

# Malmesbury School

## Coping with exams

### WELCOME

The Year 11 GCSE and Year 13 exams are approaching and it won't be long until you leave school to go on study leave. Revision and exams can be a daunting prospect and during this time it's really important to look after yourself and your wellbeing. We've put together this guide to give you some useful advice on how to cope during the weeks ahead and get the most out of your time left in school.

We hope you find it useful.

*Kasia, Emmie and Claire, School Counsellors*

### COPING STRATEGIES

**Taking time out** to relax and unwind is as important as the revision itself—ensure that you **reward yourself** with something positive after each revision session—this could be watching an episode of your favourite boxset, seeing friends, having a bath, going to the gym or getting out in the fresh air. Try to challenge negative thoughts that might tell you to work more—if you've covered the work that you set yourself, it's crucial you praise and reward yourself for it.

**Making lists** can be a really useful way of keeping track of what you want to get done that day—ensure you keep it realistic though—the last thing you want to do is set yourself too many tasks for one day as that may feel like you have not been successful. Keep your list short with achievable goals—and remember to reward yourself when you have got through what you intended.

**Talk** to friends and family about how you are feeling—if you feel yourself getting stressed or worried, talking to others and getting their perspective on things can really help. Often hearing from a friend or family member that they know what it's like or that they can see you're working hard can give you a boost to keep going.

**Breaking revision and exam timetables into chunks** can make the days seem much more manageable. Challenge any thoughts where you catastrophise 'I'll never learn/get through all of this' - the only thing this will achieve is causing you to feel overwhelmed. Think about what you can revise in the next hour or how you will feel when the exam is over instead, and then praise yourself when you get to that point.

**Trust your brain and your capabilities!** Remember you have been gradually building your knowledge in these subjects for a number of years now—trust that the foundation of what you know is in there somewhere and remember that good revision will help lift it to the surface. It's not too late to start revising well now if you've been putting it off due to worry.

### INSIDE

<b>Coping Strategies</b> .....	1
<b>Breathing</b> .....	2
<b>Useful Websites</b> .....	3
<b>Staying Healthy</b> .....	3
<b>Relaxation &amp; Mindfulness</b> ....	4
<b>Mindfulness Exercise</b> .....	4
<b>Magic 5 a Day</b> .....	5
<b>Positive Self-Talk</b> .....	5
<b>Past Student Advice</b> .....	6





## COPING STRATEGIES CONTINUED

**Remember it's normal to feel scared** that it's too late to revise or that you don't know enough. Remind yourself it's never too late—cracking on with revision today will allow you to feel more in control of the situation—the first step is the hardest but before you know it you'll be in full revision mode.



**Try to remind yourself** that this stage of your life is a stepping stone on to the next and that there are many options for you beyond these exams. Not doing as well as you had hoped does not mean you will not have the life you want—it may just be a little different to how you initially imagined it. Life is a series of opportunities and challenges—which ones you accept and how positively you face them is up to you.

*“Good breathing can help us find a sense of calm and help us relax, even in the most stressful situations.”*

### USEFUL WEBSITES

The following websites provide lots of useful advice about exam stress and looking after your mental health:

[www.studentminds.org.uk](http://www.studentminds.org.uk)

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

[www.thestudentroom.co.uk](http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk)

[www.mind.org](http://www.mind.org)

### GET SUPPORT

If you're struggling and need advice or someone to talk to, there are always people in school who are there to help you:

- Tutor
- Subject teachers
- Head of Year
- Pastoral Leaders
- Student Services
- School Counsellors

## BREATHING

Believe it or not, good wellbeing starts with simply breathing. Good breathing can help us find a sense of calm and help us relax, even in the most stressful situations.

Below is a really useful breathing technique which you can use any time, but which can be especially useful just before—and even during—an exam, as well as during revision.

Practice is the key with breathing exercises—the more you practice connecting your breath with a calm state of mind when you're NOT feeling stressed, the more naturally you will be able to use it when you are.

