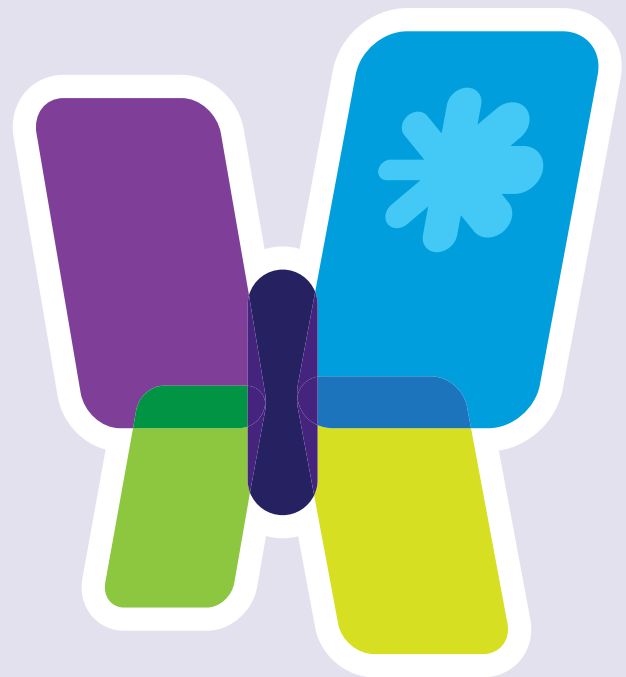


Student Mental Health in Action

Test and Exam Stress: Strategies to Perform at Your Best

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Grades 9 – 12

Lesson plan

This is an expansion lesson for [MH LIT: Student Mental Health in Action](#), a core series of four lessons designed to help students acquire basic mental health knowledge and help-seeking skills. Each lesson will include:

- **Minds On:** an activity for student reflection
- **Action Task:** engagement with the core content of the lesson
- **Consolidation:** activities for students to continue the learning
- **Transition:** a brief practice/activity to end in a positive way and help students transition to the rest of their day
- **Safety:** a reminder about available resources and encouragement of help-seeking

Note: a [slide deck](#) for the lesson has been prepared for your use. **Additional resources (e.g., Kahoots, videos, worksheets) are also embedded throughout the lesson to support various activities.**

This expansion lesson about test and exam stress follows the same format. It is best offered after the core lessons have been delivered to ensure students have a grounding in mental health literacy. However, it may be used independently with proper scaffolding (e.g., an introductory conversation about mental health, suggestions for healthy strategies to support it, information about where to find help and how to connect, and ideas about places to learn more).

OVERALL EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT MH LIT

Students learn skills to better understand mental health and mental illness so they can better support their overall health and school success.

OVERALL EXPECTATIONS FOR THE EXPANSION LESSON

Students

Students acquire knowledge and skills to better manage stress associated with tests, exams, and other assessments, evaluations, and performance-based situations.

Educators

It's important to remember that, as educators and caring adults, we can help prevent some stress associated with tests, exams, and other assessments and evaluations from occurring, and we can also help students develop skills to manage and cope with these situations that are a part of life. Reflecting on assessment practise and then making small shifts can make a big difference for students. By keeping in mind that the purpose of assessment is to improve student learning, we can create more transparent and equitable assessments in our learning environments that increase student engagement and support positive mental health and well-being.



Many of the practises that we already know and do support student mental health and are also helpful in guiding our assessment practises:

- ▶ **Relationships:** when we get to know students and build relationships, we can better recognize and shine a light on their unique strengths. Providing opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning in a way that highlights their personal strengths will improve their confidence and success.
- ▶ **Student voice:** teach students how to reflect on and self-assess their learning. Co-create success criteria so that the path to learning is clear and understood by everyone. Involving and empowering students in these ways will lead to a sense of ownership and predictability that will help improve engagement and reduce stress.
- ▶ **Asset-based approach:** by looking for evidence of learning rather than deficits, you can bolster student confidence and keep the learning moving and growing.
- ▶ **Focus on feedback:** providing descriptive and actionable feedback in a timely manner and giving students time to apply it will reduce stress in students and give space for real learning to happen. Think critically about when to label an assignment with a grade or test students' learning.

