



Managing Stress and Anxiety

Introduction

You have been through a period of adjustment and significant change due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of you have coped well with the changes to the Leaving Certificate and the introduction of the calculated grades system. Some of you have found it difficult stressful at times. We are now in yet another challenging stage of this process as calculated grades are issued. It is normal if you are feeling worried and stressed. Each one of you will respond to this challenging situation in different ways, each of you will have your 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 [tips to managing your wellbeing](#) but if you do become anxious the following information may be helpful.

What is stress and anxiety?

Stress is a temporary response to feeling under pressure. It can occur when we have to adjust to change. 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. Anxiety affects people in different ways. Anxiety is a response to a vague or unclear sense of danger such as, 'something bad is going to happen', 'I don't know what to expect and I won't be able to cope'. Sometimes it can be hard to pin point what makes us anxious.

What does stress and anxiety feel like?

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.

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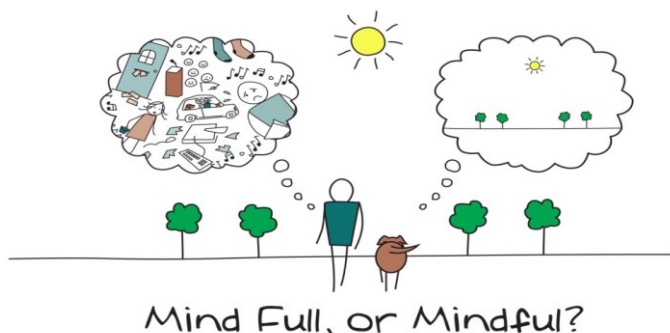
Remember, feeling stressed is normal but there are things you can do that can help manage including:

- sleeping well
- eating well
- getting exercise
- talking to a friend or family member
- avoiding stimulants (e. g caffeine; sugar; nicotine; alcohol; drugs)



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.** A good night sleep is recommended. Leave your phone outside the bedroom; avoid caffeine and sugar before sleeping; limit lie-ins. 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,.
- **Gratitude.** Remember that lots of people only show the 'best bits' of their lives on social media so it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that 'everyone is happier than me'. Remember that nobody feels happy all of the time. One tip that might help you feel more positive is to write down three things you are grateful for every evening before you go to bed. These can be very small things. This can be difficult at first, but with practice gets easier.
- **Mindfulness.** Mindfulness is about paying attention to the present, moment by moment. You can do it any time of the day and with any activity, for example; mindful eating, mindful walking, mindful washing of hands etc. Regular practice of mindfulness has been shown to reduce feelings of stress and anxiety. If your mind is too 'full', being mindful can really help!





More helpful strategies:

If you continue to feel stressed and anxious the following 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 about the things that we or others do. This is called self-talk. When we are anxious the self-talk is more negative, which makes us feel and behave worse. Notice your self-talk. If it is negative try to practice using positive, hopeful and calming self-talk statements, such as:



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. Consider the following:



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

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](#).

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

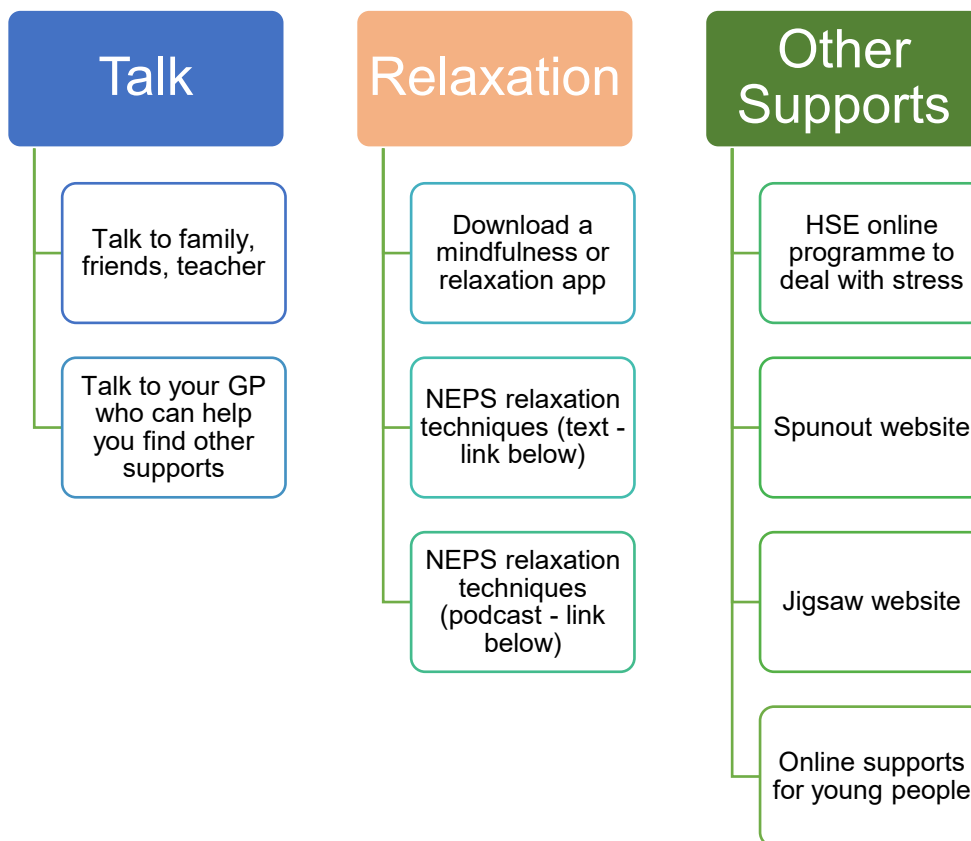
This can help to reduce worries and alleviate anxiety

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 help?

If anxiety is affecting your day-to-day life, you are not alone. There is help.



Links to resources

HSE stress control programme: <https://stresscontrol.org/>

HSE supports [here](#)