

How to beat exam stress

# EXAM ATTACK

Nicola Morgan

Expert in learning and stress

**EXAM ATTACK –  
HOW TO BEAT EXAM STRESS  
by Nicola Morgan**

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A simple, short, positive guide for exam students, helping you deal with stress well and so give yourself the best chance of achieving your potential

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**Dedication**

To all those who have ever done less well than they hoped in an exam.  
That's everyone, trust me.

**About Nicola Morgan**

I am an international expert in adolescence, teenage stress and the learning brain. I've written many successful books, including **The Teenage Guide to Stress, Blame My Brain – The Amazing Teenage Brain Revealed**, and **The Teenage Guide to Friends**. You'll find masses of advice about all aspects of teenage life on my website at [www.nicolamorgan.com](http://www.nicolamorgan.com). You might also enjoy my new project, **Positively Teenage**.

My work on adolescence and the learning brain takes me round the world, talking in schools and at conferences. Everywhere I go, I find the same thing: teenagers, parents, teachers and other adults all wanting to understand adolescence and human behavior, in order to help young people achieve wellbeing and meet their potential.

**NOTE 1:** This book uses mostly UK spellings (including “practise” when it’s a verb and “practice” when it’s a noun!) But the advice is for all exam students, everywhere.

**NOTE 2:** EXAM ATTACK is a book about exam stress and preparation, *not* about revision and exam techniques. I am also an expert on how to learn and study and I co-authored a book called [Study Skills](#), which covers that angle. EXAM ATTACK focuses on mental and physical health and attitude, rather than the specific act of learning.

Your school might be interested in [Stress Well for Schools](#), a complete course in helping teenagers manage and thrive with stress.

## **INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS BOOK?**

Exams are stressful and most people don't enjoy them! I can't remove all your exam nerves and, anyway, a certain level of that is good because it produces adrenaline to help you perform well. But I have tips to help you avoid *bad* stress so you have the greatest chance of doing your best on the day. My advice is based on years of experience and knowledge of how brains and bodies work. You might be familiar with my books, especially *Blame My Brain* and *The Teenage Guide to Stress*. Most of my working life nowadays is occupied with helping young people survive and thrive through life's challenges and *Exam Attack* is another tool for you to do that.

I have personal experience (like everyone) of not doing as well as I might in exams. Mind you, I've still achieved success in my life and better exam grades would not have changed that. And that's an important message: exams are only one step to a destination and you can be just as successful if everything doesn't go perfectly. In fact, look at many of the most high-achieving people in the world and you'll find that school exam success doesn't feature for many of them. Sometimes, we learn and gain more from *not* getting top grades in everything. It makes us try harder, think differently, be more determined. And those are all important for a successful life.

But, of course, you want to do your best in the exams ahead of you. This short and simple guide will help you achieve that. It will help you get through exams as smoothly and successfully as possible.

My tips in *Exam Attack* are based on some posts on my blog. For a link to all my online resources on stress and exams, see [here](#). Yes, the advice is there but it's often hard to find, so I decided it would help you if I put the important parts into this book and adapted it all to create a clear, easy-to-follow message.

You'll find advice on the best foods to eat (and how to cope when you lose your appetite), how to get better sleep, how to deal with panic, how to plan your revision, how to balance work and relaxation, how to get the right help at the right time, and all sorts of aspects of a healthy attitude.

### **When should you read it?**

*Ideally*, several months before exams. Then come back to it nearer the time. Some of the advice is best followed well in advance of exams and some of it is designed to help you on the day. But don't worry if you're close to exams now: it's never too late.

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## TIPS FOR BEATING EXAM STRESS

### A. A COMPLETE LIST IN BRIEF

I am starting with a whole list of tips, some of which I'll explain more fully later in this book. As well as the list below, there's also a special pdf you can print and stick to your bedroom wall. The pdf version can be found [at this link](#). Scroll to "My sheet of tips about stress".

