

# Beating Exam Stress - Techniques

# Facilitator Manual



The  
Psychological  
Service

# Introduction

Beating Exam Stress – Techniques (BEST) is aimed at young people aged 15 years and above in order to prepare them for any form of assessment they may face in life, whether within school or elsewhere. It adopts cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) strategies and a solution-focused approach to equip young people with the necessary resources to cope with exams. It includes teaching relaxation strategies.

Facilitators do not need to have knowledge or expertise in CBT or solution-focused approaches. The manual gives clear guidelines about how to deliver the programme, which can be delivered within a two-hour session, or two periods in school. A Powerpoint presentation is available and is shown in Appendix 3 of this manual.

## Activity 1

### Whole group discussion

#### 1) 'Exams/tests'

What 'exams/tests' have you had to take before or will you be taking in the future? Please list all the exams/tests you can think of. (Ppt. slide 2 - see appendix 3 page 19)

#### 2) Right at this moment in time

- a) What are your thoughts about 'exams/tests'?
- b) What are your feelings about 'exams/tests'?

### Facilitators notes:

Discuss the importance of the links between thoughts and feelings i.e. how we think about a situation can strongly influence how we feel about it and how we think about ourselves. While students are expected to write answers in their manual, whole group discussion should be encouraged.

Figure 1 (see next page) outlines a girl's response to her performance in an 'exam/test' situation (Ppt. slide 3 – see appendix 3). Go through Figure 1 and explain how getting low marks in her 'exam/test' led to negative thoughts and feelings. She attributes negative statements to this situation by **internalising** and **generalising permanent thoughts** such as 'I am stupid'. These are otherwise known as **global statements**. The girl has made broad, negative conclusions about herself, following poor performance.

Figure 2 (see next page) outlines a more positive response to the same performance using more realistic attributions (e.g. I did not try, I will try harder, I can learn, I can do it) (Ppt. slide 4 - see appendix 3). This should lead to feeling more confident and a sense of self-efficacy (possibility to perform better in the future). The statements here are more **external, specific** and **temporary**.

Figure 1: Negative response to 'exam/test' situation







What happened	What I thought	What I felt
 <p data-bbox="215 616 518 694"><i>1 out of 10</i></p>	 <p data-bbox="638 616 941 694"><i>I am stupid!</i></p> <p data-bbox="598 716 997 896"><i>I am a failure I'm not good at anything I can't do anything to change this</i></p>	 <p data-bbox="1149 649 1292 817"><i>defeated sad worthless down</i></p>

Figure 2: Positive response to 'exam/test' situation

What happened	What I could have thought	What I could feel
 <p data-bbox="215 1433 518 1512"><i>1 out of 10</i></p>	<p data-bbox="638 1108 941 1232"><i>I am able to do better</i></p>  <p data-bbox="678 1590 917 1713"><i>I did not study I did not try I will try harder</i></p>	 <p data-bbox="1133 1456 1308 1624"><i>determined defiant confident able</i></p>

Facilitator statement (Ppt. slide 5 - see appendix 3):

