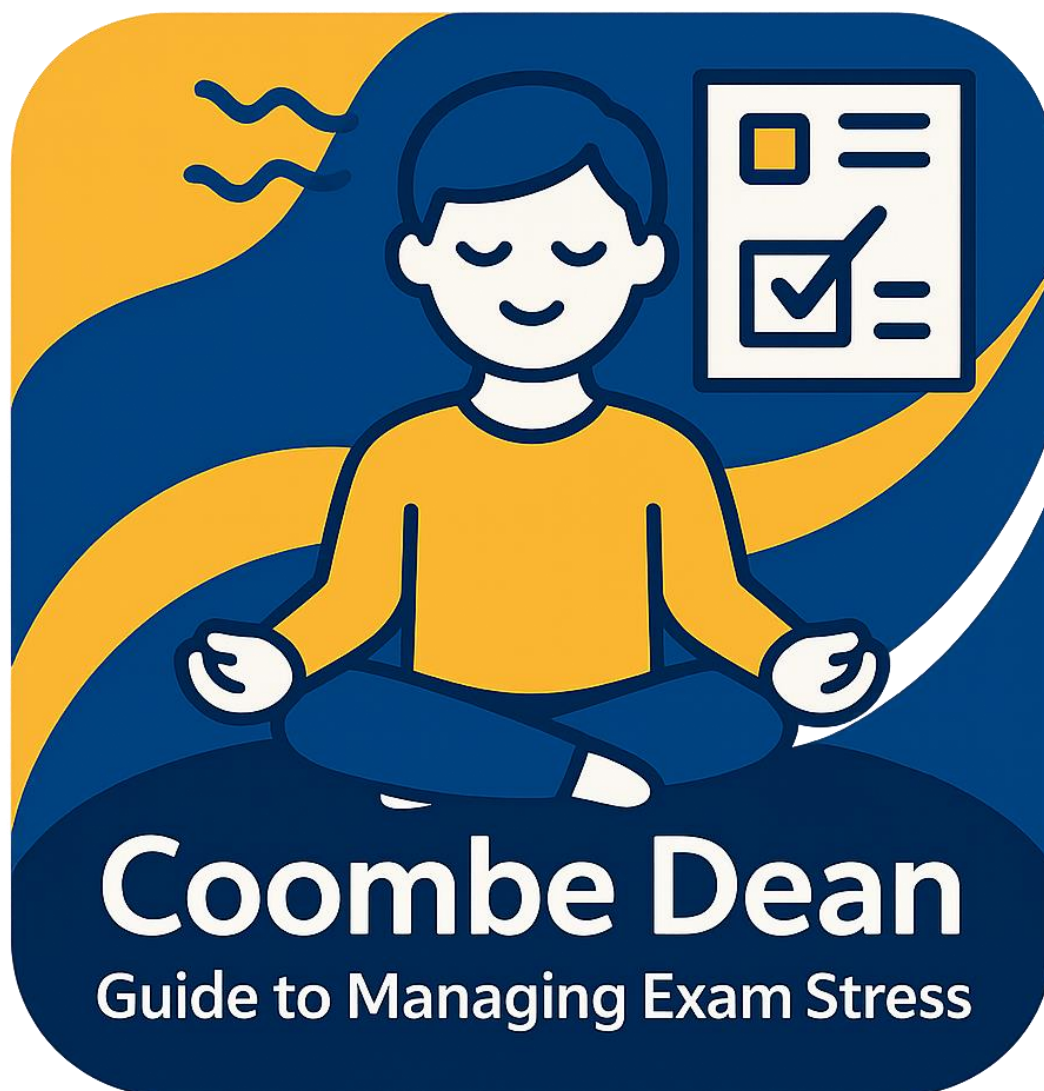


The Coombe Dean Guide to Managing Your Exam Stress



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Welcome to the Coombe Dean Guide to Managing Exam Stress

We're not going to lie to you – exams *are* stressful. They put you under pressure because they matter, and nobody wants to fail. The experience itself can feel intense too: you're in a high-pressure environment, working against the clock, expected to perform at your very best in a short space of time. **It's completely normal to find this challenging, and you're certainly not alone in feeling that way.**

Stress isn't always a bad thing. In small amounts, it can help us to focus, motivate us and encourage us to take action. But when stress becomes constant or overwhelming, it can start to work against us. It may affect how we think, how we feel and even how our bodies react. **Everyone experiences stress differently**, and some people find it harder to manage than others. You might notice yourself feeling anxious, overwhelmed, low in confidence, or even physically unwell.