1. Make sure you know well in advance how each exam is structured and how many questions you have to answer. (Dyslexic students need extra help here. Make sure your parents and teachers all understand that you will need more help than others with organization and planning.)
2. Don't bottle up your worries. Talk to someone; ask for help early.
3. Plan your revision time-table in advance; and include rest time. (Details in [Tip B.](#))
4. Practise a relaxation technique/anti-panic strategy. (Details in [Tip G.](#))
5. Spend at least 30 mins a day doing one of these: reading a book you *like*, having a bath, listening to music, walking, exercising, watching a funny film, doing a hobby, or something else that relaxes you. Don't use a computer or phone during this time. (Details in [Tip C.](#))
6. Learn how to get a better night's sleep. (Details in [Tip K.](#))
7. Find brain-fuelling foods that you like and make sure you eat before work/exam. Plan a pre-exam snack. (Details in [Tip D.](#))
8. Always have water with you when working. Your brain can't work well without enough water. (Don't overdo it, though.)
9. Avoid fizzy or sugary drinks. They make your concentration worse.
10. Brains usually concentrate best for about 25 minutes; so, during revision, give yourself breaks. Breathe deeply; move about; loosen your neck and shoulders. Research shows that breaks help performance.
11. Get plenty of fresh air. A brisk walk has huge anti-stress benefits, is a very good way of thinking things through and pushes more oxygen to your brain.
12. Some people work better when they fidget. If that's you, have blu-tack (eg) with you.
13. A bit of chocolate (preferably dark) is a good idea, before an exam for an energy boost (but you also need protein, eg nuts, to keep you going) and after as a reward. You deserve it!
14. After an exam, don't ask other people what they wrote. It's a sure-fire way to be more stressed. Now is the time to put that exam behind you. It's over!
15. Remember: exams may be stressful but they are not the most important things in the world. If something goes wrong, don't beat yourself up. There will be other ways to achieve your goals, and more chances later. Move on and grow strong. (Details in [Tip N.](#))

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## B. HAVE A GOOD REVISION TIME-TABLE

You might already have made one of these in school but I have two versions to help you. One is the nicely-designed and super-simple one which my publisher, Walker Books, created for me. The other I created myself, which doesn't *look* so nice but has much more detailed instructions! (Click [here](#) and choose the one you want from that page.)

If you just want to create your own revision time-table without using my templates, here's what to do:

1. Make a chart with a space for each day from now until the last exam. You might want to design more space for the last thirty days, as you'll want more detail there.
2. Enter the dates of each exam and indicate if morning or afternoon.
3. Mark any dates when you won't be able to revise, for example because of a competition, medical appointment or trip.
4. Think about what subjects take more revision and how long each needs. Then, in pencil, block off sections of time per subject, finishing about a month before the first exam. This means that the last month is for final revision: reducing notes and learning/practising.
5. In that last month, allow time for going over every subject again. Make sure you build in time off. (I'll talk about the importance of daily relaxation in [Tip C.](#)) Remember: you might lose time through illness, so you need to allow some slack for that.

Exams are challenging and stressful but we make them much less so by preparing well, as far in advance as necessary.

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## C. YOUR DAILY RELAXATION

A bit of relaxation every day is *really* important. It helps health, wellbeing and performance. Although a certain amount of stress is good for performance, too much is not. The best way to avoid having too much is to make sure we take time to switch off, every day.

You're too busy, right? You'll wait till after the exams and then relax, right? You should wait till you feel you "deserve" it, right? Wrong. *If you build relaxation into every day, you will perform better.* If you don't build relaxation in, you risk the problems:

1. An overload of “preoccupation” that will spoil your concentration.
2. Sleep problems.
3. A build up of the stress chemical, cortisol, which has many negative effects on health and performance.

So, you need relaxation, every day, *especially* during the run up to exams.

Let’s get practical about this. It’s not enough to mutter, “Yeah, yeah, I can do that.” You need to plan. When will this half hour be and what will be in it?