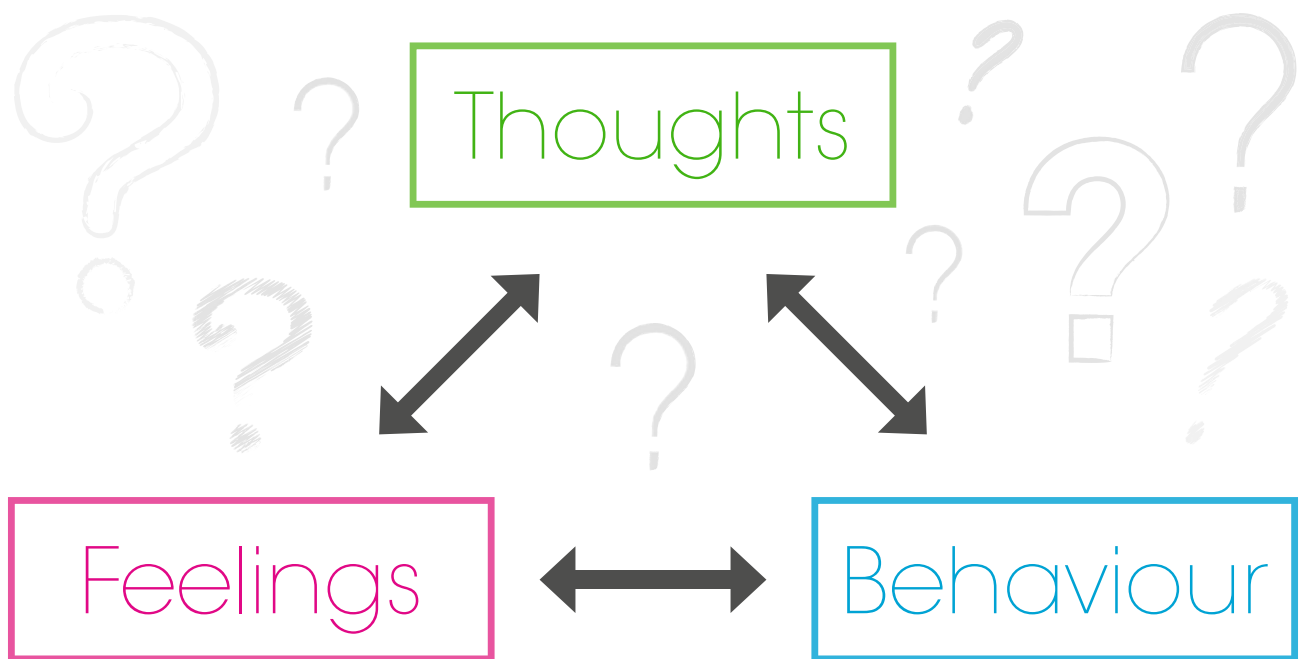
Our performance in 'exams/tests' (**behaviour**) can impact on how we see ourselves (**thoughts**) and how we feel about having to do 'exams/tests' (**feelings**).

# Activity 1 (cont'd)

## Whole group discussion (Ppt. slide 6 - see appendix 3)

To sum up what you have discussed throughout this activity Figure 3 outlines the interrelationship between our thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

Figure 3: Relationships between thoughts, feelings and behaviour



### Facilitator statement:

How we think (**thoughts**), how we feel (**feelings**) and how we act (**behaviour**) all interact and go together.

Changing one can have an effect on the others.

# Activity 2

## Case studies (Ppt. slide 7 - see appendix 3)

Below are three case studies where someone has had a negative experience.

1. John failed his driving test for the second time.  
He said that **he is no good at driving and always fails all kinds of tests.**  
He did not think of other factors affecting his performance.  
  
He didn't have the chance to practise in his mum's car because she was using it all the time. The test route was on roads that he didn't know very well.
2. Marie has got good qualifications and was well thought of at the school she attended, but didn't get a job offer after going for an interview.  
She said that **she is rubbish at interviews and will never get offered any job.**
3. Laura had wanted to go to university but failed 2 of her Highers.  
**She thinks she'll never have a chance of getting to university and that she is no good at anything.**  
  
She'd had a lot of family difficulties and had moved house recently.  
She also didn't get on with the two teachers in the subjects that she failed.

### Questions:

- Can you identify the **negative thoughts**? (Please highlight or underline).

**Answer:** See the text shown in **blue/bold font**

- How do you think each of the characters is **feeling**?