As you move through the lesson, consider your opportunities to help reduce student stress by:

- ▶ Communicating clear course outlines and expectations with students.
- ▶ Putting the focus and value on learning and improvement rather than grades.
- ▶ Considering when feedback, rather than assessment, might help you achieve what you need as an educator.
- ▶ Valuing all sources of evidence (including observations and conversations, not just projects, assignments, and tests).
- ▶ Involving students in the feedback/reflection/assessment process.
- ▶ Finding opportunities to be flexible and involve students in assessment decisions. For example, listening to student input when scheduling important assessment dates.
- ▶ Reminding students that tests and exams are not the only assessments that will make up their grade for a course.
- ▶ Conveying the message that all pathways through school are equally valued.
- ▶ Letting students know they can come to you if they have concerns.
- ▶ Teaching and prompting students to use coping strategies.

Educators play an important role in co-creating an environment that will help students feel more comfortable and give them the opportunity to do their best.

Educator resource: for additional ways educators can help set the conditions for students to do their best during tests and exams, see: [Test & exam anxiety: A guide for teachers to support students \(campusmentalhealth.ca\)](https://campusmentalhealth.ca).



LEARNING GOALS	SUCCESS CRITERIA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate an understanding of performance-based stress, factors that contribute to it, and its potential impact. • Normalize test and exam stress. • Consider the impact of school disruptions on test and exam stress. • Increase knowledge and use of strategies that can help with performance-based stress. • Know who to reach out to for support if performance-based stress is difficult to manage. 	<p>Co-develop success criteria with your students using the following questions: “How will we know we are achieving our learning goals? What will it look like/sound like?”</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can recognize that most students feel some stress around tests and exams and other performance-based situations. • I can select, practise, observe, and apply strategies to help me perform my best during tests and exams. • I can take steps to build my study and test-taking skills. • I know relaxation strategies that can help me to manage stress during tests and exams.
CONSIDERATIONS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators may need to differentiate the activities to meet the needs of all learners within the class or group and ensure they can engage with the information in developmentally appropriate and accessible ways. For example, consider students requiring accommodations or modifications to engage in the learning. • Given the possibility that students will be engaged in remote learning, when students are asked to participate, offer a variety of options. For example, they might respond on post-it notes, through a virtual tool, or orally with a partner. When possible, offer students choice and ensure activities are supportive for those who are learning remotely as well as for those engaging in in-person learning. • Should time be limited, you may also offer students choice as to which sections to focus on within the lesson or offer the lesson over more than one period (the Educator Preparation Suggestions offer ideas for doing so). • Approaches to all instruction, including mental health information, are most supportive when they are mediated through recognition and understanding of students’ cultural contexts, lived realities, and the impacts of inequities, biases, discrimination, and marginalization. For more ideas on inclusive instructional pedagogy, see: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction to Effective Teaching Practices for the De-streamed Grade 9 Math Classroom (gov.on.ca) • The focus on emotions in this series may be difficult for some students. Be prepared to connect students to additional supports, if needed. Refer to the following resources for more information and take time to consider your school and board circle of support and service pathways. Know what to do and who to connect with if a student seems like they might be struggling with their mental health. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One-Call Desk Reference (smho-smso.ca) - Talking with Parents and Families about Mental Health (smho-smso.ca) - Circle of Support and System Pathways – Flowchart (smho-smso.ca) <p>For more suggestions for delivering the series of lessons, see the “Educator preparation suggestions” resource.</p>	



SETTING THE STAGE

Remind students of the “ground rules” or shared agreements established during [Lesson 1](#) or, if this lesson is being used as a stand-alone, introduce the conversation here and spend a few minutes talking about what students need to feel comfortable discussing mental health. Collaboratively create some “ground rules” or shared agreements to guide the discussion, such as:

- ▶ There is room for everyone to contribute, but you don’t have to speak if you don’t want to.
- ▶ Use thoughtful, non-stigmatizing language about mental health that makes everyone feel included.
- ▶ Be open to each other’s experiences and appreciate differences. Value everyone’s voice.
- ▶ Share the mental health facts and information with others but keep our conversation private.