### **When?**

Whenever you like. To get the most benefit, I recommend half an hour *twice* a day. The ideal would be half an hour before you go to sleep and half an hour at another point in the day. (You can do more than half an hour but you shouldn’t do less.)

### **And what?**

Things you enjoy and find relaxing. Things that help you switch your brain off work and worries. There are two types of relaxing activity:

1. Things that *calm* us down, *lowering* our heart rate.
2. Things that are *exciting* and take our mind off any worries, *raising* our heart rate for a while but giving us a good feeling afterwards.

Think about it: some things are obviously relaxing, such as having a bath or listening to gentle music, and others are less obviously relaxing but have a fantastic effect on stress. For example, exercise raises your heart-rate at the time, but is known to be fantastic for stress, partly because afterwards you feel mentally great. The same might apply to things like going on a roller coaster or watching a scary or thrilling film: they aren’t *obviously* calming, but they can have a strong role in dealing with stress, *if* we personally enjoy them.

**So, here are some ideas** (but you may have quite different ideas – it just needs to be something *you* like):

- Take a bath.
- Read a book you love. (See [Tip L](#) for the power of reading for pleasure.)
- Go for a walk – on your own or with friends.
- Just lie somewhere comfortable and make your breathing slow down as you consciously relax all your muscles.
- Find a beautiful view and look at it; or stare at clouds drifting by in a blue sky. Research shows that looking at natural, open scenes lowers heart rate and improves mood.
- Have coffee and cake with a friend. Yes, cake is OK in moderation!
- Watch a funny film.
- Draw a picture, doodle, colour in or write a poem.
- Any exercise – doesn’t matter whether it’s energetic or just a walk or yoga. Moving your body around is the point.
- Lie with your eyes shut and think about what you’d do if you won the lottery.

- Spend time on a hobby – and if you haven't got one, find one! If your hobby involves making something, you could find a way to sell whatever it is and make a bit of money.
- Cook something – a cake, maybe; try my [Brain Cake](#) or [Brain Bars](#): they're a very good way to feed your brain during revision. (You'll find the recipes on my blog under Brainy Food, if those links don't work for you.)
- Stroke a pet. I'm not joking – it's been shown to slow heart rate, improve mood and even help ill people get better.
- Do something for someone else. It's been proved that if we do something kind to help someone else, we get benefit, too.
- Anything else you can think of!

**Activity:** make a poster for your bedroom wall with all the things YOU would spend your daily half hour on. Decorate in any way you like. The point is that when you are feeling stressed, low or upset, you won't easily think of doing these things but a list in front of you acts as a reminder.

### **What about video games or other electronic games?**

I wrote about this [here](#), if you're interested in the detail. But, in brief, this is what I think, based on all my research:

- Playing screen-based games can be a good way to relax because they help you switch off from worries. They are also, of course, often exciting.
- But there are some problems.
- If we spend *a lot* of time on anything, we risk over-using some parts of our brain and under-using others. We need variety of activity in order to be healthy. So, make sure you are not spending more than an hour or so a day on screen-based games. And make sure you are also doing different relaxing things.
- They can be stressful. Are they making you feel good or are they also making you feel bad sometimes? Irritable, for example?
- They can be addictive. Do you find you can't stop? Or that you are thinking about the games even when you're not playing? Those are signs that you are being controlled by them. Is that what you want?

So, video and other computer games can be a positive part of stress relief but that you need to think carefully about how they are actually making you feel and how long you are spending on them. Are you missing out on other important healthy activities, such as exercise and socializing face-to-face?

There are, obviously, different sorts of games and they will have different advantages or disadvantages. Some are more social. Some use more imagination. Some are more challenging. So, use your brain and think about what you're doing.

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## D. FEED YOUR BRAIN

The brain is a very energy-hungry organ and if we don't give it enough of the right sort of fuel, it simply won't work so well. Trouble is, when facing exams, you often won't feel hungry. That's a normal effect of feeling nervous.

