



Teenage mental health & wellbeing: a guide for parents



How Can Parents Support Their Teenagers' Mental Health and Wellbeing?

Secondary school and the teenage years are some of the most difficult and frustrating that young people go through. Academic success can easily become the centre of attention during this period, even when there is so much else going on, but it is crucial that this pressure isn't allowed to overshadow your child's physical and emotional wellbeing.

It can be easy to forget that school exams, be that internal mocks or GCSEs, are probably one of your child's first encounters with this kind of stress. Understandably, this must be a very scary time for parents not knowing how best they can help. These years are all about keeping a healthy balance between progression and obsession.

Tassomai's little-and-often approach to learning helps to make learning and revision less stressful, so students have more time to prioritise their overall wellbeing. Our team aren't experts in mental health but we have spoken to psychotherapists and mental health campaigners to put together their top tips on how parents can best support their children's mental wellbeing throughout secondary school.

Some of this advice acts as a good reminder of age-old sayings, while some brings a fresh perspective, either way we hope they help your family to conquer the next few years with confidence and understanding.

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What is mental health?

Mental health is defined by the [World Health Organisation](#) as a state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well, work well, and contribute to their community.

Teenage mental health can be particularly delicate due to the many changes taking place at this time in their life and the stresses of social and academic life kicking in for the first time. Young people are going through an extreme period of change during their secondary school years, which is why it can be hard for parents to spot whether changes in their behaviour are just part of them growing up, or something they should be concerned about.

Recognising when there is a problem is key to making sure your child gets the support they need. These conversations aren't always easy and it can be hard to know where to start but ensuring you have open communication is always a good place to start.

“Almost everyone in some area of their life is putting up a front or pretending to be less stressed than they really are. By pulling back the curtain and showing your child that a certain level of stress is perfectly normal, it can help them realise that they aren't alone before they are able to spiral further. It may be cliché but... a problem shared really is a problem halved.”

– Ben West, Mental Health Campaigner



The Teenage Brain

Teenagers are going through **monumental changes** in most aspects of their lives in the build up to GCSEs. Knowing what is physically changing in their brains can be really illuminating when it come to **looking after their mental health** and maintaining good communication.

We spoke to **Madeleine Inkin**, teenage psychotherapist and co-founder of Tassomai, about what is really happening in teenagers' brains, and this is what we learned:

The Prefrontal Cortex

The part of the brain that is responsible for decision making, organising and controlling impulses

The Limbic System

The part of the brain that is responsible for sleep, emotional responses and seeking rewards

- Complex hormonal changes are taking place in the limbic system and prefrontal cortex during the teenage years
- These changes are happening at the same age as academic, family and social pressures tend to increase
- Teenage brains are going through a large period of change during the GCSE years, so it is very understandable that things can feel overwhelming sometimes



“Your child’s brain isn’t fully developed yet. Their prefrontal cortex may not be fully developed until their mid-twenties, and their synapses, the lines of communication between different areas of the brain, are still growing and beginning to specialise.”

– Madeleine Inkin, Teenage Psychotherapist

How can nutrition help student wellbeing?

The Tassomai team spoke to Lucinda Miller, founder and clinical lead of [NatureDoc](#), a UK-wide nutrition clinic specialising in child and teen neurodevelopment and mental health, about what she would recommend to students and their parents when it comes to nutrition, food and all-round wellbeing...

How can nutrition support mental health and wellbeing?

There is increasing evidence that home cooked food vs. shop-bought ultra-processed food is significantly better for mental health. Studies from Australia find that a diet rich in oily fish, meats, dairy, pulses, wholegrains, fruits, salads, and veggies can lift moderate depression within three months. A diet of ultra-processed, packaged convenience food can affect the mental health of young people up to 15 years later, so what they eat now paves the way for their future mental health as well.

Are there any foods you particularly recommend to students?

A high protein breakfast is one of the best habits you can adopt when revising for an exam. This helps to keep a steadier focus for longer. I recommend including some eggs, Greek yoghurt, cheese or peanut butter at breakfast time. There is some evidence that blueberries can help with focus too, so this is a good food to include if you can.

What nutrition advice would you give to students in the lead up to exams?