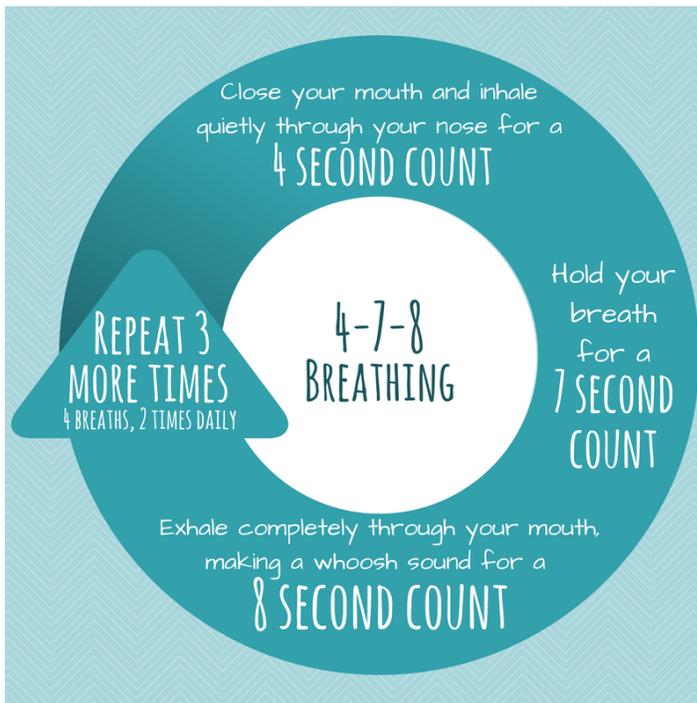
### The Science

When we are stressed, our breathing becomes quicker as stress hormones affect our respiratory and cardiovascular systems. Our body's stress response tries to distribute oxygen rich blood around our bodies. Pair this faster breathing with an increased heart rate, feeling lightheaded and a nervous tummy and we have a good recipe for stress.

Breathing exercises can help slow down our breathing whilst still delivering that good oxygen rich blood to where it needs to go. Slower breathing + positive thinking = slower heart rate and ultimately, feeling more in control. This process of slowing everything down in turn allows us to think more rationally and calmly, aids concentration and focus and helps us perform better—now that sounds like a recipe for exam success!

### Breathing & Relaxation Exercise—The 4-7-8 Method

This method is called a 'Relaxing Breath' exercise and was developed specifically to help us calm when stressed—it acts as a natural tranquiliser for the nervous system but unlike medication used for calming, which lose their effectiveness over time, this breathing exercise builds power and effectiveness the more you practice and use it.



4-7-8 simple breathing technique for relaxation

## BREATHING CONTINUED

### Best of all this technique is:

- Quick
- Simple
- You need no equipment
- You can do it anywhere

### Getting started

- Sit comfortably but with a straight back.
- Place the tip of your tongue against the ridge of tissue just behind your upper front teeth, and keep it there throughout the whole exercise.
- Exhale through your mouth around your tongue; try pursing your lips a little if this feels a bit strange.

### Steps

- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound.
- Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of 4
- Hold your breath for a count of 7
- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of 8
- This is all one breath. Now inhale again and repeat the cycle

## STAYING HEALTHY

Your mental and physical health is extremely important. Whilst we want you to take your GCSE studies seriously, it is also vital that you find a healthy balance and remember to make time to relax and look after yourself. Here are some things to remember about key areas of your wellbeing:

### Exercise

As little as 10 or 20 minutes a day spent doing moderate physical activity can have a positive impact on your mental health. Exercise releases 'feel good' hormones, which can help overcome a low mood. It can also distract you from unwanted thoughts or worries, and is an excellent way of coping with stress.

### Balanced Diet

It's very important to eat properly to remain healthy. The right foods can help your concentration for studying and help you feel well generally. It's important to give your body and mind fuel before an exam. Porridge, cereal bars, bananas, eggs, are all good choices the morning before an exam.

