



# Dealing with Anxiety while Preparing for Examinations: Coping Strategies

## Introduction

The Government has made a decision to close all schools in Ireland and reschedule the Leaving Certificate Examination. This is to slow down the spread of the Covid-19 virus and keep as many people as possible safe and well. Leaving Certificate students are all in a period of adjustment and have had to adapt and change in the face of these significant challenges.

While many Leaving Certificate students are coping well with the adjustment needed, some may find it stressful and anxiety provoking at times. Everyone responds to stress and anxiety in different ways and each person will have their own unique coping mechanisms.

During this time it is especially important that you pay attention to and take proactive steps to promote your own wellbeing and self-care. Try to reduce stress by following the guidance of wellbeing promotion Try to reduce stress by following the [guidance of wellbeing promotion](#) but if you do become anxious the following information may be helpful.

## What is Anxiety?

Stress is a temporary response to feeling under pressure. A small amount of stress can be positive as it can help you cope with tense or challenging situations. It can also make you more alert and help you to perform better. Stress can become a problem when you are feeling worried or anxious a lot of the time. Anxiety can be a normal emotional response to a stressful situation. All young people feel anxious at times and it is very common among students in school and at examination times. Anxiety affects people in different ways.

## Symptoms of Anxiety

The physical signs of anxiety can be worrying and can lead to further anxiety.

You may feel emotionally overwhelmed, irritable and wound up. You can also feel anxious or fearful and lacking in self-esteem.

You may have difficulty concentrating and in making decisions. You may also experience racing thoughts and constant worrying.



## How to manage anxiety

Remember, feeling anxious at this time is normal but there are things you can do that can help manage your anxiety including:

- sleeping well,
- eating well
- getting exercise
- Talking to a friend or family member
- avoiding stimulants,

These are some strategies that you may find helpful if you are feeling stressed:

- **Talk** to your friends and family about how you are feeling.
- **Get good quality sleep.** 8 to 12 hours sleep is recommended for students. Leave your phone/laptop outside the bedroom; avoid caffeine and sugar before sleeping; limit lie-ins to weekends. See a useful links on sleep [here](#).
- **Have a healthy diet.** What you eat or drink can impact on how you feel. Avoid caffeine and energy drinks as they can make you feel more anxious. Avoid high sugar content foods as you may experience a sugar crash. Instead, aim to eat at least 5 pieces of fruit and vegetables a day and maintain a balanced diet. See [here](#) for useful information on a healthy diet.
- **Keep active.** Exercising will help you to release tension. It helps to clear your thoughts and to be calm when dealing with your problems. It will also help you sleep better. See good suggestions on physical activity [here](#).
- **Avoid smoking, drinking or taking drugs.** These are often used as coping mechanisms for anxiety but they can, in fact, make it worse.
- **Plan** your days and your time. Routines and schedules are the key to getting through difficult times in our lives. Structuring your days will help you feel secure and reassured. Be sure to include basic daily activities such as eating and sleeping, physical activities, household activities, social activities and enjoyable activities, as well as school work/study.

## Things you can do:

These are some things that you may find helpful if you are feeling stressed:

If you are still feeling anxious there are further strategies which may help. Remember there is no single technique to manage anxiety but there are a number of things that you can do to reduce it.



## 1. Identify the Triggers

Try to identify the triggers for your anxiety and then try to identify what helps with the feelings. Keep a log of the following:

- *When and where do you feel anxious?*
- *What makes the feelings worse?*
- *What helps reduce the feelings?*

## 2. Positive Self-Talk

As we go about our day, we say things to ourselves in our heads about the things that we or others do. This is called self-talk. If you are experiencing anxiety it is likely that you are engaging in negative self-talk. When we are anxious we engage in faulty and irrational thinking which affects the way we feel and behave.

- Step 1 Write down your thoughts to identify your negative thoughts.
- Step 2: Challenge these negative thoughts by asking “Is this really true?” or “Is it helpful to be thinking like this?”
- Step 3: Replace these negative thoughts with positive, more reassuring ones. ‘The Thoughts Log’ on the final page of this resource may be helpful with this. Remember we can choose to say positive, helpful things to ourselves.

Examples of some positive thoughts:

- I can try my best effort instead of giving up
- I don’t have to be perfect. I can just try my best
- I have managed exams before, I know I can do it again

## 3. Relaxation Techniques

There are lots of relaxation techniques and different things that work for different people. Practicing relaxation creates the opposite effects to stress and anxiety. It lowers the heart rate, reduces blood pressure and the sweat gland. By trying some different techniques you can find what works for you. See NEPS [Relaxation techniques](#) (text), NEPS [Relaxation techniques](#) (podcast) and [Government information on Covid-19](#).

- **Yoga**
- **Mindfulness**
- **Deep Breathing**
- **Meditation**
- **Muscular Relaxation**
- **Visualisation**



## - Body Focus

### 4. Distraction

It may help to take your mind off things by distracting yourself.

- Focus on what is going on around you – for example if you are out walking and feeling anxious, count how many blue cars or people wearing red you see etc.
- Keep active - Go for walks, do exercises at home, cycle.
- Find ways to engage your mind e.g. spell words, count backwards, say the words of a song, read a book or try a puzzle

### 5. Take Control of your Worries

Remind yourself that although worrying is normal, it won't help. Instead of spending your time worrying, take 10 minutes to write down everything you are worried about. Your worries will seem less scary when they are written down and you won't have to think about them for a while. If you start worrying again, check if what you are worrying about is already written down. If it is not, jot it down. Alternatively if a worry comes into your mind, don't fight it, rather

- Notice it,
- Name it *I am worrying about \_\_\_\_\_*
- Let it go.

By doing this you are refusing to give power to your worries. You need to practice this.

### 6. Problem-Solving

This can help to reduce worries and alleviate anxiety

1. Write down what the problem is.
2. Think of all the possible solutions to the problem.
3. Look at the pros and cons of each solution.
4. Pick the solution that is best and try it.
5. After implementing it, ask yourself 'Did it work'?
6. If it did not, move on to the next solution.

### 7. Where You Can Get Support

If anxiety is impacting on your day-to-day life, you may need short term extra support.

The HSE also have an [online programme](#) that gives lots of useful information and strategies to deal with stress. You may also find useful resources on the [Spunout](#) or [Jigsaw](#) websites.



### **Talk to your friends and family**

#### **And/ Or**

Talk to your GP who can support you or refer you on for further help and support

#### **And/ Or**

Download a Mindfulness and/or Relaxation App.

**Useful links for Relaxation include :**

NEPS [Relaxation techniques](#) (text)

NEPS [Relaxation techniques](#) (podcast)

#### **And/ Or**

For list of services providing supports for young adults, see [Supports for younger people](#)



## Thoughts Log

When we are anxious we can engage in faulty and irrational thinking which affects the way we feel and behave. Writing down your thoughts can be a starting point in identifying your negative thoughts. The next step is to challenge these negative thoughts by asking “Is this really true?” and the last step is to replace these negative thoughts with positive, more reassuring ones.

NEGATIVE THOUGHT	?	POSITIVE THOUGHT
	?	
	?	
	?	
	?	