This booklet has been designed specifically for Coombe Dean students. Its aim is to help you understand stress and learn how to manage it more effectively – so you're not just getting through exam season, but feeling confident, in control and able to do your best.

Inside, you'll find an explanation of how stress works, alongside strategies to help calm stress down and support your wellbeing. These approaches are designed to **help you think more clearly, work more effectively and look after yourself** during busy or pressurised times.

Most importantly, **this guide is about taking care of you** – both now and in the future. Learning how to manage stress is an important life skill that will support you beyond exams and into whatever comes next.



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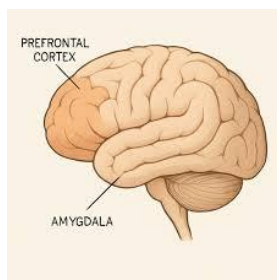
What is stress?

Stress is a **natural and healthy** response that humans have developed to help keep us safe. When we face a challenge or a threat, our body releases stress hormones that prepare us to respond. Our heart beats faster to send more oxygen around the body, blood pressure increases, and we may sweat more to prevent overheating. Stress doesn't look the same for everyone. Stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol can affect us both physically and emotionally. You might notice changes in your body, your thoughts or your feelings. Recognising your own signs of stress is helpful, as it allows you to act early and use strategies to calm yourself before stress takes over.



This response is brilliant if you're facing real danger – like needing to react quickly or escape from a rampaging lion. The problem is that our bodies don't always know the difference between a life-threatening situation and an exam. So, when you sit down in an exam hall, your body can react in exactly the same way as if you were facing down a really scary lion.

When stress levels rise too high, they can start to work against you. Too much stress can make it harder to concentrate, think clearly and remember information you've revised. Research shows that high levels of a stress hormone called **cortisol** can slow down how quickly we retrieve memories – which is not ideal when you're trying to recall facts in an exam!



Another reason stress affects exams is because of how the brain works. When we are calm, we mainly use the **prefrontal cortex (PFC)** – the part of the brain responsible for clear thinking, problem-solving and memory. This is the part of the brain we need during exams.

When we feel stressed or overwhelmed, a different part of the brain takes over – the **amygdala**. The amygdala is emotional and reactive, and its main job is to scan for danger. When it senses threat, it can “hijack” our thinking and shut down access to the PFC. That's when minds go blank, panic sets in, or simple questions suddenly feel impossible.

This is why learning how to calm your stress response is so important. When we reduce stress, we allow the thinking part of the brain to switch back on, helping us access the knowledge and skills we've worked hard to build.



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Reducing stress for exams

To give yourself the best chance of doing well in exams, it's important to manage stress in two main ways:

Calming the emotional brain (the amygdala)

This includes techniques such as **mindfulness, relaxation, movement,** and **being kind to yourself.** These help your body and mind feel safe and settled again.

Preparing well so there is less to worry about

Good revision habits, realistic planning and feeling **supported** reduce the pressure on the amygdala, allowing the thinking brain (the PFC) to stay in control.

By looking after both your preparation and your wellbeing, you put yourself in the strongest position to approach exams with confidence.



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10 Tips for Calming the Amygdala

Calming the amygdala means turning the “volume” down on the part of the brain that reacts to stress, so the thinking part of the brain – the prefrontal cortex (PFC) – can do its job. This is especially important in exams, when we need to concentrate, recall information and think clearly.

One of the quickest ways to calm the stress response is by gently distracting the brain and bringing the body back into a calm, grounded state.

The key is focus: the more attention you give to the activity, the more effective it will be.