In the run up to any exams do your best to nourish them with home cooked food which is going to contain more 'brain foods' than shop bought versions. Omega 3 fatty acids from eating oily fish, such as salmon or mackerel, can be very helpful for academic performance. Fish pate on toast or crackers is a good way to get more omega 3 in as a snack.

Any other tips for parents?

Anxiety can become magnified during the GCSE period, and this can affect self-confidence and achievement. My top tips for reducing exam-related anxiety are to cut right back on caffeine and refined sugar, and to increase the consumption of proteins and healthy fats, as well as fruits and vegetables. Supplements that can help with exam-related feelings of panic include Magnesium, B vitamins, and Zinc, as well as Saffron and Theanine.



Advice from a Mental Health Helpline Volunteer

A member of our wonderful team is a volunteer for a mental health helpline in their free time and they wanted to share how important the art of listening is when it comes to mental health.

What advice would you give to parents?

*"One of the biggest bits of advice I would give to parents and students alike is to avoid trying to minimise problems on your own. There is **always someone out there**, whether that's friends and family or people like me at the other end of the phone, who are ready and willing to listen to any problems you are facing.*

*"It's easy to dismiss feelings that you think you 'shouldn't' be upset about, but your feelings are **always valid** and ignoring them doesn't make you feel any better. Everyone is affected by different things in different ways."*

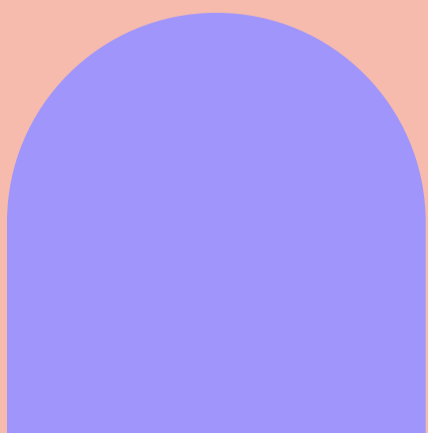
The art of listening

*"Helpline staff never pass any judgement, so that you feel as comfortable sharing with them as possible. This is a **great lesson** when it comes to listening to people in our life, even if it is difficult to hold back our opinions sometimes (as I'm sure it can be as a parent).*

*"Speaking to someone on a helpline gives you a place to have your **thoughts and feelings listened to**, and sometimes that is all you need, as it gives you a chance to reflect on what you are going through in that moment.*

*"There's such **magic to saying something aloud** and having what you say witnessed by someone else, even if there's no immediate solution to the problem. Sharing a problem that has been bouncing around your head and gaining traction with a good listener can be transformative and it's amazing how much it can **change your perspective**."*

We loved this insight into what **'a problem shared is a problem halved'** really means and encourage all parents to keep the importance of communication and listening in mind, particularly at more stressful times in the academic calendar.



Practical Tips to Support Your Child

Do

- **Start the conversation!** Ask them questions about how they're feeling. If they're not comfortable sharing, try opening up about any struggles you've faced in the past. Vulnerability is contagious!
- **Act early!** If you think they are struggling, don't sweep it under the rug. Even if you're not sure of the best way to help, it's always better to address any underlying issues or unhappiness as soon as it arises.
- **Educate yourself** on mental health and the best ways to support your child if they are struggling. [Young Minds](#) has great resources for parents and carers who want to feel a bit more informed.
- Work with your child to try and set up a sustainable routine around homework and exam revision, even if it's initially 15 minutes each day. The confidence-building power of daily routine is transformative and can **prevent stress** before it starts.

Don't

- Stop them from seeing friends during revision time, it's good to break up the work with healthy social situations and **everyone needs some downtime**.
- **Try to take everything on yourself** - it's really important to remind yourself that you are not a professional and there may come a time when your child needs more than just your personal support. This is very hard, especially for parents, as our natural instinct is always to try and 'rescue' someone we care about from situations that are hurting them, but we can't do everything ourselves, nor are we qualified to.
- **Allow stress to become sickness**. Intervene before your child has a chance to get overwhelmed - it's all too easy for everyday stress over schoolwork to tip into something more serious, so don't let a fixable situation get worse than it needs to.
- Let your child mistake a single test score for a **final assessment of their potential**. Instead encourage them to focus on how their work is developing, what they want to improve next, and on the positive incremental changes over time.