Teacher prompt: “In these lessons we focus on sharing facts and reliable information rather than sensitive personal stories, which take time and attention to share and may be upsetting for some students. If there is a personal situation you would like to speak about, please see me after class. I’ll also be sharing resources throughout the lesson.”

If a student does start to make a disclosure during class, you may redirect them using a statement such as the following: “Thank you for sharing. This is important and I want to give it the time and attention it deserves. Let’s check in after class.”

MINDS ON

Warm up activity

This Minds On activity involves two quick anonymous polls about test and exam stress.

- ▶ **Question 1:** Have you ever experienced stress related to your academic success at school (e.g., graded assignments, labs, quizzes, tests, or end of term exams)?
- ▶ **Question 2:** Has your test and exam stress changed over time (e.g., with changes in grade, changes in schools, the onset of the pandemic)?

Ask students to consider their collective responses:

- ▶ How common was stress related to academic success at school?
- ▶ Did students note changes in their test and exam stress over time? If so, why do they think that was the case?

Teacher prompt: “Most people experience some stress when they have an upcoming test or exam. The changes in school over the past few years have also impacted the way students have been assessed, which can also influence how they feel about assessments and evaluations. For example, in some cases students haven’t had as much practise with tests and exams as usual and that can understandably affect how comfortable they are with them.”

Kahoot



Educators may also wish to share the following information with students from a [2021 study](#) with Ontario students in grades 7-12:

- ▶ The COVID-19 pandemic affected mental health for many people. In this study 39% of students felt that the pandemic negatively affected their mental health “very much” or “extremely.”
- ▶ It also impacted learning for some students, which can influence exam and test-taking. For example, 26% of students felt that online learning from home due to the pandemic was “very difficult” or “extremely difficult.”
- ▶ However, students experienced stress before the pandemic, too; 32% of students reported an elevated level of stress or pressure in their lives, and this wasn’t significantly different from before the pandemic.

Teacher prompt: “Test and exam stress are very common, and the past few years have presented additional challenges. Today we will talk about ways to manage the common stress of exam and test-taking and share some strategies to help you perform your best.”

NOTE: Knowing your students is so important. Remember that some students experienced more significant negative impacts of the pandemic than others, depending on their life circumstances (e.g., financial hardship and instability, loss of a loved one). Educators should also be aware of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on students who experience racialization and marginalization, which can translate into challenges in terms of how they participate in school-related tasks. Some newcomer and refugee students may also have experienced significant disruptions to their school attendance prior to their arrival in Canada, which can impact test taking and exam stress. Also note that in some cultures and communities, there can be particular pressure towards performance that may make assessments and evaluations more stressful for some students. As you prepare the lesson, consider your students and any sensitivities and vulnerabilities that may be present. Emphasize examples that respectfully validate realities while also offering hope.

Optional Educator Resources:

- ▶ [Welcome students who are newcomers to Canada – Educators and student support staff – School Mental Health Ontario](#) (smho-smsso.ca)
- ▶ [Listen, Believe & Act: Support for students who have been disproportionately impacted in schools](#)



ACTION TASK

What is test and exam stress and where does it come from?

NOTE: This section corresponds to Part 1 of the Student Journal

Share the following facts with students and, if time allows, you may wish to use them to open a dialogue with students about what they think stress is.

- ▶ Test and exam stress is the pressure, tension, nervousness, and sometimes worry we feel before or during test-taking situations (and other types of assessments and evaluations). It can involve thoughts about being evaluated and the consequences if we don't do well.
- ▶ Most people feel some stress when they are about to write a test or exam, or when they are performing in some other way (like giving a presentation or trying out for a team, musical performance, or school play). It's very common.
- ▶ Stress can be a good thing! Some nervousness can help motivate us to work hard, focus, and perform our best. It shows the test or exam is important to us.
- ▶ However, if the stress gets too big, it can get in the way of our ability to study for tests and exams and to show what we know when we are taking them.
- ▶ That's because when worries are too big, they take up space and resources in our brains that we need for the test or exam, like our ability to remember and work with information (our working memory).
- ▶ This tends to affect our ability to solve complex and challenging questions more than simpler ones, like remembering basic facts. It can make the hard stuff even harder.

