

Tips for school activities before and after exams

1. Introduction

In the run-up to exams, students may feel stressed or perplexed and need support from teachers, parents and peers. To help them manage stress before and after exams, we have some suggested activities below for all primary and secondary schools. It is hoped that through these activities, a caring and supportive atmosphere will be created on campus so that students will not be overwhelmed by stress to the point that affects their learning and mental well-being.

2. Schedule and mode of implementation

The activities should be conducted a week or two **before** and a week **after** exams. Schools may, in light of their own needs, refine these suggestions as class-based, grade-based or whole-school activities.

A. Activities before exams

(1) My timetable

Teachers may ask students to draw up a viable timetable based on their individual needs by listing in detail the time allocated for everyday activities, such as getting out of bed, travelling, attending school, eating meals, studying, chilling out, playing, spending time with friends, going to bed and so on. In groups of two, students may discuss potential difficulties and possible solutions, and the duo can remind and support each other along the way until the exam is over. Teachers may invite students to share their timetable and offer them recognition and encouragement. Students may keep the timetable in their handbook as a pre-exam schedule.

Guiding questions:

1. Prioritisation is key to time management. Based on their “urgency” and “importance”, every task can be placed into one of the four categories, namely “important and urgent”, “important but not urgent”, “not important but urgent” and “not important and not urgent”. Which of these categories do you spend most of your time on? Can you share with us how you allocate your time?
2. What is stopping you from keeping to your schedule as planned? How can you modify your plan or adjust your expectation or strategy?

Rationale:

When feeling lost before exams, students may use the timetable to remind themselves of how they can make good use of their time to organise their daily routine and be encouraged to cope with exams by planning ahead.

(2) Take your mind off worries with exercise

Students may do some simple stretching on the spot by following teachers' instructions or watching exercise demonstrations in the videos produced by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (https://www.lcsd.gov.hk/en/healthy/virtual/class_04.html). Teachers may also engage students in coming up with ways to incorporate exercise into their daily routine. For example, to increase physical activity, they may get off the bus/train one stop earlier than usual and walk/jog the rest of the way (some advice is available at the Department of Health's webpage "How can I walk more?" at https://www.change4health.gov.hk/en/physical_activity/10000_steps_a_day/how_can_i_walk_more.html). They may also spend their spare time doing enjoyable exercise with friends, which is a great way to work out and socialise. Students should make some time to exercise no matter how busy they are with their studies. This not only improve their health, but can also help improve concentration and relieve stress and worries.

Guiding questions:

1. Do you exercise regularly? What keeps you from doing exercise? In what ways can you do better?
2. How do you feel after doing some stretching?

Rationale:

While burying yourselves in studies, don't forget to take good care of your physical health and mental well-being. Good health is the foundation of everything. Exercise will help you develop positive emotions and enhance learning efficiency.

(3) Useful tips for myself

Teachers may ask students to write down the difficulties they are likely to encounter in revision with possible solutions alongside. Examples of difficulties may include digital temptations, comprehension of topic contents, frameworks of answering exam questions and steps in doing Mathematics. Solutions may include handing over their mobile phones/computers to a family member, setting a time limit on phone use, seeking help from teachers, senior students or classmates, and doing more practices. Teachers may invite students to share their views and ideas. With the aim of developing problem-solving skills, this activity assures students of their capability in identifying different solutions to problems, thereby alleviating their stress before exams.

Guiding questions:

1. What is the greatest difficulty that you are likely to encounter in revision? How do you tackle it?
2. In what ways are you inspired by your classmates' sharing?

Rationale:

Exams have always been a part of our learning journey. While exams may seem like high mountains to climb, we have indeed overcome them time and again. Through this activity, students may reflect on their problems and come up with possible solutions based

on past experiences. They will come to realise that they can be their own helpmate, get themselves more prepared and handle stress with ease.

(4) Letter of anxiety

Students will recall what has been bothering them lately, then write it down on a small piece of paper and put into an envelope. On the envelope, they will mark down a period of time. It can be any time, say 7:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m., as long as it is not within one hour before bedtime. During this period, students may think about their worries arbitrarily. Outside this marked period of time, if they feel worried or anxious, they may practise mindfulness by focusing on their breathing to alleviate their anxiety. To help students understand the signs of exam stress and how to manage it, teachers may show them the video on “Mindfulness in the Face of Academic Stress” of the Jockey Club “Peace and Awareness” Mindfulness Culture in Schools Initiative (JC PandA) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0o26v1w2AcM>). Teachers may also make use of the audio guide in the following two mobile apps to help students relieve stress through mindful breathing exercise:

1. JC PandA mobile app: <https://www.socsc.hku.hk/jcpanda/mobile-app/>
2. Newlife.330 mobile app: <https://newlife330.hk/?section=3>

Moreover, teachers may encourage students to download relevant mindfulness mobile apps so that students can use mindfulness skills to cope with stress and calm themselves down for the sake of physical and mental well-being.

Guiding questions:

1. What are the signs that you are experiencing stressed?
2. How do you calm yourself down? What are your experiences with mindfulness?

Rationale:

Mindful breathing is an evidence-based approach for reducing stress, which may help students calm themselves down. The more they practise, the better they will master the skill and the more effective it will be. Breathing is a natural process that occurs constantly without conscious thought. When we know how to focus on our breathing, we will know better how to deal with stress, relieve our emotions and clear our mind.