5 Techniques to use *before or after* exams:

Mindful monkey stretch

Stand up and gently stretch your arms out in front of you, then to the sides, and finally above your head. When fully extended, slowly bend forward and let your head hang down. This releases tension stored in the body and helps you feel calmer and more relaxed.

Hugging yourself (or someone you trust)

A hug of just ten seconds can have powerful effects on stress levels. If no one else is around, try hugging yourself by wrapping your arms around your body and gently squeezing. This helps the body feel supported and safe.

Wall push

Stand with your feet planted firmly on the floor and push your palms against a wall for five to ten seconds. Feeling the resistance of a solid surface can be deeply grounding and calming, even if you don't immediately notice the effect.



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Superman pose

Lie on your front on the floor. Stretch your arms out in front of you and your legs behind you, then lift them slightly and hold for ten seconds. This can be particularly helpful when you feel restless, irritated or unfocused.

Shaking

Many animals naturally shake to release stress after danger has passed. Gently shaking out your arms, legs or whole body can help release built-up tension and reset your energy levels.

5 Techniques to use *in* the exam room

Hand massage

This is simple, discreet and can be done anywhere. Use the thumb of one hand to gently press and massage the palm of the other. Move slowly and notice the pressure. This can be very soothing and helps release tension.

Palm push

Press your palms firmly together and hold for five to ten seconds, then release. This gives your body something physical to focus on and helps you feel grounded. Think of it as a mini, portable yoga pose.

Closing your eyes

Around 80% of sensory information enters through our eyes. Closing them briefly gives your brain a break from stimulation. Even a few seconds can help reduce feelings of overwhelm.

Mindful sighing

Breathe in through your mouth to a count of five, then let out a long, audible sigh. These controlled sighs can quickly reduce tension and reset your focus.

Bubble breath

Place one hand on your chest and one on your stomach. Breathe in through your nose and hold for five seconds. Then breathe out slowly through pursed lips, imagining you are blowing a bubble that you don't want to burst. Repeat until your breathing feels slower and more controlled.



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Not every technique will work for everyone. That's okay. The aim is to build a small "toolkit" of strategies you can use when stress starts to rise, helping you calm your body and mind so you can think more clearly and feel more in control.

Try some of these out during your mocks so you can learn which work for you.

You can use this page to make some notes on which techniques you have tried and how they helped.

Technique tried	When/where?	How did it help?	When would you use it again?



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Preparing well doesn't just help you learn the content – it also reassures your brain that you are in control. This lowers stress levels and helps you perform at your best.

Look after your body

Get enough sleep Aim for around **eight hours a night**. Research shows that sleeping for only six hours can significantly increase stress hormones, making it harder to concentrate, remember information and stay calm.

Eat and drink well Try to eat **regular, balanced meals** and **drink plenty of water**. Your brain needs fuel to function properly, and staying hydrated improves focus and memory.

Keep hydrated If you feel panicky or your mind goes blank, take a drink of water and **breathe slowly**. This can help calm your body and refocus your thinking.

Plan and prepare

Plan ahead Don't leave revision until the last minute. Create a **realistic revision timetable** and start early, updating it as needed. Include time to do things that make you feel happy, relaxed and get you moving – you deserve to look after yourself!

Create your space Find somewhere you can work comfortably, whether that's at home or at school.

Ask for help If you don't understand something, talk to a teacher, learning mentor, parent/carer or friend. Getting **support** early reduces stress later.



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Stress free revision

Avoid cramming Trying to do all your revision in one go increases stress and makes recall harder. **Short, regular revision sessions** are far more effective. Ensure you allow time for homework, having dinner, revising, and having some time to relax.

Revise for 45 minutes, and have 10 minutes to relax, and make a cup of tea or hot chocolate. Have 5 minutes to sort out what you need for your next 45 minutes of revision, and go again.

Don't do ANY more than 3 x 45 minute sessions, and make sure you don't just do one subject.

Balance work and rest Revision is important, but so is rest. Take breaks and make time for things you enjoy – music, exercise, friends, hobbies or relaxing activities.

Get started You don't have to feel motivated first. **Motivation often follows action.** Try working for just 10 minutes and see how you feel.