Appendix A offers a graphic of the relationship between stress and performance (the Stress Performance Curve, also known as the Yerkes-Dodson Law). It demonstrates how some stress can be helpful but that too much can have a negative impact. Ideally when we are taking tests and exams (or performing in other ways), we are aiming to stay in the yellow zone.

Teacher prompt: "A common reason people may feel test and exam stress is lack of preparation, but there are many other reasons, too."

Share with students these additional factors that can be related to test and exam stress, or invite students to brainstorm what they feel contributes:

- ▶ daily routines (e.g., physical activity, substance use, nutrition, sleep)
- ▶ inefficient or ineffective ways of studying
- ▶ time-management difficulties (and timed tests)
- ▶ the scheduling of many tests/exams/other due dates within a short period
- ▶ lack of familiarity and practise with taking tests and exams
- ▶ taking classes that aren't a good fit for you



- ▶ external pressure (e.g., from parents/caregivers to gain acceptance into a certain post-secondary program or job)
- ▶ internal pressure (seeing your grades as a reflection of your worth as a person)
- ▶ over focusing on the outcome of a test or exam and wanting to get a certain mark
- ▶ past experiences of not doing well on a test or exam
- ▶ negative thinking and self-criticism
- ▶ over focusing on how classmates, friends, or siblings are doing in school
- ▶ issues outside of school interfering with studying or concentrating
- ▶ balancing schoolwork with the demands of a job (needing to work long hours—this can impact time for school, personal time, and fatigue, among other things)
- ▶ social media and the pressure to overextend yourself/take on too much both in and outside of school (e.g., in an attempt to match unrealistic examples of lives/success)

Teacher prompt: “There are many factors that may impact the level of stress you feel with an upcoming exam or test. Some of these are controllable and, if you address them, you can set yourself up for success. For example, when you know a test is coming, you might be able to spend less time on social media, so you have more study time. Other factors may be beyond your control but acknowledging them and their impact and changing the way you think about them can help. For example, if you are worried about getting a certain mark, you can try to focus on the importance of what you have LEARNED rather than the test or exam and remind yourself that there will be other opportunities to show your learning that will also contribute to how you do in the course. In a moment, we will spend some time sharing some strategies that may help manage stress related to tests, exams, and other performance-based situations.”

How do we experience test and exam stress?

NOTE: This section corresponds to Part 2 of the Student Journal

Teacher prompt: “We’re going to take a few minutes to think about the experience of test and exam stress. It feels different for each of us, so this is an opportunity to think about how it shows up for you. Our stress response is often automatic (meaning we don’t choose or plan it). But knowing what it looks like can help you recognize it, choose strategies that work, and use them early so you can minimize the impact of stress on your schoolwork and health. You can also reach out for help early, too, if needed. If you are experiencing a lot of stress, it’s always a good idea to speak to your family doctor, too, just to make sure there are no physical health issues that may be contributing.”

Invite students to privately reflect on the personal Student Journal offered. **The Journal is not for submission. It is for personal reflection only.**

Teacher prompt: “As you complete the Student Journal, consider if test and exam stress show up in mainly one way for you when/if they appear, or if a variety of areas are involved. As we move into the next section of the lesson, we will return to the strategy column so you can record strategies that may be a good fit for the way you experience test and exam stress.”



What can we do about test and exam stress?