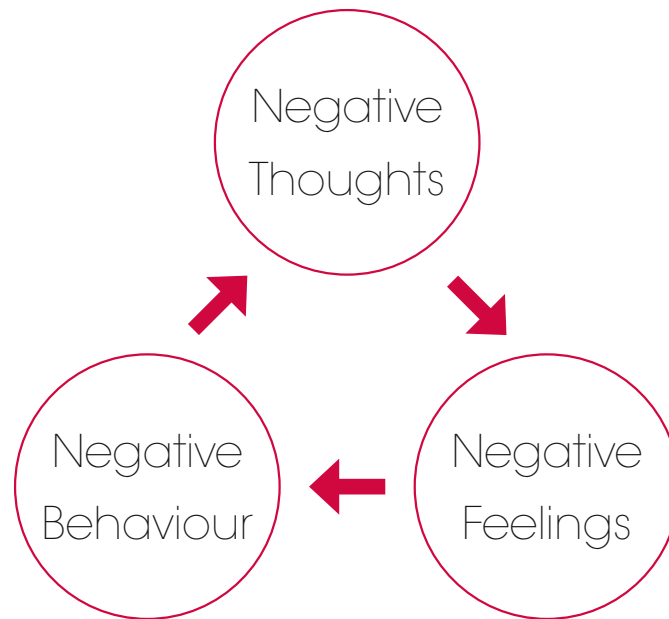
**Answer:** Elicit from the group words such as sad, down, depressed, frustrated etc.

- Do you think any of them are motivated to try again?

**Answer:** Take the lead from the group on this – stimulate some discussion about bouncing back.

Note: This is a revision of the main message from activity 2, so does not need much time spent on it (Ppt. slides 8 and 9 - see appendix 3)

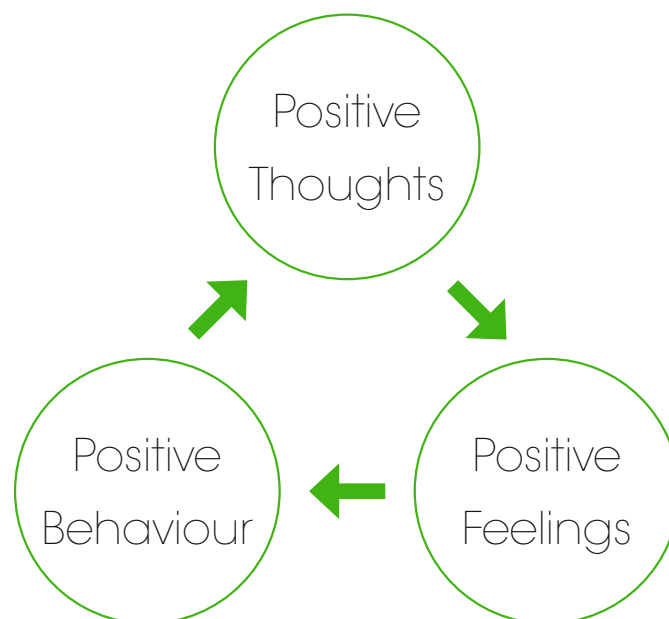
Figure 4: **Negative thought cycle**



**Facilitator statement:**

Our beliefs (**thoughts**) about the causes of events can affect how we approach future events. Therefore, reframing negative thoughts into positive thoughts can lead to more positive **feelings** and actions (**behaviour**).

Figure 5: **Positive thought cycle**



# Activity 3

## Whole group discussion (Ppt. slides 10 and 11 - see appendix 3)

Figure 6 below outlines 3 dimensions of thinking about setbacks. The components on the left are negative responses to setbacks and the components on the right are positive responses to setbacks. Talk the group through these.

Figure 6: Ways of thinking

### Three dimensions

1

**Internal**  
It is me



**External**  
It is something else other than me

2

**Rigid**  
It will always be the same



**Flexible**  
It can change

3

**Global**  
It happens every time, all the time



**Specific**  
It happened once this time

Figure 7 highlights helpful pathways to reframe thoughts from negative to positive. Go through these with the group.