Building Resilience

Secondary education requires students to have a level of mental resilience against the stresses and strains they are bombarded with, but they are rarely taught how they can develop these skills. Learning to pick yourself back up again after a failure doesn't always come naturally - it's its own kind of art form and requires practice just like everything else, without it students are much more likely to burnout and get overwhelmed.

Sam Clark, teacher and author of 'What They Don't Teach You in School', told us there are five practical steps that help build resilience in children:

1. Openness

Developing an environment where children feel confident to talk openly.

2. Emotions

Building an emotional vocabulary, so that children understand a range of emotions outside of the 'big four': happy, sad, jealous, angry.

3. Failure

Letting your child know that failure can be the first step to success.

4. Other people

Teaching your child about healthy boundaries and how to respond without being dragged into the emotional reactions of others.

5. Taking responsibility

Learning how to respond to making mistakes is key to becoming emotionally resilient.



Mastering Emotions

We spoke to Emma Yentis, an experienced PSHE teacher, about building resilience and the ways parents can help their children to master their emotions with a few simple techniques.

When it comes to emotions, the main thing to try and avoid is the 'tornado zone' where anger and frustration take over and make communication difficult. The best way to do this with children of all ages is to teach them how to recognise their emotions and what is triggering them.

There are 3 main types of emotions:

- 1. Feeling calm, happy and ready to learn*
- 2. Feeling irritated or frustrated*
- 3. Feeling angry, not listening to people around you and not knowing how to respond appropriately*

Feelings of irritation can quickly spiral out of control into this 'red' zone, hence the name tornado!

The best thing parents can do is give their children the tools to recognise how they are feeling, what is causing those feelings, and what they can do to recentre and calm down.

Some of my favourite methods to help students regain their focus are:

- **Counting to 10** – this may seem basic, but this can provide some much needed calm, even for teenagers*
- **Breathing exercises** – there are lots of these to choose from, so I suggest looking up a few and practising with your child so that they have them in the back of their minds for when they need them*
- **Moving to a quiet space** – this isn't always possible, but if your child struggles with regulating their emotions or has been feeling anxious, reach out to their teachers to help make a plan for if they need to step out of lessons to regain control*



Mental Health Resources

[SHOUT85258](#)

SHOUT85258 is a text message based organisation that gives young people an accessible way of asking for help. Think of it as the texting version of the Samaritans. Even if your child isn't currently struggling, suggesting they save the number to their contacts will let them know that you're thinking of them, without smothering them.

[Samaritans](#)

Samaritans is a registered charity aimed at providing emotional support to anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope, or at risk of suicide throughout Great Britain and Ireland, predominantly through their telephone helpline, which is available 24/7 for those who need it.

[Papyrus UK](#)

Papyrus UK is a mental health charity specialising in supporting young people and they have great advice for parents and carers, both on their website and if you contact them. The resources on their site are fantastic. If you are unsure where to start, head to their website.

[Young Minds](#)

Young Minds is the UK's leading charity fighting for children and young people's mental health. As an organisation, they are fighting for a world where no young person feels alone with their mental health. They have a parents helpline and large bank of resources for parents who are unsure of how to best support their child's mental health.

[Switchboard](#)

Switchboard is a hotline, instant message and email service run by volunteers who all identify as LGBT+. They offer a safe space for anyone to discuss sexuality, gender identity, sexual health and emotional well-being.



“People don’t compare mental health to their physical health enough - if you were concerned for your child’s physical health you would be straight down to your GP asking for a check up and making sure everything was ok. You wouldn’t leave an infection to ‘clear up by itself’, you would act, and the same has to go for mental health. Act early if you notice someone struggling.”

