ways to Build a Brilliant Brain**.

## Join Nicola's community:

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