



Managing Stress and Anxiety – A Guide for Students

It's been a long time since we have all been in school. Some of you may have taken part in online schooling and others may have found that a challenge and may be feeling a bit anxious about going back to school after the long break. We are all starting a new year and some of you may be starting in a new school. It takes time to adjust to these changes and get used to new routines in school. Here are some tips on how you can manage any stressful or anxious thoughts or feelings as you settle into your new school year.

What is stress and anxiety?

Stress occurs when we have to adjust to change, it is part of life. The change can be big or small, bad or good, such as being late for a bus, going on a first date, starting a new school year. Not all stress is bad, but it is how we respond to stress that affects the impact that it has on our lives. Anxiety is a response to a vague or unclear sense of danger such as 'something bad is about to happen' or 'I don't know what to expect and am sure I won't be able to cope'. It can be hard to pin-point what is making us feel anxious. Learning to manage stress and anxiety is good for our wellbeing.

What does stress and anxiety feel like?

Stress and anxiety can make you feel overwhelmed, irritable and wound up, fearful and bad about yourself. They can make your heartbeat or breathing get faster, your palms sweat, or make your knees shake. These physical signs can make you worry and feel more anxious. . Stress and anxiety can affect how we think, feel, and behave.

How do you react when you are stressed or anxious?

Notice your **thoughts**. Don't try to push away anxious thoughts as this will make them become stronger. Notice and acknowledge your anxious thoughts because they are a normal response to stressful situations. Did you know we can learn to manage our thoughts?

Notice your **body**. We can feel stress and anxiety in our body. Some people feel a pain in the tummy, or feel sick, some feel hot in the face or head, some feel their heart beating faster or feel sweaty. You may have a mix of these or different feelings. Did you know that this is our body's way of telling us we need to calm down?



Notice how you **behave** in a stressful situation. Do you attack, use sharp comments, avoid or freeze? Try to notice how you react. Did you know, while these are common ways to react to anxiety, they don't always work?

Are you one of these?



Do I attack
like a shark ?



Do I make
sharp
comments?



Do I zoom
away like in a
speeding car



Do I retreat
into my own
shell?

Adapted from Karen Treisman (2019)

Here are some tips to manage stress and anxiety

➤ **It's good to talk!**

It really does help to talk. Choose somebody you trust and tell them how you are feeling. Talking about your feelings can make the feelings less strong.

➤ **Name it to Tame it**

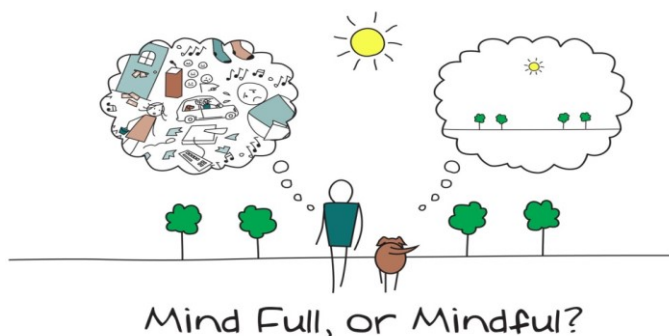
Try to name your feelings and this will give them less power. Feelings come and go, you will not feel like this for ever.

➤ **Use your Breath**

One example of using your breath is hand breathing. Using your index finger, trace along each finger of the other hand. As you trace up along the finger, take a deep in-breath, as you trace down along the finger, take a deep out-breath. See how you feel after these five deep, slow breaths. Have you heard of any other breathing exercises?

➤ **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. Your teacher can give you other examples. If your mind is too 'full', being mindful can really help!



➤ **Managing stressful thoughts.**

Leaves floating on a stream is one activity you might try. Sit in a quiet room and take a few minutes to do this exercise. Close your eyes and accept each thought that floats into your mind without judgement. Imagine placing each thought on a leaf and then imagine that leaf floating gently away on a stream.

There are lots of smartphone applications with guided mindfulness exercises.

➤ **Do you know your triggers?**

It can be helpful to make the link between our thoughts, feelings and actions when we are feeling anxious or stressed. This helps us learn about our personal triggers. Triggers are things or situations that make us stressed or anxious. Triggers are unique to each individual.



➤ **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:



➤ **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 us 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.

➤ **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 occupy your mind, for example, spell words, count backwards, say the words of a song, read a book or try a puzzle

➤ **Self-Care**

Try to get a good night's sleep, eat well, and do some exercise. Stay in touch with family and friends. Don't forget to relax!

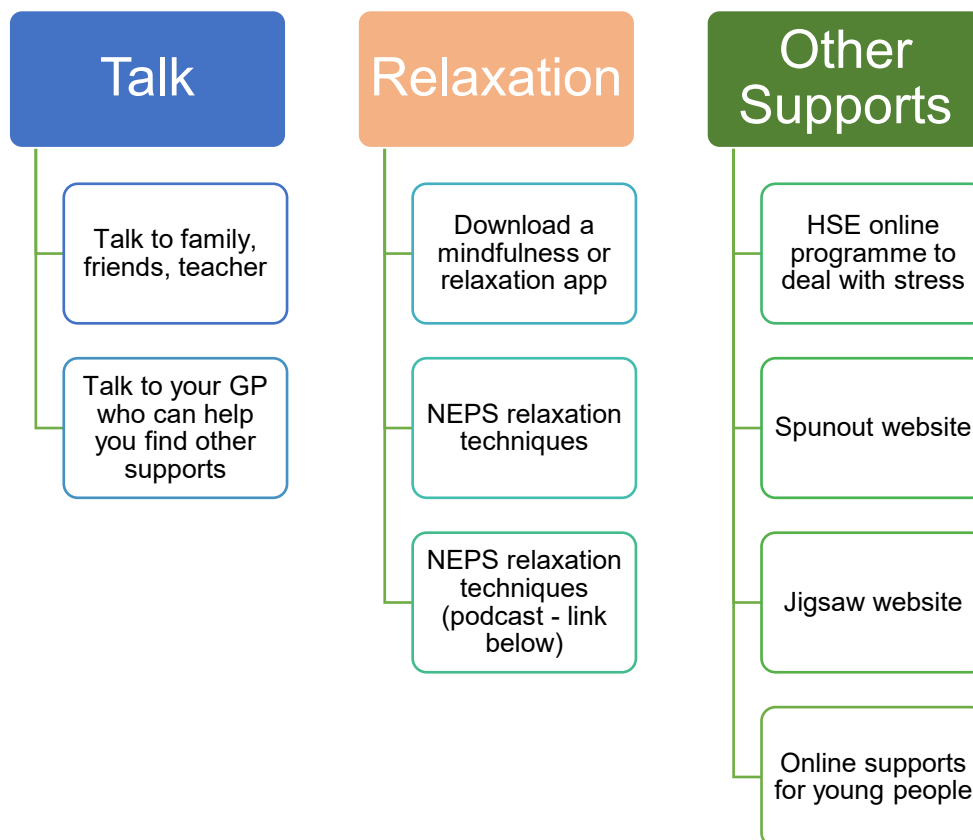
➤ **Do something kind for someone else**

It really does make us feel better to do something nice for someone, make a cup of tea, say thank you, smile!



Where you can get help?

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



Links to resources

[NEPS relaxation techniques](#) (text)

[NEPS relaxation techniques](#) (podcast)

[HSE stress control programme:](#)

[HSE mental health supports and your mental health.ie](#)