### Sleep

If you're tired your worries and stress levels can get out of hand. If you've been finding it difficult to get to sleep, try cutting down on stimulants including tea, coffee, energy drinks and screen-time. Some people feel very stressed about not getting enough sleep. Remember that it is normal to struggle to sleep before something you're worried about, e.g. exams.

### Rest & Relaxation

Balance is the key. It's just as important to rest and relax as it is to revise. Take time out to do the things you enjoy and to spend time with your friends and family. This will not only relax you but re-energise you for your next study session.

## RESOURCES FOR RELAXATION

Calm App



Guided Mind App



Headspace: Guided Meditation App



Puremind: Meditation & Sounds



YouTube



Apps are available on iPhone/Android. Although they require a subscription to access the full range, there are some really valuable free meditation/relaxation scripts you can access.

## BREATHING CONTINUED

### How important are the numbers?

The total time you spend on each phase is not so important but the 4:7:8 ratio *is* important.

If you struggle holding your breath you can speed up the exercise but ensure you keep the ratio of 4:7:8 for the three phases. The more you practice, the more you will get used to it and can work on slowing it down and inhaling and exhaling more deeply.

### When should I use it?

Practice at least twice a day. Morning and evening would be useful, to help both start your day with a calm, clear and positive mindset and to end your day in a calm, restful state ready for sleep.

As you increase your practice, you can use it whilst revising (remember, being in a relaxed state aids concentration and focus) as this will help your brain associate revision with being calm.

On the morning of exams increase the number of times you practice it and just before you enter the exam room—again remember the more relaxed your body is, the more calm your brain will be and the more you will be able to focus and recall information.



## RELAXATION, MINDFULNESS & THE SENSES

There are lots of breathing, relaxation and mindfulness resources that you can explore online—find a method that works well for you and practice each day.

Some people find listening to a scripted relaxation best—having a voice talking you through a muscle relaxation exercise or a calming visualisation can be really helpful.

Others prefer listening to some calm music whilst they breathe and reflect on positive thoughts.

### **Ground yourself in the present by counting:**

**5 things you can see**

**4 things you can touch or feel**

**3 things you can hear**

**2 things you can smell**

**1 thing you can taste**

**Breathe slowly and deeply throughout.**

## A SIMPLE MINDFULNESS EXERCISE

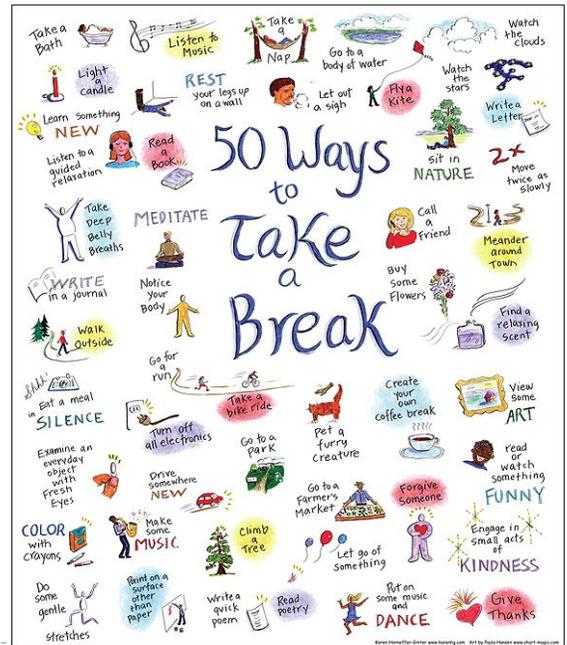
Lie or sit quietly and make yourself comfortable. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths then visualise a place where you feel happy, calm and safe. It can be a fictional place or somewhere you have visited.

