

Stress Management during Exams

~ Sujata C

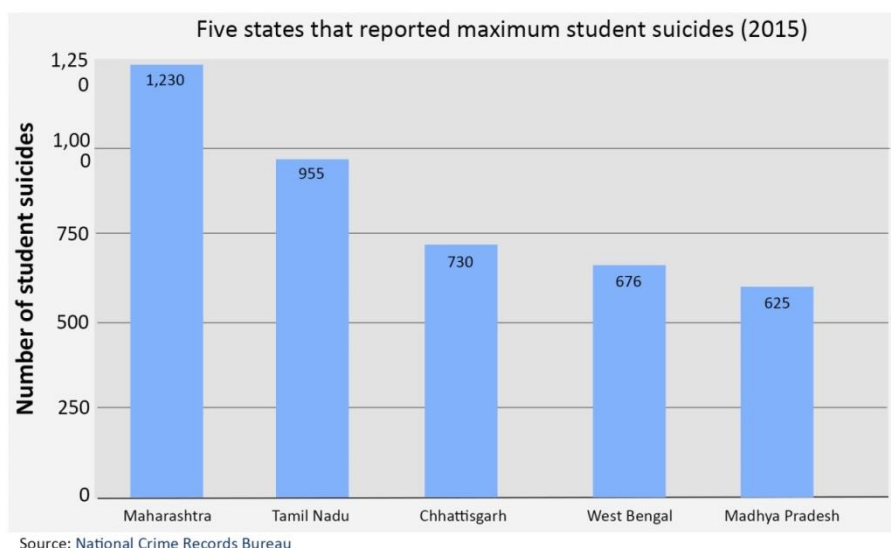


Spring is in the air but the butterflies are in the stomach. March was a dreaded month for most students as it was the time of examinations. After a gap of almost seven years, CBSE students sat for their Class X board exam this year. This is also the time of the year when most students prepare for various competitive exams held around this time. Despite rigorous preparation, high expectations from parents and teachers as well as peer-pressure take a heavy toll on life. After all, it is a decisive time in their lives. In fact, exam related stress is one of the factors that pushes youngsters to the edge and compels them to take the extreme step.

Special schools training students to crack the exams are ruthless and put a lot of pressure. The hours are gruelling as students have to put in 12-13 hours of study every day. These are at times followed by weekend tests, and those who do not fare well face humiliation with their names being displayed on the notice boards for all to see. This practice of shaming students for poor academic achievement, instead of giving them mental boost, is highly condemnable. An ancient saying goes that it is better to spend a day with a good teacher than a thousand with a poor one. It is the responsibility of teachers and parents to help students handle

pressure. During this time, the teacher is more of a counsellor and guide to help their students.

India has one of the world's highest suicide rates among people aged between 15 and 29; and each year, 30-40 people every 100,000 Indians in this age group kill themselves. This accounts for about a third of all suicides in the country. Total suicides in 2015 were 133623, of which 1360 were students. Failure in exams is the leading cause of suicides in children below 18 years.



Why does success in board exams matter so much?



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It is believed that the future course of life of every examinee depends on this. College admissions come close on the heels of board exams, and board results are crucial determiners whether a person makes the cut-off for a good college or a college of one's choice. Ever increasing cut-offs by prestigious colleges, which could be as high as 95%, only gives out the message to every average student that their future is at best bleak. This results in anxiety and stress.

Exam stress can manifest in different ways. If it is not tackled at the right time, it can lead to other undesirable things such as substance abuse. There is research to prove that high level of school stress in teenagers pushes them towards drugs, alcohol or cigarettes. There can be many causes that lead to stress – school related problems, teacher-student equation, overload of studies, etc. Some students may suffer burnout before the exams and become unfit to write them. A study from the British Psychological Society stated that 30% students in Britain turn to alcohol to ease the stress of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams. Indian students are not too far from this same truth.

Warning signs to watch out for

Here are some of the symptoms students may display:

- A sense of despair, anxiety or worry
- Black out during exams
- Stress for lack of sleep
- No clear focus to think or speak coherently
- Migraine, headache or fatigue
- Increased heart rate, shortness of breath

These or any other underlying ailments could affect a student and may get magnified if not taken care and given the required support.



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What can teachers do?

Teachers can guide students in a few things essential for taking an exam. This includes useful tips from their classroom experiences to help students in the following aspects:

How to manage time: Give practical tips on how to manage time. Time management is essential before and during an exam.

How to study: Explain the importance of pacing one's study. Studying in small manageable bits at frequent intervals is better than several hours of intense work at one go. Some students are better with reading out loud, while others prefer to study silently.