Visualise success Picture yourself walking into the exam calm and prepared. Imagine reading the questions clearly, recalling information and finishing feeling proud that you've done your best

For more hints and tips on how to revise go to the revision section of the school website: [Coombe Dean School - Revision Tips and Resources](#)



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How to Create a Revision Timetable

Prepare: List all the subjects that you need to do revision for.

Now rank them in order, with the first being the subject in which you need to do the most revision. Think about your target grades and current attainment to work this out. Discuss with teachers if you need to.

An example:

Subjects to revise for:		Rank order (most revision needed)
▶ Maths		1 st . Science
▶ English		2 nd . Maths
▶ Science		3 rd . Geography
▶ Geography		4 th . English
▶ RE		5 th . Business Studies
▶ Music		6 th . Music
▶ Business Studies		7 th . RE

Next steps: Decide which subjects you need to give most time to and create your timetable.

The student in the example above needs to make sure they spend more time revising subjects like Science, Maths and Geography.

Try colour-coding your subjects so that your timetable is easy to read and you can glance at it quickly and know what you're doing.

Make sure you put sessions in that allow you to relax and unwind. Try to find time to see friends and family and do the things that you enjoy.

Be realistic! For example: Don't plan to revise maths for 12 hours solid on a Saturday, because it won't happen and you won't benefit from it. Break the day up into manageable pieces and do spend hours trying to do the same thing – it won't help you.

Have your revision timetable somewhere where you will see it **every day**, so it acts as a reminder of what you need to do.

Put a copy on your phone or set alarms/reminders that will help you stick to your plan.



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Example Revision Timetable

Weekly Revision Timetable

Name: _____

Day	8:30 – 10:00	10:00 – 11:00	11:00 – 12:00	12:00 – 1:00	1:00 – 2:35	2:35 – 4:00 <small>(Revision / Intervention)</small>	4:00 – 5:00	5:00 – 6:00	6:00 – 7:00	7:00 – 8:00	8:00 – 9:00	9:00 – 10:00
Monday						English	RE	Break	Music	English	Relax	Relax
Tuesday						Science	Break	Break	Maths	Geography	Relax	Relax
Wednesday						Break	Geography	English	Break	Maths	Music	Relax
Thursday						Maths	Science	Break	Business Studies	Relax	Relax	Relax
Friday						Play football	Break	English	Break	Maths	Business Studies	Relax
Saturday	Science	Maths	Geography	Science	Football	Football	Football	Football	Relax	Relax	Relax	Relax
Sunday	Geography	Football	Football	Relax	Relax	Science	maths	Break	Geography	RE	Relax	relax

***Remember: make sure you give yourself breaks and allow time to relax and do the things you want to do and enjoy doing.

Template:

Day	8:30 – 10:00	10:00 – 11:00	11:00 – 12:00	12:00 – 1:00	1:00 – 2:30	2:30 – 3:10	3:15 – 4:15 <small>Period 6</small>	5:00 – 6:00	6:00 – 7:00	7:00 – 8:00	8:00 – 9:00	9:00 – 10:00
M												
T												
W												
Th												
F												
Sa												
Su												



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On the Day

- ✓ **Eat breakfast.**
- ✓ Know where your exam is and what time it starts. **Arrive early** to school so you are ready for your warm-up session and can make the most of the last minute support.
- ✓ **Bring everything you need**, including spare pens and pencils (prepare these the night before if possible).
- ✓ Drink some water before the exam and **take a bottle** in – as long as it is clear plastic.
- ✓ **Go to the toilet beforehand** so you are comfortable and don't need to get up and leave.
- ✓ If you feel anxious, **breathe slowly and deeply** while waiting. Focus on your breath to calm your body.
- ✓ **Read the instructions on the exam paper** carefully. Ask if anything is unclear.
- ✓ Read through the questions first and **plan your time**.
- ✓ If you get stuck, **move on and come back later**. Always write *something!*
- ✓ Leave time at the end to **check your answers**.

Remember

Preparing well, looking after yourself and using calming strategies gives you the best chance to show what you know.



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