Reflect on your senses and imagine everything around you. You might be lying on a boat in the middle of a beautiful ocean feeling the movement of the boat rocking you into a calm state, or sitting on a beach listening to the sea and breathing in positive thoughts with each wave, or walking in a beautiful garden feeling the lush grass beneath your bare feet and smelling the gorgeous scent of the flowers while you imagine your stress floating away.

Wherever you go, allocate some time each day to 'visit' your special place. Remind yourself that nobody else can be in this place (unless you want them to be) and you have no worries, only positive feelings while you're there. Each time you practice this mindfulness exercise, try to notice something new to build on your visualisation further.

# MAGIC 5 A DAY FOR MENTAL HEALTH

- Mindfulness** - be in the moment, don't worry about the past/future
- Activity** - gym, sports, gardening, books etc
- Giving** - volunteering, doing things for others, listening to a friend
- Interests** - photography, art, hobbies
- Connected** - friends, family, talking, being with others



*“Positive self-talk is a coping strategy which involves breaking the vicious circle where negative thoughts lead to stress and anxiety.”*

## POSITIVE SELF-TALK

Worrying thoughts can make us feel physically anxious (heart-racing, muscle tension etc.), which then leads to us worrying more ('Here we go again, I'm going to panic'). A vicious circle soon gets established, running faster and faster under its own momentum. Positive self-talk is a coping strategy which involves breaking this vicious circle, where negative thoughts lead to increased symptoms. Practice using the following statements both before, during and after your revision/exams.

### Preparation

- “It's not going to be as bad as I think.”
- “It won't last long & I can cope with it.”
- “I am getting better & need to do this to build my confidence.”
- “If I do get bad feelings, I know they won't last long & I can cope with them.”
- “It's better to go and do the exam than not to go. Worry doesn't help.”
- “I can do this.”
- “I am ready.”
- “I can breathe and relax.”

### Coping

- “Concentrate on what is going on.”
- “I can tolerate anxiety; I've managed it many times before.”
- “Remember to relax and think positively.”
- “Concentrate on what I have to do.”
- “I know I am going to be OK.”
- “The feelings are unpleasant but not harmful or dangerous.”
- “One step at a time.”
- “The feelings *always* pass away.”

### Praise/Review

- “I did it!”
- “I can be pleased with the progress I am making.”
- “I achieved that; I'm getting better”.
- “I coped with that.”
- “I did that well.”
- “If I keep this up I'm going to get really good at this.”
- “I handled that; it should get easier”.



## AND LASTLY...

### Celebrate!

Plan something fun to mark the end of your GCSE exams. Your results will come, and you may be pleasantly surprised or slightly disappointed—but don't worry—there will be people on hand to help you understand your results and figure out the next steps.

While you're waiting, enjoy some much needed time off and be proud of all your hard work.

## PAST STUDENT ADVICE

"Before you know it, the exams will be over and you'll have your results. Make use of the teachers, they are there to help." (E, Yr12)

"Make time to continue doing the things that make you happy and relaxed e.g. music, sports, seeing your friends." (J, Yr13)

"Don't overwork yourself, you'll just end up burnt out. Regular breaks are as important as the revision itself." (A, Yr 12)

"Try not to leave everything to the last minute. May as well get the stress over and done with." (K, Yr12)



"Get outside; a bit of fresh air can make a really big difference." (C, Yr13)

"I found revising 'little and often' much more effective than trying to cram before a test or exam. It also makes revision much less stressful." (C, Yr12)

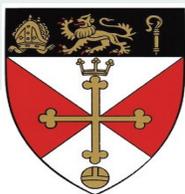
"As long as you do your best and try your hardest, there isn't anything more anyone can ask of you." (R, Yr13)

"Revision is temporary, but the results are permanent." (A, Yr13)

"Don't let exams consume you, you are more important than a number on a piece of paper." (C, Yr12)

"Small but often amounts of revision is better than cramming everything in the night before. Even if it's an hour a night, at least you'll feel prepared." (M, Yr12)

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## Good Luck!