– Ben West, Mental Health Campaigner

How Tassomai can help with exam stress

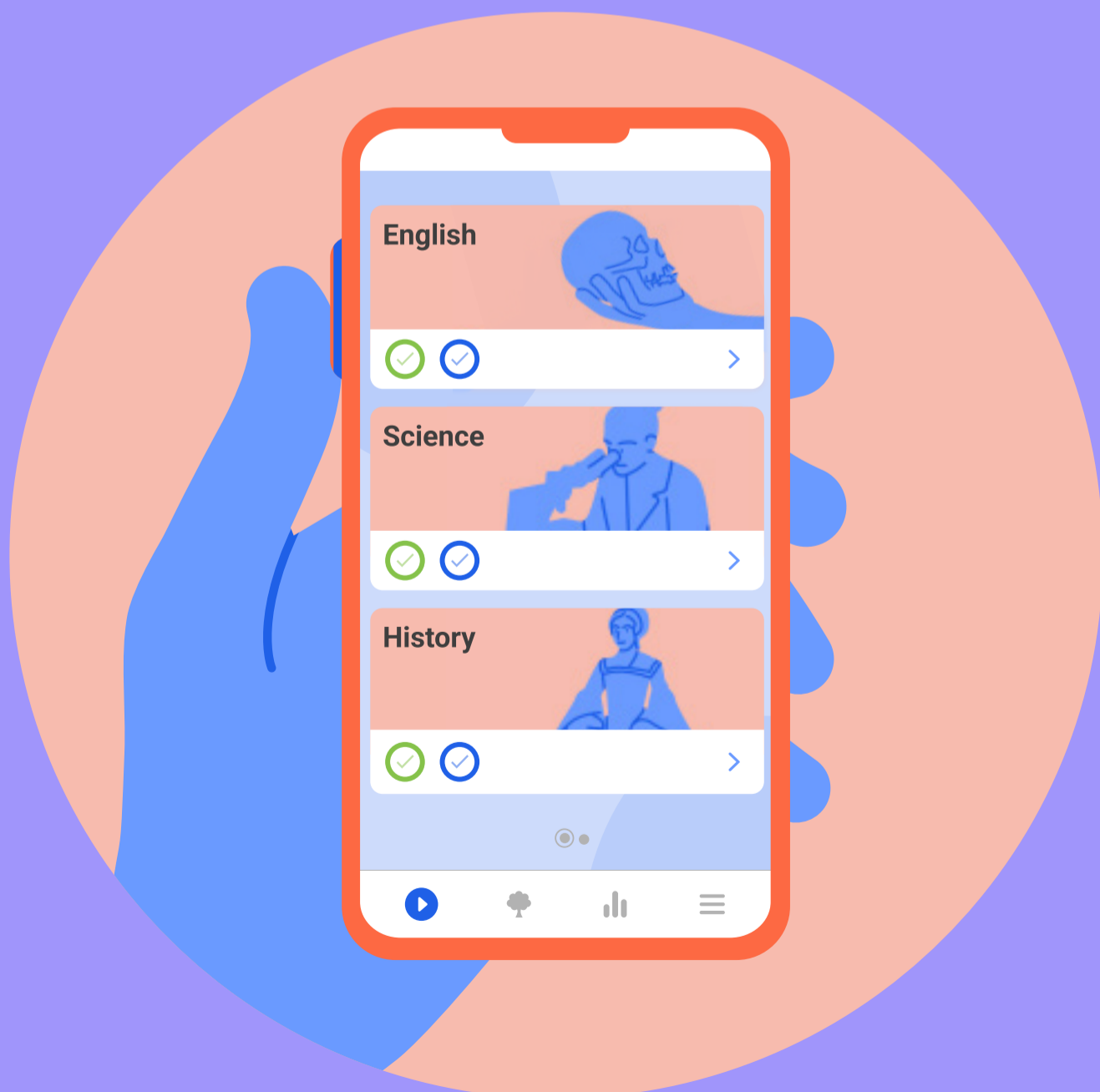
Students preparing for exams often display very similar characteristics, whether they bury their head and ignore their work or try to cram at the last second before a test.

Tassomai is based around the principle of **little-and-often** revision, encouraging students to reinforce strengths and target any weaknesses with personalised daily quizzes.

This approach is **scientifically proven** to help embed knowledge and increase long-term fact retention, but it also has the added benefit of reducing student stress levels.

Opting for quick, **targeted daily quizzing** throughout the school year gives students a constant background level of knowledge and revision, which reduces the need for frantic revision in the run up to exams and **sets them up for success!**

[Find out more about how Tassomai can help your child here.](#)





The Learning Program

www.tassomai.com