How to stay confident: Suggest small and easy exercises to boost confidence levels. Self-confidence is all about balance. It should not be too low or too high. Both low self-confidence and over-confidence are detrimental to success. It is not a pill that can be popped into the mouth. It comes with practice.

How to avoid peer pressure: Encourage students to try and do better than what they had done last time. Many students have joint study sessions. While it can be beneficial to some it could prove damaging to others. Each student is unique and has to carve out a path according to their ability.

How to use old exam papers: Go through previous years' question papers to demonstrate what to expect during exams. Examiners/paper setters follow a pattern while setting the paper, and going through them can familiarise students with the type of questions asked.



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How to concentrate: Give them tips on ways to improve concentration. Anxiety is the enemy of concentration. But again, a little anxiety is necessary to be able to learn well, say experts.

How to revise: Suggest all the options and let them figure out what works best. Some students write down what they have learnt. Others may be confident about retaining it in the mind. Sometimes conducting a mock exam helps them to get rid of the exam fears.

How to remember: Share some techniques of memory recall with students. Mnemonics and other visual techniques can help them learn and retain information. Sitting in the same place to study everyday also helps with memory.

How to answer questions in the exams: Give practical advice, so that time is used well and students do not waste time lingering over questions they are not able to answer. Doing objective type questions first is better than writing the essay answers.

There is hope that students will experience less pressure from 2019. In February this year the Minister of Education announced the decision to reduce the tenth class NCERT syllabus by half. This is because the load at present is more than the workload of undergraduate syllabus for arts and commerce streams. The other good news is that CBSE wants to implement a more balanced curriculum that encourages life skills and experiential learning. The board has also invited suggestions from parents, teachers, academics, students and principals in school education. This is a first ever move to involve stakeholders in education in the decision-making.

Sujata C is a writer and editor with a portfolio of diversified writing categories like web content, articles, short stories for children, technical editing, etc. She has been a brand consultant and advisor for several companies and has worked with concerns like McCann Erickson, New Delhi; Foundations Advertising Services, New Delhi; Saatchi and Saatchi, Hyderabad; etc.

Lesson Plan: Stress Management during Exams

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There are many ways a teacher can help their students in dealing with exam blues. Pay attention to each student in your class. Daily interaction helps to pick up any tell-tale signs of stress or depression that can be immediately attended to. Counsel the students about the food they eat and their daily routine before and during the exam. Help them to retain their composure during the stressful period. The following are certain tips that can be discussed with students to help them keep their stress levels at bay.

Diet

Eat well, sleep well, exercise a bit, take regular breaks while studying, meditate, and stay away from artificial energy drinks. Stick to fresh homemade food to prevent any stomach infection. Eat plenty of fruits and nuts, avoid fried foods, and aerated drinks.

Drink at least eight glasses of water every day. It is important to stay well hydrated. Beverages like tea and coffee in moderate amount is good. Green tea can be consumed as it is full of antioxidants. Studying



burns up calories faster as the brain is undergoing rigorous exercise. Eating at intervals of three hours is essential. Eat the last meal at least three hours before going to bed.

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Sleep

Many students try to cram everything the night before the exam. While it may work for some, it is not exactly a healthy practice as it leads to sleep deprivation the next day and the risk of becoming sleepy during the exam. Quality sleep is essential during exams. Light exercise every day helps. Follow good sleep hygiene. Short power naps are okay to have during the day as it can improve alertness and performance. Sometimes exam anxiety can lead to

insomnia. Avoid coffee or strenuous workout before bedtime. Rather, a light walk can improve sleep. Avoid fried and spicy food for dinner. A glass of warm milk might help with sleep.

Make sure the room is comfortable and quiet. Make arrangements to cut out external sounds as much as possible for a peaceful sleep. Mattress and pillows should be snug. Cut out all sources of bright light. Put away cell phones, shut down computers and switch off the television as the light from their



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screens make it difficult to fall asleep.

Think about using blackout curtains, eye shades, ear plugs, "white noise" machines, humidifiers, fans and other devices that can make the bedroom more relaxing. Resist the temptation to check social media at night. Electronic devices tend to make the brain active and alert which will keep away sleep.

Sports

A game or light sports activity in short bursts helps to release stress. It acts as a relaxant.

Yoga and meditation

They help to calm the mind, improve focus and concentration apart from exercising the muscles in the body.

Brain games

These help nurture intelligence and keep the mind sharp. They make an individual alert.

