



Exam Anxiety - Staff Guidance

The majority of students suffer with exam anxiety to some degree. With the introduction of linear exams, anxiety levels are potentially going to increase. Add to that the pressure on School/College Staff to achieve good results and it is no surprise that the exam season is a highly stressful period!

Some students find this level of stress difficult to cope with, and it is proven to affect their performance in Exams (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-23958164>).

As staff, we have a vital role in helping students manage stress and anxiety. Our demeanour and language all play an important part in helping the students perform to the best of their ability.

- I want you to think of anything you want except blue monkeys.
- DO NOT THINK OF BLUE MONKEYS.
- What are you thinking about? BLUE MONKEYS!
- If blue monkeys hadn't been mentioned would you have thought of them?

This is the power of language. Think of BLUE MONKEYS as a negative thought. If it hadn't been mentioned you wouldn't have thought about it. It is vital that we use positive language around the students to help combat the negative thoughts that affect performance.

Some people, including parents, feel that we have to let the students know how bad their life would be if they fail and that is the only way to make them work harder. We are always warning children using negative language:

- ‘Careful you don’t fall off that wall!’
- ‘Mind you don’t hurt yourself!’
- ‘Maths isn’t your thing is it?’
- ‘You’re not going to pass if you don’t revise.’

This negative language can become entrenched in their thought process. Instead we could say:

- ‘I love how careful you are being walking along that wall!’
- ‘I love the way you are doing that with such care!’
- ‘Well done for working hard at Maths.’
- ‘Revision is going to help your grades and show us what you can really do.’

Which would you like said to you? There are numerous studies that show positivity improves performance. It doesn’t have to be such ‘flowery language’. Use your own style of positive language which can include humour. However, make sure it is the right humour i.e. not negative.

Negative thoughts lead to negative feelings which in turn lead to negative behaviour. The negative behaviour can lead to consequences that reinforce the initial negative thought. Continued negative thought processes reinforce anxiety/stress and can become debilitating. Common student thoughts about exams are:

- ‘Everyone will be so disappointed in me because I won’t get the grades.’
- ‘I am going to let the teachers and everybody down because I am useless.’
- ‘I will fail all my exams and I will end up homeless and jobless.’
- ‘I can never take them again so this is my only chance.’

Students suffering from high anxiety levels may have displayed some of the following symptoms:

- weight loss
- weight gain
- not sleeping
- falling asleep in lessons
- quick to anger

- no longer contributing to discussions
- withdrawn
- regular ‘melt downs’ before or during exams

How can you help?

DO NOT:

- Tell students the rest of their lives depend on these exams.
- Tell students they cannot retake these exams.
- Believe that a student will only perform if you give them a shock e.g. you know you are going to fail the exams.
- Tell a student they are going to fail.
- Tell them they will be the only failure in the class.
- Joke there are always vacancies for Big Issue Sellers/ Macdonald’s Workers.

DO:

- Use positive language statements.
- Discuss positive strategies for worst case scenarios, e.g. you can retake in 6th Form or look at alternative courses.
- Do provide a range of study/revision techniques, don’t presume all students will successfully use the one that worked for you.
- Tell them to try their best.
- Remind them there are always options.

Some staff may feel uncomfortable in using positive language. They may feel it is ‘wishy washy’ or ‘namby pamby’ or not ‘who they are’. The main point to take away from this is that negative language is destructive. Find your own positive language approach that you are comfortable with.

Good Luck!