I have good solutions and they do NOT involve eating anything you hate!

### Here are the principles:

1. First, learn what sorts of foods help fuel your brain well. (See below.)
2. Second, select all the ones you like. (I'm giving you some ideas soon.)
3. Next, make sure they are in your house. A bit of preparation is needed and co-operation from whoever does the shopping. I know some of the foods are more expensive than others, but do what you can. Not all of them are expensive.
4. Finally, remember to eat them! Take some into school on exam days so that you have food you can snack on.

### So, what foods should you be aiming for?

1. Not too much added sugar.
2. Plenty of protein, but not too much fatty, processed or red meat. Focus on eggs, beans and pulses (eg lentils), avocado, nuts, fish, dairy, grains (eg oats and whole wheat) and chicken.
3. Not too much processed food. ("Processed" means food that has been prepared in a factory and had things added or taken away. Frozen or tinned food can be great, as long as it doesn't have lots of sugar, salt or other additives, especially colours and preservatives. Check the labels. Note that things which say "low fat" often have lots of sugar and other things added.)
4. You have to eat *enough* food, too: now is not the time to be going on a diet. If you're dieting, you're not feeding your brain properly.

I've made a chart with lots of ideas. You'll find it on the next page. Or click [here](#) and select the link to the downloadable chart in the first paragraph of that page.

You'll see a huge list of foods that would be healthy snacks and meals to keep your brain working well. The BLUE foods are breakfast suggestions, but of course you can eat them at other times, too.

<b>EXAM BOOSTS</b> <small>Eat before exam?</small>	<b>REVISION FUEL</b> <small>Eat before revising?</small>	<b>REVISION FUEL</b> <small>Eat before revising?</small>	<b>MEALS</b> <small>Add a yogurt or glass of milk to fuel your brain well</small>
dried berries	yogurt	hummus	eggs + toast
mixed seeds/nuts	fruit smoothie	cream cheese s'wich	tuna s'wich + salad
Brazil nuts	cheese+ tomato s'wich	Soup – eg lentil, veg	chicken s'wich + salad
brain bar (my recipe!)	avocado dip + carrots	porridge	cheese salad
brain cake (my recipe!)	peanut butter	cereal	chicken + pasta+salad
banana	filled wholegrain roll / bagel	cereal bar (quality)	quiche + salad
raisins + peanuts	banana cake	wholewheat pancakes+ banana	baked potato+chse or beans
mixed dried fruit	bagel + crm cheese	milk – hot or cold	Salmon or tuna + rice
oatcakes+ cheese	wholegrain currant bun	homemade milkshake	beans on toast
dried apricots	raisins	oatcakes+ cheese+apple	egg s'wich
homemade granola	breadsticks + dip	cottage cheese	chicken curry+rice
	fish paté	flapjack	couscous
	grapes + cheese	Marmite or vegemite	nut roast or lentil bake

Some people ask if there are any super-foods that make brains work extra well. Well, research is *not* clear and some studies prove nothing. There are positive results reported for Brazil nuts and blueberries, as well as certain oils such as those found in oily fish (eg mackerel), but there's not enough evidence that they are much better than other good foods. So, don't buy supplements or eat a silly amount of one particular food in the belief that it will make you cleverer. Even if they are "super-foods", experts are clear that the *best* thing is *variety*. There is *no* one food that contains everything you need for a healthy brain. Supplements are not generally as good as the food they are trying to replace.

Have you tried my delicious [Brain Cake](#) or [Brain Bars](#)? Tasty, nutritious and fun to make.

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## **E. ASK FOR HELP**

Maybe you're good at asking for help. But maybe you're not. Or maybe you usually are but this time you haven't. And you're panicking.