NOTE: This section corresponds to Part 3 of the Student Journal

Teacher prompt: “It may take some patience but managing test and exam stress is a skill we can practise and improve. We’re going to talk about four strategies that can help. They are strategies that are flexible enough to be used while you are writing tests and exams, but they can help with other types of performance situations, too, like giving a speech, auditioning for a play, participating in a sports event, or even making a big decision. The four types of strategies focus on healthy routines, study and test-taking skills, challenging unhelpful thoughts, and relaxation. As we go through them, think about how you experience test and exam stress. This can help you decide which strategies may be most important for you. For example, if you tend to be critical of yourself and imagine the worst, you might want to focus on thought changing. Or if you tend to get physical reactions that make it hard to focus during tests and exams, you might want to try relaxation. There is no one right way to manage test and exam stress, and you may wish to try several strategies, so you have a variety of options available for different circumstances. If you look up more ideas online, be mindful of the variability of advice on social media. The ideas here have been carefully chosen and reviewed. Some of them may seem a bit simple, but they really can make a difference.”

Optional video: educators may wish to share this brief student voice video on [Skills for students: Managing the stress you feel](#) – YouTube (1 minute)

STRATEGY #1: BUILD HEALTHY ROUTINES

Teacher prompt: “Healthy routines are the foundation for everything we do. Here are some routines that can support us to be at our best, no matter what kind of challenge we are facing. This may sound simple, but taking care of ourselves helps with our health, wellness, and ability to manage stress. You are worth it! And you will be a better friend, family member, and student if you take the time to care for your well-being.”

HEALTHY ROUTINE	WHY IT MATTERS
Getting enough sleep	Research shows that sleep after learning supports memory consolidation; if your brain is rested, it can learn and remember better and think better during tests and exams. Regular routines that give you 6-10 hours of sleep can help you manage stress. This may mean turning off screens at least an hour before bed to give your brain a chance to settle down and prepare to sleep.
*Being nourished	Your brain needs vitamins, minerals, and nutrition to work its best. Try to eat well before a test or exam, if you can.
Staying hydrated	Your brain needs water to focus and be efficient. A hydrated brain performs faster than a dehydrated one.
A healthy level of physical activity, given your fitness level and body	Physical activity improves memory and attention, so it’s great to get moving during study breaks (or even while studying) and before tests and exams, if you can.



HEALTHY ROUTINE	WHY IT MATTERS (continued)
Being mindful of stimulant use (e.g., energy drinks, caffeine, nicotine)	These kinds of stimulants can increase anxiety and interfere with sleep. Limit caffeine intake and watch when you have it during the day (try not to have it too close to bedtime).
Scheduling time effectively	Scheduling can help you make the most of your time and see your goals and the steps you are taking toward them. A study plan can reduce stress because it helps you stay on track and prioritize healthy routines. It can also help you feel in control. Aim for a schedule you can maintain and be sure to include breaks and downtime. They give your brain time to consolidate information and allow you to do other things that support your learning (like eating, relaxing, or moving). Blocking time for fun is important too!
Prioritizing what you need to do and how to spend your time	Prioritizing can help you ensure the important stuff is covered, which can help reduce stress. Prioritize the hardest tasks during your peak learning/energy times.
Staying connected	Sometimes when we are stressed, we withdraw. But maintaining a healthy social support network is essential to physical and mental well-being. It can positively impact everything from your ability to cope with stress to your self-esteem and blood pressure. Take time to text a friend, schedule a walk and talk, help someone out, or make a meal together.

Potential discussion points: To do your best on tests and exams, it's not only important to study. It's also important to take care of yourself.

- ▶ Do students sometimes prioritize tests, exams, and other assessments and evaluations over their physical well-being? When is that most likely to happen?
- ▶ How could students be more aware of the connection between their physical well-being and school success?
- ▶ What would help students maintain a healthy work-life balance?

Ask students to share their thoughts (e.g., on post it notes, through a virtual tool, or orally with a discussion group or partner). Choose the method that best suits your learning situation and the needs of your students.