Music therapy

Different types of music have varied impact on the mind. Alpha music can help improve the cognitive functioning of the brain. Listen to Delta music to help with sleep. Raga Kalyani in Indian classical music is known to assist sleep.

Music in general will relax the mind and calm the nerves, which is important to stay composed before writing an exam.

Aromatherapy

Many aromatic oils have a calming effect on the body and mind. They are also useful stress busters. Experts say that the use of essential oils in aromatherapy can promote both relaxation and cognitive function at exam time. Rosemary, lemon and eucalyptus are good for helping in concentration, while lavender and sweet marjoram are relaxing. Stimulating oils can be used in the day and relaxing oils must be used in the night. Aroma oils also can help to improve memory. A scent

will trigger certain memories. So students can use a particular aroma suited to their needs during study and repeat it during exam time. This may trigger the memories and help in recall of that particular portion.



Ayurveda

It is considered the *Upaveda* of *Atharva Veda*, one of the four Vedas, the oldest recorded wisdom. It prescribes medicines based on the *Charaka Samhita* that details the mental prowess during learning into categories: *Grahaṇa* (grasping), *Dharana* (retention), *Viveka* (discrimination) and *Smṛiti* (memory or recollection). Ayurveda promotes plant medicines that enhance memory and grasping power. *Ashwagandha*, *brahmi*, *gotu kula*, *shankapushpi*, etc., are some herbs that support healthy memory, intelligence and concentration. Students may be advised to consult a doctor before taking these medicines. None of these are addictive and can be discontinued after the stressful period is over.

Homeo medicines

When stress becomes unbearable or a panic attack occurs parents may be at a loss how to calm down their wards. Biochemic phosphates in homeopathic medicines provide natural remedies for stress. Homeo medicines lay emphasis on treating the root cause of the problem, which is often at the mental level. The medicines are given after diagnosing the personality type of the patient. A visit to a homeo doctor may be advised.

Chinese medicines

Ginkgo biloba is an ancient tree species that is used in Chinese medicinal system to aid and assist memory.

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Weltschmerz (noun)



Meaning: A feeling of melancholy and world-weariness

Pronunciation: /'vɛltʃmɜrts/

Origin and additional information: The word originates from the German words *welt* (meaning 'world') and *schmerz* (meaning 'pain'). The term was coined by Jean Paul (pseudonym Johann Paul Friedrich Richter), a German romantic writer, in his novel **Selina** (1827) to denote the feeling experienced by someone who believes that physical reality can never satisfy what the mind wants. In other words, it is a state of mental depression or apathy suffered by witnessing the actual state of the world vis-a-vis the ideal state.

Word section: Combining the two German words, *weltschmerz* aptly captures the melancholy and pessimism that characterised the poets and writers of the Romantic era. They were a gloomy lot, unable or unwilling to come to terms with the changing realities, and perceived the worldly changes as a threat to their right to personal freedom. In German philosophy, it was distinguished from pessimism (the logical conclusion of cool, rational philosophical pondering), for unlike it *weltschmerz* was an emotional response. Jean Paul

used the word in **Selina** to describe Lord Byron's discontent and the sadness in life.

Wilhelm Alfred Braun reflects upon the nineteenth century German writers' notion about weltenschmerz in his **Types of Weltschmerz in German Poetry**:

Weltschmerz is essentially a symptom of a period of conflict, of transition. The powerful reaction which marks the 18th century—a reaction against all traditional intellectual authority, and a struggle for the emancipation of the individual—reached its high-water mark in Germany in the seventies.

However, by the end of that century, the concept evolved from being a personal emotion to one that reflected a broader zeitgeist (spirit of the age). According to Google Books' Ngram viewer¹, the use of the word *weltschmerz* experienced a sudden spike after the two world wars and later again in the 1970s². This was followed by the right-wing extremist attack during Oktoberfest of 1980; the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989; the economic crash of the 1990s.



Use of weltenschmerz over the last two centuries

Usage:

- i. *Having knocked about the world - and been knocked about by it - it's no wonder that he should show symptoms of a lingering Weltschmerz in later life.*

(Source: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/weltschmerz>)

¹ It charts the usage of words and phrases in books over time

² The 1968 student protests, the Baader-Meinhof terrorist attacks and the economic problems of the early 1970s.

- ii. *Beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco.*

~ **The Invisible Man** by Ralph Ellison

- iii. *The romantic suffering of Germany or of the world itself - the Germans call this mood Weltschmerz was a common theme of German poets like Heinrich Heine, Friedrich Rückert and many others in the 19th century.*

(Source: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/weltschmerz>)