### **Here's what to do:**

1. First, write your worry or worries down.
2. In a different colour, write the name of someone you could ask for help.
3. If it's not too late to contact the person today, DO IT. If it is too late (and be considerate about bothering teachers during late evenings or weekends unless they've said it's OK) put the paper on the floor by your door, and forget about it till morning; get ready for bed, put some music on or get out an engrossing book, climb into bed and switch off your mind. Worrying about it won't help but now that you have a plan for dealing with it you've done all you can do.
4. Next day, contact the person and ask for the help you need.

The sooner you ask for help, the better. But even if you think it's too late, do it. Teachers and other adults want to help you.

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## **F. STRESS-BUDDY**

A stress-buddy is someone who looks out for you if you're under stress and you look out for them. Friends usually do that anyway, but sometimes even good friends don't notice that someone is suffering inside. And it's easy for someone to be left out and ignored.

Around the time of exams, caring support is especially important.

You might think you don't have time to help someone else. True: your first concern should be you and you are not responsible for other people.

However, helping someone else can make *you* feel good, too. It doesn't have to take lots of time. Sometimes it's a matter of just asking if the person is OK, or letting them into your conversation.

Stress-buddies don't have to be in pairs; there could be small groups, too. Can some of you team up and agree to look out for each other? This means making sure no one is working too hard or eating too little, for example. And reminding them to look after themselves, letting them know if you think they are overdoing it.

If you feel like an outsider, or you don't have a close friend you think can help or for any reason you don't feel OK asking someone to be your stress partner, show this advice to a teacher you trust. Ask if the teacher can think of a way that everyone could be in supportive groups and look out for each other.

Of course, parents and other family members can be supporters, too, but you have to let them know what you need and when. Don't expect them to read your mind.

At this difficult exam time, you need to know someone is looking out for you and you are looking out for someone else. Look around you – who is it?

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## **G. ANTI-PANIC STRATEGY**

It's a horrible feeling when you open the exam paper and find you can't answer the first question. Or the second. And by this time you're in such a panic you think you can't answer the third either.

Or perhaps your panic comes the day before, when you suddenly realise you've forgotten to revise something.

When panic clutches you, you need an instant strategy to calm down the chemicals that are making you over-stressed. Some nervousness helps you perform at your best but panic doesn't. Panic is an extreme state of nervousness which stops you thinking straight.

The solution begins with correct breathing.

When we are stressed or panicking, we tense our stomach muscles and all the breathing moves high in the chest and becomes quite shallow and fast. To lower your stress (or to relax) you need to make your breathing move low down in your body, not high. It is often called belly-breathing.

So, try this now: put one hand high on your chest, just below your collar-bone, and the other low on your stomach. Just notice what your breathing is like. If you're breathing in a relaxed way, the hand on your stomach will be moving and the one on your chest will hardly move at all. So, any time you want to reduce your tension, alter your breathing so that your stomach or belly *is* moving more. When you are doing this properly, you'll also find that other muscles relax, too. Your shoulders sink and everything instantly feels softer, slower, better.

Now you're ready to learn a simple relaxation exercise. I've made an audio file you can listen to on your phone or other device. Once you've practised a few

times with that audio, you can do it on your own whenever you need. The link is [here](#).

Important: practise *before* you are stressed. Then you'll be able to do it easily when you need it.

And never forget the instant calming technique of belly-breathing: breeeeathe with your stomach.

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## **SOMETHING ABOUT PANIC ATTACKS**

Everyone feels panicky now and then but some people suffer full panic attacks. A panic attack is a horrible thing and you may even think you're going to die. *You're not!* If you have ever had a true panic attack, do two things:

1. Practise the relaxation technique and belly-breathing skills even more. They will be your most important first tool.
2. Talk to an adult about it. Panic attacks are *not* dangerous but they are horrible. And there are ways to deal with them and prevent them. Your GP can help, too. People who have panic attacks tend to have higher anxiety levels than others and may need extra help dealing with stress. But I promise there are ways to feel much better and deal with your anxiety.

