

Readapt and Readjust: Back to the Classroom



Handling Exam Stress

A student's guide to readapting to offline school, preparing for in-person exams after a gap of two years and managing exam stress.



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Exams are learning moments. We need to approach each exam as an opportunity to acquire the skills of life. This guide is a useful initiative that would enable students to build insight, knowledge and tools to deal effectively with stress. Let's empower students with the skills that would guide them towards optimal performance and success.

**Dr. Samir Parikh, Director
Fortis National Mental Health Program,
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Exams are challenging for most students and their families even at the best of times. Being back at school after two years of a pandemic is bringing a range of both positive and difficult emotions – excitement and nervousness about being back, seeing friends and teachers again but with new rules about how to act. Being back also means coping with many changes at school and still doing well on tests and exams. This guide is intended at helping students to help feel a little more prepared and learn some tips on how to cope better.

**Pattie Gonsalves, Director,
It's Ok To Talk, Sangath**

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1.0 Introduction

Readjust and Readapt is a collaboration between Fortis National Mental Health Program, Sangath's It's Ok To Talk initiative, the 1M1B Foundation, and Instagram.

In March 2020, with the start of the pandemic, we all experienced changes in our daily lives. For students, the major adjustment was the transition to online school. School classrooms were replaced with home study tables and screen time replaced the daily interaction with friends and teachers.

Fast forward two years, and offline school and in-person exams are a reality once again. The time for a readjustment is now.

This guide will focus on providing you with practical tips to manage study and exam priorities, and learn strategies to cope with associated stressors. You will learn key study techniques and ways to improve your concentration as well as understand stress and why it happens. You will be introduced to relaxation strategies for short-term relief as well as important self-care practices to manage your mental health in the long-term.

2.0 How to put your best foot forward

Your schedule

Prioritise your tasks.

Make a list of all the tasks that you need to get done. Once you have made your list, categorize each task based on its importance and urgency. This will help you identify time wasters and prioritise things that are most important.

After prioritising your tasks and determining how much time each activity might take, you can create a daily and weekly calendar.

Ensure some flexibility in your schedule by planning out the next 3-4 days in more detail based on priorities and up-coming tasks.

Set a goal for each study session.

Set a specific goal for each study session. For example, 'review chapter 5 from the maths book and complete one practice test'.

Avoid procrastination by making a short to-do list. Make a list of tasks with a clear priority. Once you complete a task, strike it off the list. It is so satisfying!

Study breaks are an essential part of preparing your study schedule. Planning your breaks will make your study time more effective.



Time Management tips:

- Understand your priorities
- Create a schedule which works for you
- Don't forget to prioritise your sleep and physical activity
- Spending time with family and friends helps you to relax

Study tips

The environment

Set the right environment for your studies – study at a table which is well lit and not cluttered. Ensure that you have all your study materials ready.

Minimise distractions by letting your family know that you will be studying. Put aside your gadgets and mute your notifications.

Improve your memory

Study one subject at a time and make your own notes. Use mnemonics, flow charts, and graphics for better memory retention.

Did you know that colour helps us in memorising certain information by increasing our attentional level? Use your favourite colour highlighter for important information.

Visualising what you are learning can be helpful and improve recall. For example, if you are learning about the water cycle, make a mental image of water evaporating, becoming clouds, and then rainfall.

Did you know that learners will forget most of what they have learned within the first seven days? This is called the forgetting curve. Help improve your retention by revising your materials on days 1, 2, 7, 15, & 30.

Active study is more effective than just reading through your class notes. Revision, writing past papers, and self-evaluation will help reinforce the topics.

Discuss subjects and topics with your friends. Think about the connections between your subjects. When your mind is active, it will retain information better.

Take a break!

Study for a stretch of 45 minutes and then take a short break for 5-10 minutes.

How can you make your study breaks more effective? Here are some handy Do's and Don'ts

Do's	Dont's
Leave your study area – go for a short walk, get some fresh air. It will help re-energize you.	Avoid any digital devices as increased screentime can make you more fatigued.
Talk – have a light conversation with a loved one, spend some time together and indulge in a quick indoor game.	Avoid activities that you know will take too long. You can break your study momentum and getting back to it becomes more difficult.
Have a quick and healthy snack during your break.	Don't feel guilty for taking a break. There is nothing wrong with relaxing during your exam time. Relax and have fun!



Let's make learning fun

Gamify your studying – find fun ways to study like puzzles, flashcards, or quizzes. Engage the whole family in your study time using music or art to reinforce learning.

Role-playing is a fun interactive way to study together. You become the teacher and your study buddy is the student. Then switch roles. Teaching each other will help both of you to refresh your learning and tackle difficult concepts together.

Schedule regular self-evaluations at least once a week. Write your own test paper and attempt it in an exam-like environment. Use paper and pen and time and score yourself. Identify topics where you need more revision and build this into your schedule.

Improving your concentration during study time:

Sleep! Sleep deprivation can affect your concentration. Turn off all electronic devices an hour before bedtime. Make sure to get 7-8 hours of sleep a night. You will feel more energized to take on challenges and be less sleepy while studying.