Optional video: [Mood Matters: How Food, Movement & Sleep Can Have an Impact on You](#) – YouTube (4 minutes)

NOTE: During the COVID-19 pandemic, an increase in eating issues was observed, and in Ontario 46% of students in grades 7-12 reported being preoccupied with/worried about their weight or body shape (OSDUHS, 2021). Educators should ensure conversation about food and nutrition is sensitive and body positive. Offering one-time presentations on disordered eating and eating disorders or assigning eating disorders as an isolated topic of study/project topic is not recommended as **it may inadvertently increase preoccupation with weight and shape**. Instead, a whole-school approach focusing on ensuring the student environment is supportive of body diversity and health equity is recommended. In a culture where youth are subjected to constant pressure to look a certain way, it is important that we create an environment where they can be accepted as themselves. For more information about how schools can help, explore this [tip sheet from Eating Disorders Ontario Prevention](#).



STRATEGY #2: BUILD STUDY AND TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES

Teacher prompt: “There are many strategies we can use to help us study and take tests and exams effectively, like organizational and time management skills, learning strategies like note taking and reading strategies, and stress management strategies. We all learn differently and have different learning strengths, so it’s important to find the strategies that work best for you.”

Appendix B provides a variety of study and test and exam taking strategies for students. Some of these tips are shared within the Student Journal. The full list of tips can be accessed by students on [School Mental Health Ontario’s student blog](#).

STRATEGY #3: CHALLENGE YOUR THOUGHTS

Teacher prompt: “The way we think can have a big impact on how we feel and what we do. Here are some ways of thinking that can help manage test and exam stress.”

- ▶ Focus on what you can control about the test or exam (e.g., your breathing and preparation).
- ▶ Reinterpret what you are feeling in your body as helpful (e.g., when your heart rate speeds up it delivers more oxygen to your brain, which can help you think better).
- ▶ Refocus if you start to think about past experiences when you didn’t do well on a test or exam.
- ▶ If thoughts about other aspects of your life are distracting you, “package” them by writing them down and telling yourself you will deal with them later.

Teacher prompt: “When it comes to test and exam stress, we can sometimes think negative thoughts about the test, ourselves, and our future. But thinking something doesn’t mean it is true or that it will happen, and these thoughts can get in the way of doing our best. Unhelpful thoughts can be about things like:

- ▶ feeling your test scores equal your self-worth
- ▶ comparing yourself to others
- ▶ feeling you are behind where you should be because of school disruptions

These can lead to negative thinking habits, such as:

- ▶ automatically deciding that you’re not capable of meeting a new challenge or solving a difficult problem (which can make you give up before you even try)
- ▶ expecting the worst when you’re faced with uncertainty
- ▶ feeling if your performance isn’t perfect, it’s a total failure
- ▶ thinking about negative experiences so much, you don’t notice the positive and neutral ones
- ▶ holding yourself to unreasonable standards
- ▶ assuming others are thinking negative things about you



This kind of thinking can make assessments and evaluations more stressful. When you notice unhelpful thoughts and self-criticism happening, interrupt and challenge them! Then strive for more realistic thinking. Realistic thinking involves looking at all aspects of a situation – the positive, negative, and neutral—before making conclusions. It doesn't mean everything is perfect all the time. It means you look at yourself, others, and the world around you in a fair and balanced way. Here are some strategies to help.”

- ▶ Pay attention to your thoughts and what you are saying to yourself; often we are unaware of our thoughts even though they are having a big impact on us.
- ▶ Identify the specific thoughts that make you feel stressed.
- ▶ Notice shifts in your stress level. When they happen, they are a cue to ask yourself:
 - What am I thinking right now?
 - What is making me feel stressed?
 - What am I worried will happen?
 - What negative thing do I expect?

Source: [Test Anxiety Workbook \(Anxiety Canada\)](#)

Teacher prompt: “Once you know the thoughts that are stressing you out, interrupt and challenge them. Sometimes this can be tricky, so we are going to practise. If you practise regularly, these strategies can help you to:

- ▶ develop a healthy mindset toward tests and exams (e.g., they are an opportunity to shine, show what you know, and highlight your strengths; they can also help you figure out areas you might want to focus on so you can build your knowledge and skills);
- ▶ manage self-expectations and expectations from others;
- ▶ manage negative emotions after achieving less than personal goals;
- ▶ reframe what success looks like from a certain mark to doing your best.”

