

Under stress due to exams? Take five minutes off and read this article on how to handle the pressure

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It is said that moving house, losing a loved one or changing job are life's most stressful events - but there is no doubt that students, especially those studying for the Leaving Certificate, also experience a huge amount of pressure in the run-up to exam time. In many ways, this is understandable. The Leaving Certificate in particular has a considerable impact on a young person's life and career options, while the outcome of final-year university exams will also play a role in new graduates looking for that all-important first job.

This is not just speculation, but grounded in fact. Our organisation, which is the representative body for counsellors and psychotherapists in Ireland, carried out nationwide research into the area of stress among children and young adults (people aged under-24).

Our research found that 71% of under-24s had experienced some stress, while more tellingly, 29% or almost one-third of under-24s surveyed said that 'other factors', which include exam time pressure, outweighed other causes of stress, such as relationships (14% according to the IACP survey).

What's more worrying is that while some 120,000 students will sit their Junior and Leaving Certificate exams over the coming weeks, very few of them will seek any kind of professional help, with the IACP survey showing that that only one in seventeen (6%) of Irish people aged under-24 would seek professional help from a doctor or counsellor when experiencing personal problems or difficulties in their lives. Furthermore, only one in 14 (7%) of under-24s responded that they would tell no one about their problems.

This shows that there is a clear need for students who are under pressure to talk about their problems, especially in the run up to exams. As the survey's findings show, there appears to be reluctance among young people to talk about or discuss their problems or anxieties. Unfortunately, young people who have a tendency to be anxious are most affected around exam times and these pressures can bring underlying mental health issues to the surface.

While students have to sit exams themselves, there is no need for them to go through the stressful, pre-exam period on their own. It is an old saying that a problem shared is a problem halved and parents need to get involved.

Support and positivity is crucial at these times and parents can help young students to develop the necessary skills to deal with the pressures of exams. They also need to talk to students about their fears or uncertainty about the future, especially in light of the fact that so many young people are leaving the country to find work in other countries.

Apart from parental support, students should also reach out to friends, family members – like an older sibling or a cousin who has been through the exam cycle – as well as teachers, doctors or counsellors.

It's important for Junior and Leaving certificate students to stay calm and to think positively, but if they feel that they cannot cope or do not have the necessary support, they should seek professional advice. There is no shame in doing this – after all, if you have a physical health problem, you go to a doctor, so why not do the same if you have a mental health issue?

It's also important for students to put their exams into perspective. It's true that they will have a bearing on your future, but are exam grades really a measure of what you are worth? Some of the world's most successful and innovative businesspeople – Steve Jobs and Bill Gates are two shining examples – had unremarkable third-level experiences, while Albert Einstein's school days were full of 'must try harder' reports.

The other important thing to do is to be realistic and set goals that you can achieve as opposed to setting yourself impossible tasks - as chasing the unattainable will only put you under more pressure. Apart from getting support from those close to you, you should have a well-balanced diet as healthy eating improves memory and concentration; do some exercise, which will help to relieve stress and help you think more clearly and try to get eight hours' sleep every night, with an hour of relaxation each night. Despite being under exam pressure, it is also important to enjoy this period of your life. Exam time may be stressful, but compared to the world of work, it's still a relatively carefree existence.

To find out more about the IACP or to find a list of accredited counsellors or psychotherapists in your area, visit www.iacp.ie.