Daily physical exercise can improve both your concentration and attention. Take a walk with friends, go for a jog, or indulge in some workout time.

Start your day with a proper breakfast and don't skip meals throughout the day.

Puzzle playing can help improve your concentration. Try games like Scrabble, memory games, puzzles, chess, crosswords, sudoku, etc.

Try this: take a newspaper page or any written passage and cross out all the letters 'e' that you find on that sheet. This game will improve your focus and attention span.

The day before the exam:

- Get a good night's sleep – no all-nighters!
- Eat a healthy diet. Avoid caffeine which will impact your sleep schedule.
- Engage in outdoor activity to get your mind and body working.
- Revise but no need to cram for the exam.
- Pack your school bag the night before – ensure a smooth morning by packing your required stationary the night before.



The day of the exam

- Think positively – ‘I am well prepared. I will do well’.
- No last-minute reading or cramming, you may just confuse yourself.
- Outside the exam hall, talk to your friends but not about the exam.
- Once inside the hall, set your table with everything you will need.
- Do a short relaxation or breathing routine. Close your eyes for a moment and visualise a positive exam experience.
- Read one question at a time. Be aware of the time and spend the right amount of time on each question based on the points assigned.
- If you don’t know, leave it blank and move on. You can come back later.
- Do not compare yourself to others and how they are taking the exam. Focus on yourself.
- Do not hurry, read through your answers as the time allows.



After the exam is over

- Don't worry about what you may have missed or could have written differently.
- Have a snack and spend time with your family.
- Relax, stretch, and have fun.
- Resume your studying when you feel ready to tackle the next subject.

Expert tip:

Experiencing nervousness before, during or even after an exam is common. If you experience it at any point, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths, hydrate yourself, and then go back to the problem at hand, being sure to break it down into several manageable chunks.



3.0 Stress Management

What is stress?

Stress is a term used to describe how the body and mind react to everyday challenges. "I am stressed" or "this is stressful" is our way of voicing the pressures of everyday situations or events.

In these situations, it is possible that our thinking turns to the unknown future or fear of failure.

These thoughts and emotions can have a physical impact on the body:

- Feeling tense
- Increased heart rate
- Shallow breathing
- Sweating and/or shaking
- Feeling too hot or too cold
- Stress can hamper our ability to focus and concentrate on the task at hand

Breathing techniques to relieve stress

Breathing exercises can help to slow down our bodies and minds to enable us to focus.

- Slow your breathing:
 - o Breathe in slowly through your nose for ~5 counts
 - o Place your hand on your stomach and feel it rising
 - o Hold your breath for a couple of seconds (don't over do it!)
 - o Slowly breathe out through your mouth for ~10 counts
- Think of a happy place:
 - o Close your eyes and breathe deeply and slowly
 - o Think about a place which makes you feel calm, happy, and rested

- o Continue to breathe in and out while visualising your happy place with all of the colours, sounds, and smells
- Relax your muscles:
 - o Focus on the muscles in your body which are tense
 - o Tighten them one at a time for a few seconds and then slowly release
 - o Work slowly across all the major muscle groups of your body from top to bottom
- Other techniques:
 - o A short yoga routine with asanas and stretching can relieve physical aches and provide a break from your studies
 - o Meditation, which combines slow breathing and visualisations, can calm your mind

Other stress busters

Change how you think about the situation

Think about the cause of your stress as something that is manageable versus something that is overwhelming you. Keep it in perspective by questioning, 'Will this matter one year from now?'. If not, you might be worrying more than you need to.

Remember how far you have come

Talk to yourself with kindness and empathy. Remind yourself, 'I am well prepared'. Instead of 'I am a failure', think 'I will be proud of myself for the efforts I have put in and what I have achieved, no matter the result'.

Distraction

Distract yourself from your stress with a different activity. Try a walk with a friend, enjoy nature, listen to your favourite music, or engross yourself in a hobby or sport that you enjoy.

Journal

Keep a diary in which you write down your thoughts. Writing down your thoughts and feelings can give you more control over them. Writing down your worries can shift the focus away from replaying the stressful event in your mind.

Seek professional help

An important part of taking care of ourselves is to acknowledge when we need more support. There is no one rule for when to seek help but, if exam stress is impacting your daily life, even after you have done things to improve the situation, it may be the right time to consider professional help. There are two main professionals who deal with mental difficulties

- Psychiatrists are medical doctors who are authorized to prescribe medication as treatment.
- Psychologists or counsellors focus on talk therapy as treatment.

Both psychiatrists and psychologists can conduct an assessment of your mental health and help guide you on the options for treatments which will help in your situation.

Talk to a trusted adult or your school counsellor about what you are experiencing and ask for their assistance to get you the support you need.

Expert tip:

Asking for help is never shameful. In the most extreme cases, it can help save a life. When struggling, talk to friends, family, or your teacher about how you are feeling. Alternatively, don't be afraid to seek professional help and support.

4.0 Seeking Support

- Fortis 24x7 Stress Helpline (phone) | +91 83768 04102
- Fortis (email) | mentalhealth@fortishealthcare.com
- Fortis (FB page) | Fortis National Mental Health Program
- Sangath (phone) | +91 11-41198666

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