### Highlighting helpful pathways

Figure 7: Helpful pathways (changing to positive)

Negative

Positive

**Is it me? .....** **Or something outside me?**  
I'm stupid! This is too hard

**Is it always? .....** **Or just sometimes?**  
I will always be stupid This is too hard for me now

**Is it everything? .....** **Or is it just this?**  
I'm bad at everything I have great ideas but I need more time

# Activity 3 (continued)

Depending on time, this activity can be carried out in the large group, individually or in small groups, each taking one of the 3 scenarios with feedback from participants.

## Thinking about Thinking

Let's look at the case studies from Activity 2 again.

1. John failed his driving test for the second time.  
He said that *he is no good at driving and always fails all kinds of tests.*  
He did not think of other factors affecting his performance.  
  
He didn't have the chance to practise in his mum's car because she was using it all the time. The test route was on roads that he didn't know very well.
2. Marie has got good qualifications and was well thought of at the school she attended, but didn't get a job offer after going for an interview.  
She said that *she is rubbish at interviews and will never get offered any job.*
3. Laura had wanted to go to university but failed 2 of her Highers.  
*She thinks she'll never have a chance of getting to university and that she is no good at anything.*  
  
She'd had a lot of family difficulties and had moved house recently.  
She also didn't get on with the two teachers in the subjects that she failed.

## Questions:

- In relation to figure 6 (see Activity 3), which 'way of thinking' are each of the characters showing?

**Answer:** All three are thinking in Internal, Rigid and Global ways.

- What else could they have **thought** (from the information given) to have made themselves **feel** a bit better?

**Answer:** Refer to the positive ways of thinking and elicit examples from these.  
Highlight external factors in each case study

- If they had **thought** like this do you feel they would be more motivated to try again?

**Answer:** Elicit positive responses from the group. Emphasise that they would be taking a much more positive approach and be much more likely to try again.  
The next page illustrates this. (Ppt. slides 12 and 13 - see appendix 3)



- When things go well who takes the credit?

**You should**

- When things don't work out is it **always** your fault?

**No**

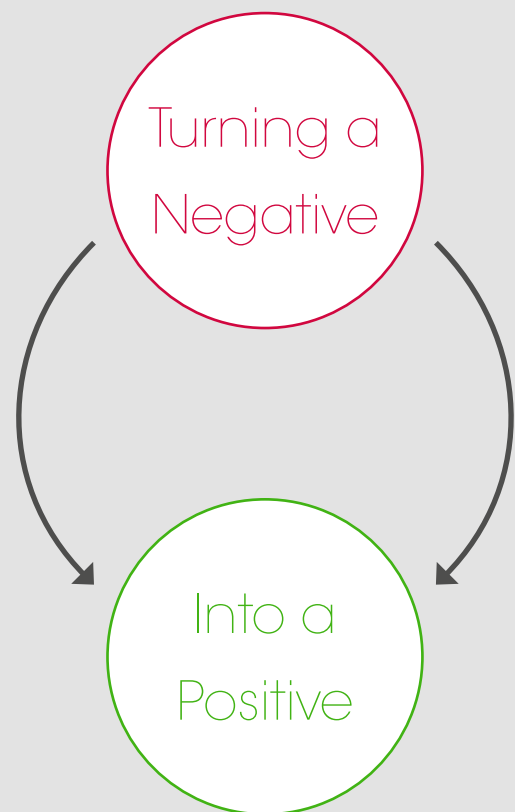
- Look for ways of explaining bad things that are outside of your control
- Successful people are good at finding other explanations

### Example:

Football managers are good at finding other explanations for their team's defeat e.g. the state of the pitch, referee decisions, key players missing, dirty tactics from the other team etc.

### Note:

Highlight to the group that it is not just about finding excuses for failure but exploring genuine reasons and having a plan to do better in future.



# Activity 4

## Turning negatives into positives (Ppt. slides 14 and 15 - see appendix 3)

Discuss figure 8 below with the larger group. Ask individuals how they would like to feel going into a test situation. What would they need to be thinking for this to happen? What would they be doing differently? What would let them know they were feeling and thinking more positively about test situations?