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## **H. THE HOLIDAYS BEFORE EXAMS**

In the UK this would be the Easter or Spring holidays. It seems very unfair to ruin your holiday by having exams just afterwards!

Whatever holiday period you have just before exams, I have simple advice:

1. At the start of the holiday, check all the tips in this book and write down things you need to remember.
2. Make a new copy of your revision time-table from [Tip A](#) if you want to. Your original one is probably full of crossings-out now. You might need to change some of your plans, depending on how things are going.
3. Look after your mental and physical health, by fitting extra relaxation around the revision. See [Tip C](#).
4. Use any sunny weather to get outside, relax your mind and raise your spirits.
5. Ask for any help you need.
6. See your friends when you want to. Spend time with people who make you feel good about yourself.

7. Make sure you have suitable foods in the house: things you can eat when you're nervous. See [Tip D](#).
8. Oh, and whether or not you're celebrating Easter, eat chocolate! Some people say it has health benefits; I'm afraid the science on this is a bit flaky (!) but there's no doubt that a little bit of what you like does you good. Dark chocolate is probably "better" than milk chocolate but really it's mostly about a little bit of pleasure so choose whichever gives you that. Eat it slowly, consciously tasting every tiny bit.

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## I. THE LAST DAY BEFORE EXAMS

How exciting! It's nearly over!

### Here is your last minute checklist:

1. Stationery and other equipment: is it all ready? Spare pens, pencils etc? Calculator? Any books you need?
2. Food for exam day: do you have a) food you can eat for breakfast even though you might be feeling sick and b) a snack box with suitable, tasty, snackable, brain-fuelling foods? See [Tip D](#).
3. Time-table: do you know *exactly* when you have to be at school and exactly what time exams start every day?
4. Last-minute notes: do you have the final notes for tomorrow's exams, ready to read over one last time in the early evening and then in the morning on your way to school?
5. Relaxation skills and anti-panic strategy: have you practised it? Do it tonight when you're ready for bed, too. (See [Tip G](#).)
6. Pre-bed routine: tonight, it's possible you won't sleep brilliantly. If this happens, don't panic: adrenaline will keep you focused and alert in the exam. However, following good pre-sleep advice will make a big difference. See [Tip K](#).
7. Read a book for pleasure. Keeping up your pleasure reading during exams is a VERY GOOD IDEA. It will help calm your mind, switch your anxiety off and help you sleep. (See [Tip L](#).)
8. If you get stressed tomorrow or the exam goes badly, remember: exams are not the most important thing in the world. You can deal with this. There are many more chances to get where you want to go. So, don't stress about it. (See [Tip N](#).)

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## **J. SHORT TERM MEMORY PROBLEMS**

This is from an email conversation with 15yo C, reproduced with permission.

Hi Nicola

I was searching ways that are good for revising and I came across your booklet on the internet. I am 15 years old and I have a brain injury causing short term memory loss. I have 3 science exams on the 11th, 12th and 13th of May and I was just wondering if you had any tips on how to revise?

Hi C

Thanks so much for emailing me. I'm sorry you have short term memory problems but congratulations for tackling them so positively!

The key is to engage as many of the senses as possible: "multisensory learning". This makes it easier for your brain to recall things. So, the most obvious senses are sight and hearing. Start with those, finding ways to learn your notes using sight and sound. Sight includes colour, pictures and shapes.

For sound, you could record your voice saying facts, for example, and play it back while going for a walk. Sound is involved in making rhymes to remember facts, or singing a song to remember things. So, you could put all the chemical formulae to music! Or make rhythms for them? Use colours?

Movement will help, too. So, pacing the room while learning facts could make a difference. Also the act of writing things in huge letters helps reinforce the memory.

When you get into the exam, you might want to write some notes down quickly, to refer to as you go through the exam, little things you particularly want to remember.