(5) Secret angel

Students will write their name on a slip of paper. Teachers will collect all the slips and have each student draw a slip at random. Students will become the secret angel of whoever’s name is on the slip drawn. For the following week, they have to guard that person without them knowing. They may send them cheer-up cards, take lesson notes for them or give them small presents. Whatever is done must be kept secret. At the end of the week, students will share what they did as a secret angel and the identities of all the secret angels will then be disclosed.

Guiding questions:

1. Being someone's secret angel, did you notice any difficulties they might have? What did you do to guard them?
2. How did you feel when you received encouragement/presents from your secret angel?

Rationale:

When life throws us challenges, we always hope for some help from a guardian angel. In this activity, students will not only be touched by the feeling of being validated and guarded, but more importantly, they will learn to identify the needs of others and play their part to make other people's lives better, thereby becoming a more fulfilled versions of themselves.

B. Activities after exams

(6) Time to party

When students can finally calm their nerves after exams, it is a good time to celebrate. Teachers and students can have a potluck party and prepare a class talent show. Together they will make a happy memory by enjoying the food and performance. They can also create fun-filled moments by playing group games such as Musical Chairs, Who is the Leader, Scavenger Hunt and Word Chain, if time permits.

Guiding questions:

1. Whose performance did you enjoy the most? Why?
2. Which part of the talent show struck the biggest chord with you? Why?

Rationale:

Celebrations can help relieve exam stress of students, enabling them to create shared happy memories, build a sense of connectedness and feel supported in class. They will, in turn, be more willing to seek help when they have difficulties and be comfortable to share their feelings and thoughts.

(7) Proud of myself

Teachers may ask students to reflect on what they did well and not so well during exams and how they can do better next time, so that they can see each challenge (such as tests and exams) as a process. While students who performed better than before have cause to be happy, there is no need to get upset over setbacks (such as making careless mistakes, misreading the questions or mixing up the concepts) as long as they reflect on areas for improvement and learn from experiences. To keep moving forward, students can try to appreciate and encourage themselves while embracing both their strengths and weaknesses. Teachers may invite students to share their experience, and offer them recognition and encouragement.

Guiding questions:

1. Which part of the sharing struck the biggest chord with you? How are you inspired?

2. What did you do during the exam period that deserve giving yourself compliments? Did anyone help you or do something for you along the way? You may say “thank you” to them and to yourself.

Rationale:

Everyone has their own success story. Experience sharing will get students to understand and inspire each other. Through this activity, teachers may promote positive thinking, recognise and help students give full play to their character strengths, so that they can have a greater sense of self-efficacy and be able to see exams as merely a part of growing up.

(8) Having fun after exams

Schools may engage all students in art activities (such as Zentangle, pastel painting, music therapy), games or sports events to help them feel relaxed and relieved.

Guiding questions:

1. How did you feel in the activity? Did you feel relaxed?
2. Which part of the activity struck the biggest chord with you?

Rationale:

To live a balanced and healthy life, students are encouraged to participate in activities that help them relax after a stressful event or time as a means to take good care of themselves. In fact, stress is not necessarily a bad thing. It can be a motivator if effective methods and strategies are used to keep it in check.

(9) Our strengths

Students will write their name on a slip of paper. Teachers will collect all the slips and have each student draw a slip at random. Students will then write specific and positive compliments to whoever’s name is on the slip drawn, such as praising them for being courteous, diligent, studious, athletic, organised or articulate. They can also design an appreciation certificate and give it to that person. Through sincere exchange and sharing, students will learn to appreciate and support each other, which help create a harmonious culture in class. When they realise that everyone has their own strengths, they will be able to show more self-appreciation and self-validation.

Guiding questions:

1. How did you feel about the appreciation certificate? How are you inspired?
2. How did you feel when you were presented with the appreciation certificate just now? Why?

Rationale:

Words of appreciation make us feel validated. By observing each other in this activity, students will learn to appreciate the good in others as well as encourage others, thereby creating a culture of cohesion and friendliness in class to achieve mutual support.

(10) Guess who I am

Teachers may ask students to write down one of their own distinctive features and a hidden hobby/skill on a piece of paper with their name at the bottom, and fold it up. Teachers may then collect and unfold the paper one by one and read out the self-description therein to let students guess who it is referring to. Through the exchange of fun facts of each other, this activity will enhance understanding among the class. Not only can this create a relaxing atmosphere after exams, but it can also promote a conducive culture for building mutual trust in class.

Guiding questions:

1. Did you make a right guess just now? Do you often observe your classmates?
Why and why not?
2. Did you find anyone in class who share similar hobbies/skills with you? How did you feel about that?

Rationale:

It is only when we are willing to share and listen to others' sharing that we can discover if we have something in common with others. This is a way to help students develop friendships and foster connections among themselves. A relaxing class atmosphere can also help students learn with ease.

(11) Stress-busting nature activities

Off-campus learning or activities can be conducted in green spaces so that students can enrich their life experience and build a sense of connectedness with increased peer interactions, while reducing stress by spending time in nature and focusing on the surroundings.

Guiding questions:

1. Which part of today's activity did you like the most?
2. With whom did you feel the most enjoyable today?

Rationale:

Studies have shown that spending time in nature or green spaces can help reduce stress and improve mental health. When combined with interactive peer activities, it will build good rapport and stronger sense of connectedness among students, providing emotional support which further benefits their mental well-being.