Figure 8: Pre-exam positive thinking

How would you like to be 'feeling' going into the 'exam/test'?	What do you need to be thinking?	What can you do (behaviours) to be thinking and feeling this way?

- On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not confident at all and 10 being very confident), how confident do you feel at present going into a 'exam/test'?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not confident at all

Very confident

- (i) What are you doing that lets you know you are at this point in the scale?
- (ii) What would need to happen for you to move up one point on the scale?
- (iii) At what point on the scale would be '**good enough**' for you to be feeling going into an 'exam/test'?

# Experiences of 'exam/test' situations

Figure 9: Examples of turning negative thoughts into positive thoughts

	Negative Thoughts	Positive Thoughts
1	I am worried that I won't do well	I know that I can do well
2	I think that everyone else will do better than me	I think I have as much chance as everyone else
3	I don't think I've revised enough	I have revised enough and I know the material
4	I am worried that I won't be able to remember the information	I will remember the information by staying calm and in control
5	I just don't know the material	I do know the material
6	I don't feel ready to sit this test	I am ready to sit this test
7	I am worried that I will let others down	I know others want me to try hard and do my best
8	I don't think I can get the results I need to get where I want to go	I know what I need to get where I want to go
9	I can't write/read quickly enough to complete the test	I will do the best I can in the time that I have
10	I will feel ill	I will feel fine
11	I can't concentrate	I will stay calm and be able to concentrate
12	I am easily distracted by my surroundings	I will just ignore what's happening around me and get on with the task
13	I will be marked down for my poor writing/spelling	I will do my best with my writing/spelling and demonstrate what I know
14	I won't understand the questions	I will read the questions carefully and make sure I understand what they are asking me to do
15	I won't be able to get through the whole paper in the time allowed	I will structure my time and allocate an appropriate amount to each question.

**Facilitator statement:**

We can all learn from our previous experiences and can re-frame these negative thoughts or feelings into more positive views which will help us cope better and approach 'exams/tests' with confidence.

# Activity 5

## **Energy Exercise (Ppt. slide 16 - see appendix 3)**

Ask participants to fold a piece of A4 paper in half, on one half write down things that give you energy, on the other write things that drain your energy. Once participants have completed this, have a discussion about doing more of the things that give you energy and less of those that drain your energy.

What gives me energy?	What drains my energy?

*Do more of what gives you energy!*

# Activity 6

## Stress! (Ppt. slide 17 - see appendix 3)

- (i) **Group discussion:** What are the signs of stress?  
How do we feel?    What do we think?    How do we behave?
- (ii) On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being very stressed and 10 being not stressed at all), how stressed do you feel going into a 'exam/test' situation?



**Very stressed**

**Not stressed at all**

- (iii) What are you doing that lets you know you are at this point in the scale?

- (iv) What would need to happen for you to move up one point on the scale?

- (v) At what point on the scale would be '**good enough**' for you to be going into an 'exam/test' situation?

# Activity 7

## Relaxation (Ppt. slide 18 - see appendix 3)

(i) **Group discussion:** How do we know we are relaxed?

How do we feel?      What do we think?

What physical signs does our body give?      How do we behave?

### What makes us relaxed?

List the top 3 things that relax you:

1.

2.

3.

(ii) On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not relaxed at all and 10 being very relaxed), how relaxed do you feel going into an 'exam/test' situation?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

**Not relaxed at all**

**Very relaxed**

(iii) What are you doing that lets you know you are at this point in the scale?

(iv) What would need to happen for you to move up one point in the scale?

(v) At what point on the scale would be '**good enough**' for you to be feeling going into a 'exam/test' situation



**Facilitator statement:**

It's all about balance. Making sure we have enough of the 'good stuff' will help us to manage and cope with the challenges we face. A little bit of stress can help us to focus and perform well. As humans, we are designed to cope with one-off stressful situations.