Make sure you eat well before an exam. Nuts and raisins are great if you can't eat through nerves. Yogurt is good! And drink lots of water. All these things are what everyone needs to do but the edge you could give yourself through good nutrition could make your brain perform at its best.

I hope that helps a bit. GOOD LUCK! Let me know how you get on!

Best wishes, Nicola

Hi Nicola,

I had my final science exam yesterday and think my revision has been successful because I didn't struggle too much. Thank you so much for replying and helping me with the tips. They were very useful. I have told my friends about you and passed on your tips and they thought they were very good!

Thank you so much, I will probably be back in touch in year 11 when I have a lot of exams! Thank you, C

Hi C

That's fabulous! Well done! You survived and you survived well. In my opinion, the fact that you actually spent time researching ways to help you shows a real intelligence and that's why you coped so well.

You should be very proud of yourself! Thank you SO much for contacting me – it makes my work worthwhile.

Best wishes for a great summer,  
Nicola

I'm happy to say that C did *really* well in her exams! She came back to me for more help the next year but she really just needed reassurance and to know that someone was thinking of her and saying calming things.

Note: people with dyslexia will also find these tips useful. There is a other advice for dyslexics in [Tip M](#).

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## **K. GET THE BEST SLEEP YOU CAN**

Teenage (11+) sleep patterns often cause problems. You need more sleep but will often find it hard to go to sleep early.

Although everyone's sleep needs are different, you will function and feel better if you can get enough sleep. Here are some tips for you. They help people of any age who want better sleep. Try them for at least a week.

1. Plan ahead. Decide what time you want to feel sleepy and make sure all your work and stress is dealt with an hour before, so you can spend that hour winding down.
2. Create a good routine for the hour before you want to sleep. For example, do all these in the same order each night: an hour before bed, turn off TV, computer, phone, electronic games; have a light snack and milky drink if hungry; dim lights; close curtains; play soft, slow music; bath/shower; clean teeth; get things ready for morning; get into bed; read for pleasure.
3. During hour before bedtime, *avoid*: caffeine (normal tea, coffee, cola etc); backlit screens (TV, computers, phones, electronic games – these emit light that mimics daylight and wakes us up); stress (eg arguments); internet/social media; loud, fast music; fast exercise; large meal.

4. These things can help sleep: lavender oil on pillow or in bath; herbal teas; hot milk/cocoa; reading for pleasure; slow music; dim lights; warmth; breathing/relaxation exercises.
5. Make a list of things you need to do or take to school in the morning. Making a list means you don't have to use brain-power trying to remember or worry.
6. Fast exercise is not good during the hour before sleep, but earlier in the day it can help. But slow exercise, such as yoga or Pilates, can help you wind down near bedtime.
7. Reading (for pleasure, not work) is a good way to wind down and switch off from worries.
8. Catching up at the weekend helps a bit but if you stay in bed too late you'll end up disturbing your body clock and suffering the same as jet-lag – not good!
9. If worries are keeping you awake: write them down and put the paper away; then focus on daydreaming about your ideal place, building up a more detailed picture each night.

Don't worry about not being able to sleep sometimes. A few bad nights won't be a problem. Sleep loss only causes problems when it goes on for too long.

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## **L. KEEP READING FOR PLEASURE**

Too busy to read? Too much revision to do? Stop right there! Now is one of the best times to make sure you're reading for pleasure every day.

The benefits of daily pleasure reading are huge. I've put lots of the research on my website but some of the main results are:

1. You'll reduce stress and lower your heart-rate.
2. Being carried away into another world helps you take a break from your worries.
3. It will help you get to sleep more quickly if you read for a while before switching your light out.
4. Daily reading for pleasure in teenagers is proven to be associated with higher grades and greater success.

I have done a lot of research into the science behind reading to relax. I've even given it a new name: [Readaxation](#). You can find out about it on my website if you want.

Read to relax; read to stay sane; read to know that you are improving your health. Read what you want, something you can get carried away by, something

that will let you escape for a while to another world. You'll come back feeling better and more able to face exams or whatever you are dealing with.

