

How to do matric with less stress and more success

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Across the country, around a million South African families have a young loved one preparing to write their final school exams. It's a time loaded with significance and charged with hope and excitement, fear and anxiety. Teens feel like they are facing the high-stakes endurance challenge of their lives, and many parents are uncertain about how best to support them. Together, how they navigate the matric experience will impact on stress and performance levels.



Ziyanda Khumalo, a Student Support and Development Advisor at SACAP (South African College of Applied Psychology) emphasizes the importance of having plans to manage both the studying that needs to be done and the emotional intensity of this end to the school era.

“Being prepared and having strategies helps both matric students and their parents navigate the matric experience with more clarity and confidence,” Ziyanda says. “There are fine lines to walk. You want the stress of the situation to stimulate rising to the challenge, but not be crippling or overwhelming. You want to provide support without pressurising. None of this should be left to chance, it needs an agreed plan, and what underlies the best outcomes is having open and honest communications between parents and teens.”

Exam anxiety: What it is and how to handle it

According to educational and research psychologist, Dr Diana de Sousa, exam anxiety is a common experience for matric students. She says: “It helps to understand the science behind this. Exam anxiety is caused by the body's natural stress response triggered by the amygdala in the brain. This response perceives exams as a threat to a student's self-esteem, future goals, or academic standing, causing increased levels of cortisol in the body.”

You can recognise exam anxiety if you are troubled by negative thought patterns, self-doubt, and fear of failure. Dr de Sousa says: “This mental noise can impair concentration, memory recall, and decision-making during study time and while writing your exams. However, coping strategies, relaxation techniques, and positive reinforcement can help manage and mitigate the effects of exam anxiety.”

It's important for parents to have an accurate take on their child's unique coping mechanisms as it's not uncommon for

teens to be adept at masking anxiety and stress. In other words, the teen presenting a carefree, even careless front may well be doing this to hide strong, fear-based emotions they haven't yet learnt to process.

Jacques Viljoen, an educational psychologist and Sacap educator emphasises how important it is for parents to be able to identify and understand stress in children. He says: "Children often do not express their feelings and emotions as transparently as adults. This can make it challenging for parents to discern when their child is experiencing stress, anxiety, or other negative emotions related to exams. This means that active engagement and informed observation by parents are essential in understanding and supporting their child's emotional well-being."

Six matric toolkit essentials for parents

1. Provide a stress-free study environment – Matric students need comfortable, quiet spaces for studying at home that are largely free of distractions and other demands. Adjust their schedule of chores if necessary and manage the expectations of siblings and other family members.
2. Promote a balanced, healthy lifestyle – Studying without breaks, skipping meals, cutting off all social interactions and sleepless nights will not support peak performance. Parents need to enable healthy eating, regular study breaks, daily exercise and sufficient sleep. This is critical parental support during Matric. Focus on the holistic well-being of your child, helping them to look after both their physical and mental health.
3. Check-in don't check out – It's important that your teen manages themselves when it comes to their study schedule, but parents still play an important role in helping to keep them accountable. Take a keen interest without taking over. Provide a sounding board and motivation if there's procrastination and distraction.
4. Ace the Goldilocks test - Every child is unique, and parents need to be accurate when it comes to how much pressure is 'just right' to support their child's optimal performance. Make sure your expectations are realistic and find the balance between motivating and pressurising your child.
5. Communicate with care - Open and non-judgemental conversations are the fuel for traversing the Matric landscape as smoothly as possible. Focus on being encouraging, and offer emotional support, reassurance and a safe space for your child to express their feelings. Celebrating small wins creates frequent positive reinforcement and builds confidence.
6. Support stress management – While a certain measure of stress sharpens performance, it's easy to lose this balance and tip over into being overwhelmed and anxious. No one performs at their best when they are under too much stress. Parents need to keep a focus on gauging their teen's emotional well-being and promote stress management techniques. Talking through troubling perspectives, going for a walk together, preparing and sharing a wholesome meal are all ways to de-escalate anxiety and help your child get back on track. If necessary, seek help from a trusted teacher or loved one or a health professional.



Advice from the professionals for matric students:

It helps to have a plan for tackling your matric studies that includes factoring in your physical and mental health. Developing good study habits helps you to get through your workload more efficiently while maintaining your resilience and well-being.

It is important to set goals, develop a study schedule, and manage your time, which includes limiting distractions and avoiding procrastination. Khumalo says: “Students need to reflect on their study environment and identify their distractions – is it an uncomfortable chair that makes them fidget and get up? Is it the constant pinging of their device? Are there younger siblings demanding attention?”

“You need to first set yourself up for success in your environment, and then work towards your goals. You need to include regular and consistent breaks, and then manage your time precisely so that you don’t get caught up in other activities around the house. Tracking your progress helps to ensure focus and avoids the stress that comes with falling behind on your studies.”

- **Take action on exam anxiety** – You can recognise exam anxiety if you are troubled by negative thought patterns, self-doubt, and fear of failure. This mental noise can impair concentration, memory recall, and decision-making during study time and while writing your exams. However, coping strategies, relaxation techniques, and positive reinforcement can help manage and mitigate the effects of exam anxiety.
- **Move your body every day** – One of the best to manage mental stress is by getting the body moving. Unfortunately, during long bouts of studying, getting up and out into the fresh air for some exercise too often falls by the wayside. It’s important to include time for being physically active in your daily study schedule. Exercise results in the release of mood-enhancing endorphins which combat stress, anxiety and depression. While you might not be able to take the time out for a long cycle or play a soccer game during your studies, you will find that you can take a break and simply go for a brisk walk in your neighbourhood. This refreshes the brain and releases a good amount of dopamine which will shift you into a more positive mindset. In addition, regular stretching helps a great deal during study time to make you more physically comfortable and resilient.
- **Eat and sleep well** – Too often when we have big demands on our time and attention, we forget about how important it is to eat and sleep well. Poor diet and lack of sleep amplify stress and anxiety, making it harder for us to perform well. Eating well-balanced meals feeds the brain with the right nutrients and this helps to improve memory and alertness.
- **A little kindness to self goes a long way** – It’s normal to experience exam stress, and it’s crucial to be kind to yourself during this challenging period. Dr de Sousa says: “Don’t skip out on the short breaks that you need to rest and recharge. Take a flexible approach to your study schedule and make adjustments if necessary. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed, it is important to reach out for support from teachers, family or friends. Keep your perspective clear and

remember that the results of one exam doesn't define your worth or potential.”

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