# Activity 8

## Mental Relaxation (Ppt. slide 18 - see appendix 3)

*Read out the following script to the group and give them the option of lying somewhere comfortable on the floor or sitting comfortably on a chair.*

1. Make yourself comfortable, lying or sitting down.
2. Begin by clenching your right hand into a tight fist and at the same time taking a deep breath, take a really deep breath and hold it – feel the tension in your right hand and forearm and in your lungs – hold your breath – feel all the tension – and breathe out and relax your hand and feel your body relax. Close your eyes and relax comfortably - feel heavy, warm and relaxed, without any effort.
3. Let your whole body relax more and more deeply as you breathe smoothly and slowly, using your stomach. Feel yourself becoming heavier, relaxed and warm each time you breathe out slowly and smoothly using your stomach.
4. Relax your muscles deeply as I name the different parts of your body.
5. Relax your forehead; your face; your eyebrows; your eyelids are heavy and relaxed; relax your mouth; your tongue and your jaw.
6. The more you relax, the heavier your body will become. All your muscles become heavier and heavier – a feeling of warmth and heaviness is spreading throughout your whole body.
7. Relax your neck; let your shoulders drop and feel heavy, warm and relaxed.
8. Let the relaxation spread to your arms, all the way out to the tips of your fingers.
9. Let it spread through your back and lower part of your body. Notice the feeling of complete relaxation. Breathe smoothly and slowly from your stomach, feeling heavier, limp and slack each time you breathe out slowly and smoothly from your stomach.
10. Let all thoughts and noises drift through your mind like passing clouds. Nothing disturbs your deep relaxation – there is nothing that makes you feel worried or uneasy. Everything feels calm and peaceful.
11. Notice how heavy and relaxed your body has become. When your body is completely relaxed you cannot be bothered to move a single muscle.
12. Continue to breathe slowly and smoothly, using your stomach. Each time you breathe out, you feel as if you are sinking down deeper and deeper. It feels good to let things drift through your mind like passing clouds – and to let yourself drift deeper into a heavy, warm and comfortable feeling of relaxation.
13. Continue to relax on your own for a while (2 minute pause).
14. Now you can listen to me again. Each time you relax like this you will find that it becomes easier and quicker for you to relax more deeply. You will notice that this type of relaxation gives you complete rest, both physically and mentally. After each session you will feel rested, calm and alert.
15. Feel yourself becoming more alert now. Before you open your eyes, take some really deep breaths and stretch your whole body like a cat. Feel completely alert and well in every way as you open your eyes.



# Useful Resources

## Appendix 1 - Bad breathing

Shallow breathing from the chest delivers less air per breath to the lungs. Less air per breath leads to a higher number of breaths, putting in motion a series of physiological changes that constrict blood vessels. An imbalance between the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels in the lungs delivers less oxygen to the brain, the heart, and the rest of the body.

Too much oxygen and not enough carbon dioxide can create an agitated state. As you learn to exhale slowly, you conserve carbon dioxide and rebalance the system. However, too much carbon dioxide, and not enough oxygen, can create feelings of fatigue and depression. Learning to inhale slowly re-balances your system by taking in more oxygen. Stress, anxiety, and emotions all affect our breathing – the natural “fight or flight” response that increases respiration.

## Good breathing

It is easy to develop good breathing habits, but it takes practice. To achieve normal levels of oxygen and CO<sup>2</sup> in your system, you begin by focusing your attention on breath!

Good breathing used in relaxation techniques comes from the diaphragm/abdomen. Concentrate your breathing by placing one hand on your diaphragm (just under your ribs at the top of your stomach) and the other hand on the upper part of your chest. If necessary, adjust your breathing slowly until it is only your bottom hand that is moving. You are now using your diaphragm to control breathing.

When you feel any of the “fight or flight” responses, take three slow breaths. Count slowly to three when you breathe in through your nose (and stomach rather than your chest). Breathe out on a slow count of six through your mouth.



Breathe in    1 — 2 — 3

Breathe out    1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6

Practise this and it will become a strategy available to you in a stressful situation.

