

Quick Guide for School Staff

RECOGNISING AND RESPONDING TO EXAM ANXIETY

What is exam anxiety?

Exam anxiety is a form of performance anxiety that can cause real physical and emotional distress. It is not the same as ordinary pre-exam nerves: it can significantly affect a pupil's ability to attend school, sit exams, and engage with learning.

Physical signs to look out for:

- Stomach aches or nausea, particularly on exam days
- Headaches or dizziness
- Fatigue or difficulty sleeping
- Rapid heartbeat or shaking
- Sweating
- Pale or clammy skin (may be less visible on darker skin tones)
- Panic attacks

Patterns matter:

A one-off stomach ache is normal. But symptoms that coincide with exams, specific subjects, or revision periods – or that increase as the exam timetable progresses – may indicate exam-related anxiety.

Behavioural signs to look out for:

- Repeated visits to the first aid room with no apparent physical cause
- Withdrawal or reluctance to engage
- Irritability or unusual behaviour
- Avoidance of exams or specific lessons
- Difficulty concentrating or reporting that their "mind goes blank"

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How school staff can respond:

- ✓ Take symptoms seriously: the discomfort is real, even without a physical cause
- ✓ Create a calm, low-pressure environment
- ✓ Allow a short rest break, with the aim of supporting a return to class or the exam hall
- ✓ Ask open, gentle questions, for example: "Is there anything about today that feels particularly difficult?"
- ✓ Let the pupil know who they can speak to for support
- ✓ Avoid dismissing symptoms as "just nerves"
- ✓ Avoid putting pressure on the pupil to explain how they are feeling

When to escalate:

School staff are not expected to diagnose mental health conditions or perform mental health interventions, but they are required to ensure regular attendance for every child.

Not all exam anxiety will require referral, but some pupils may benefit from additional support:

- Symptoms are persistent, severe, or worsening across the exam period
- A pupil's anxiety is affecting their attendance or ability to sit exams
- There are signs of self-harm, low mood, or significant distress
- A pupil discloses they feel unsafe, or safeguarding concerns are present