Reading for pleasure is not a luxury: it's medicine for the soul.

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## **M: GET THE RIGHT HELP FOR DYSLEXIA**

As you know, this isn't a book about exam and revision technique but about dealing with exam stress. But in [Tip J](#) I gave advice for people with short-term memory problems so I can't ignore people with dyslexia. Especially as I was a dyslexia expert long before I was a brain and stress expert!

Exams bring extra stress for dyslexics, for two reasons. First, exams are largely tests of reading, writing and memory. These are things dyslexic people most often have challenges with, despite being just as "clever" as anyone else and being better at many other skills than other people.

Second, a very common feature of dyslexia is difficulty with organization, time-tabling and planning ahead. And those are all so important at exam times.

So, here is my advice to deal with these extra stresses:

1. Make sure all the adults in your life (at home and school) realize that organization is difficult for you. They may not know this!
2. Ask for help early. Ask for help with creating a revision time-table, with planning, and with knowing what to expect in every exam. You need to arrive at each exam and feel that when you turn over the paper, you know what you have to do.
3. Follow the same revision techniques as I gave in [Tip J](#) for people with short-term memory problems.
4. Hold onto this idea: it's only at school that your dyslexia is making things so difficult. In the real world, there are huge opportunities for you to use the skills you have and to find new skills. Dyslexic people can be brilliantly successful. Exams are just an annoying hurdle to overcome as best you can (and you might actually do really well!) and then you can run free into a wider world with many chances to shine. Dyslexic people have many strengths and talents but they are often not tested in exams. Your chance will come!

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## **N: DON'T CARE TOO MUCH**

Have your exams gone badly? Do you believe you've missed the grades you think you need for whatever it is you think you want to do? Did the whole thing come tumbling down because you were ill or you'd split up with a boyfriend/girlfriend or you just panicked and it all went wrong? Is your head fizzing with stress and your stomach sick with lead? Are you in a panic about the rest of your life or angry with yourself for (as you see it) letting yourself down?

Well, stop right now! Remember what I said at the start: exams are not the most important things in the world. Nor are they the only route to success. "Failure" in an exam does not need to matter.

Sit down, take a few deep breaths and let me float a few ideas past you.

- You might actually have done perfectly well enough!
- Not getting the required grades doesn't have to stop you. There may be a different course or a different path into the job you think you want – or a similar job that you might enjoy even more.
- If necessary, you can almost always retake an exam.
- Do you *really* know what you want to do anyway? Most people don't and I think it's best to keep open-minded. Why not just see what's out there? There are far, far more things you could be and do than you've currently thought about.
- Pretty much every adult I know has failed something. In fact, failing an exam can make us stronger. We learn as much from failure as from success.
- Some of the most famously successful people in the world didn't do well at school.
- And even among the non-famous, school success does not equate to real life success. It's more about guts and personality than grades.
- Soon, no one will ask what your exam results were.

It feels important now. And, of course, everyone wants to do the best they can and it's right and sensible to aim for that. But trust me when I say that exams do not matter as much as you think. They are just steps and just one path.

Failing exams is not the end of the world. Sometimes, failing exams sets us on a whole new and possibly more exciting course of life. Determination, grit, ambition and guts will do more for you than exams.

So, yes, you can do it! You can't do everything – no one can – but you can do far, far more than you think, if you have the right mental attitude. That attitude starts

with this simple belief: if I work hard, try hard and am determined, I give myself the best chance.

Go for it and GOOD LUCK! Remember: success is more about guts than grades. That is a very good motto for life!

Nicola Morgan

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Please leave your feedback on Amazon. Or email me through my website or contact me on Twitter (@nicolamorgan).

**Other books by Nicola Morgan:**

Blame My Brain – The Amazing Teenage Brain Revealed

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Teaching materials: [Brain Sticks](#) and [Stress Well for Schools](#)

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Thank you!