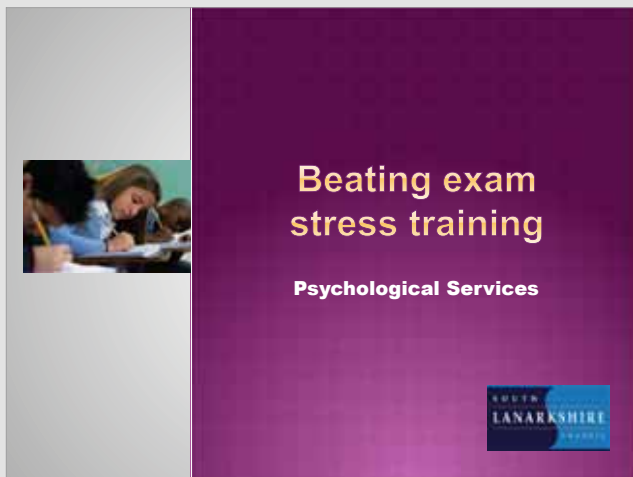
## Appendix 2 - Exam de-stress: Summary of things to remember:

- **Thinking** strategies: remind yourself of challenges that you have encountered in the past and coped with. Tell yourself that you can cope again. Keep things in perspective: the exams are important but not the 'be all and end all'. Doing your best is as much as you can do. Turn negative automatic thoughts into positive ones: if you're thinking 'I can't do this' or 'I'll never pass this exam' you can instead be telling yourself 'This is hard for me but I'll do my best' or 'I can pass this exam if I avoid getting too stressed and keep focused'.
- **Relaxation** strategies: remember that you can try the things that work for you. Examples include: deep, slow breathing; progressive muscles relaxation; lying down and listening to music; soaking in a warm bath; reading a magazine; taking exercise to help switch off. Find what works for you and use it when you can. Remember that feeling a little bit stress or pressure can be a positive thing in helping to give you the energy and motivation to focus on studying.
- **Balance**: it's important to keep a balance in life even when you are entering a phase that might be quite a stressful one. So when it gets close to exam time, you need to make sure that you still get enough sleep (for most people that's 7-8 hours a night). You should also make sure that you have good eating habits: not overeating or missing meals. Drinking plenty of water is a good idea, while avoiding too many sugary and caffeine drinks. Keep in touch with friends, so that studying for exams doesn't become overpowering. Remember to take short breaks during your study sessions.
- **Exam day**: keep calm and tell yourself that getting too stressed might affect your performance. While getting to the exam venue in plenty of time is important, avoid getting involved in any panic talk with other people waiting to enter the exam hall. It might be better to stand aside somewhere until you can enter the exam hall. If you feel stressed during the exam, remember the breathing exercises that you can use. If it helps, take a lucky charm with you!!



# Appendix 3 - Powerpoint slides

## Slide 1



**Beating exam stress training**

Psychological Services

LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL

## Slide 2



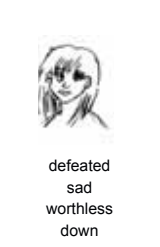
**Activity 1**

**Exams/tests**

- What exams/tests have you had before or will be taking in the future?
- What are your **thoughts** about exams/tests?
- What are your **feelings** about exams/tests?

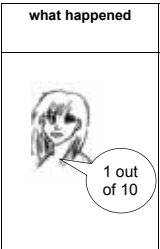


## Slide 3

**Negative thoughts ---> feelings**

what happened	what I thought	what I felt
		 defeated sad worthless down

## Slide 4

**Changing negative thoughts ---> feelings**

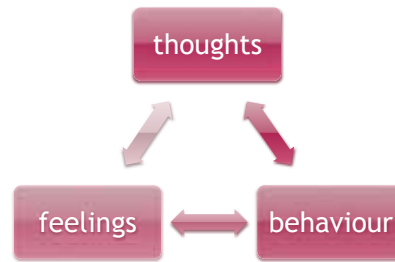
what happened	what I could have thought	what I could feel
	 I did not study I did not try I will try harder	 determined defiant confident able

## Slide 5

**Doing-thinking-feeling links**

Our performance in 'exams/ tests' (**behaviour**) can affect how we see ourselves (**thoughts**) and how we feel about 'exams/tests' (**feelings**)

## Slide 6



How we think (**thoughts**), how we feel (**emotions**) and how we act (**behaviour**)

...  
...all interact and go together

## Slide 7

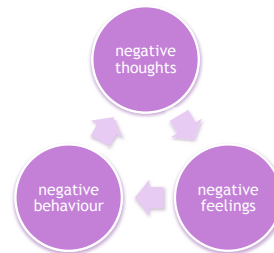
### Activity 2

#### Case studies

- Can you identify the **negative thoughts**? (Please highlight or underline).
- How do you think each of the characters is **feeling**?
- Do you think any of them are motivated to try again?

## Slide 8

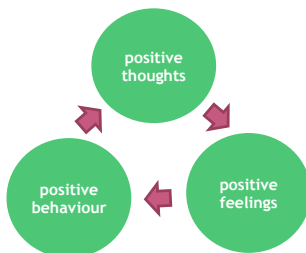
### Break the cycle (simplified way of looking at things)



Our beliefs (**thoughts**) about the causes of events can affect how we approach future events.

## Slide 9

### Unhelpful – helpful thoughts



Therefore, reframing negative thoughts into positive thoughts can lead to more positive **feelings** and actions (**behaviour**).

## Slide 10

### Ways of thinking

#### 3 Dimensions

- Internal**  
It is me
  - External**  
It is something else other than me
- Vs
- Rigid**  
It will always be the same
  - Flexible**  
It can change
- Vs
- Global**  
It happens every time/all the time
  - Specific**  
It happened once this time



## Slide 16

### Energy exercise

#### Activity 5

- Write down the things you do that give you energy and the things that drain your energy.
- It is important to do **more** of the things that give you energy and **less** of those that drain it
- Do more of work works and if it doesn't try something different

## Slide 17

### Stress



#### Activity 6

##### What are the signs of stress?:

- How do we **feel**? What do we **think**? How do we **behave**?
  - On a scale of 0-10 (where 0 is very stressed and 10 is not stressed at all) How stressed do you feel going into a exam/test situation?
- 1) What are you doing that lets you know you are at this point in the scale?
  - 2) What would need to happen for you to move up one point on the scale?
  - 3) At what point on the scale would be '**good enough**' for you to be going into a exam/test situation?

## Slide 18

### Relaxation



#### Activity 7

##### How do we know we are relaxed?:

- How do we **feel**? What do we **think**? How do we **behave**?
- ##### What makes us relaxed?
- On a scale of 0-10 (where 0 is not at all relaxed and 10 is very relaxed) how relaxed do you feel going into an exam/test situation?
- 1) What are you doing that lets you know you are at this point in the scale?
  - 2) What would need to happen for you to move up one point in the scale?
  - 3) At what point on the scale would be '**good enough**' for you to be feeling going into an exam/test situation?

## Slide 19

### Relaxation

#### Mental relaxation exercise – (activity 8)



## Slide 20

### Final thought



It's all about balance. Making sure we have enough of the 'good stuff' will help us to manage and cope with the challenges we face.

If you need this information in another language or format,  
please contact us to discuss how we can best meet your needs.

Phone: 0303 123 1015

Email: [equalities@southlanarkshire.gov.uk](mailto:equalities@southlanarkshire.gov.uk)

[www.southlanarkshire.gov.uk](http://www.southlanarkshire.gov.uk)

Education Resources  
(January 2015)

*Copyright © 2015 by South Lanarkshire Council (Psychological Service)*

Produced for Education Resources by Communications and Strategy. 026568/Dec15