Optional video: educators may wish to share this brief student voice video on [Skills for students: Persevering even when things are hard](#) – YouTube (1 minute).

Appendix C offers an activity to help students challenge their thinking. For more, see School Mental Health Ontario’s [Virtual Field Trip on Thought Changing](#).

Reflection question:

- ▶ Is there anything you could do or not do to help others with their test and/or exam stress? For example, could you take a deep breath with a friend prior to a test or exam? Or could you avoid comparing answers with classmates as soon as a test is over?
- ▶ Ask students to share their thoughts (e.g., on post it notes, through a virtual tool, or orally with a discussion group or partner). Choose the method that best suits your learning situation and the needs of your students.



STRATEGY #4: PRACTISE RELAXATION STRATEGIES

Teacher prompt: “You can practise interrupting unhelpful thoughts, and you can practise interrupting the anxious feelings that can come along with them, too. There are many ways to relax ourselves, our minds, and our bodies. Daily practise is a great idea. The more you practise when you are calm, the more you’ll be able to use the strategies when you are stressed. practise during your study sessions and use the strategies just before a test or exam starts, during the test or exam, and when the test or exam is over. You can use the strategies before you go to sleep, too, especially the night before an exam.”

STRATEGY	RESOURCES
Breathing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding Calm – Guided Breathing Video, SMH-ON (youtube.com) • Circular Breathing Video, SMH-ON (youtube.com) • Breathing Exercises Bundle (smho-smsso.ca) • Breathing Balloon (kidshelpphone.ca) <p>For more, see School Mental Health Ontario’s Virtual Field Trip on Breathing Strategies to support students’ stress management and coping skills. It includes a video to help students practise.</p>
Muscle relaxation and stretching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tense and Relax Video, SMH-ON (youtube.com) • Muscle Relaxation Exercises Bundle (smho-smsso.ca) <p>For more, see School Mental Health Ontario’s Virtual Field Trip on Muscle Relaxation Strategies. It includes a video to help students practise.</p>
Visualization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding Calm – Forest Visualization Video, SMH-ON (youtube.com) <p>For more, see School Mental Health Ontario’s Virtual Field Trip on Visualization. It includes a video to help students practise.</p>
Grounding techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grounding Techniques Bundle (smho-smsso.ca) • Breathing and Noticing Video, SMH-ON (youtube.com)

NOTE: Students may request information about stress-related apps. It can be challenging to select mental health apps as there are so many available options. Educators may find considerations and cautions to help guide this discussion within the “Mental Health Apps” section of the [School Mental Health Decision Support Tool: Student Mental Health Awareness Initiatives; Version for School Administrators - School Mental Health Ontario](#) (smho-smsso.ca)



CONSOLIDATION

NOTE: Part 4 in the Student Journal also offers an independent consolidation activity (the creation of a personalized plan)

The consolidation is a scenario that allows students to practise what they have learned. The scenario is available as a short video. Appendix D also provides the script and an educator discussion guide.

Practise Scenario Video – Youtube

Practise Scenario Video – Vimeo

Teacher prompt: “We are going to put what we’ve learned today into practise.”

NOTE: Educators may wish to check in with students before the next class test or exam to remind students of the lesson and their personal strategies. And remember, educators play an important role in co-creating an environment that will give students the opportunity to do their best!

Wrap up questions:

- ▶ Is there anything from our discussion that really stood out for you or surprised you?
- ▶ What is one strategy that you’re interested in exploring as a start?
- ▶ Has anything changed in terms of the way you think about test and exam stress?

Key messages:

- ▶ Most students feel stress when taking tests and exams.
- ▶ Some stress is a good thing! It can help us perform our best.
- ▶ Stress that is too big can get in the way of studying and showing what we know during tests, exams, and other assessments and evaluations.
- ▶ Doing well on tests and exams is a skill we can practise and get better at. There are strategies that can help.
- ▶ If strategies aren’t enough, it’s probably time to talk to an adult who can help you find more support.



TRANSITION

Personal Wellness

Teacher prompt: “Talking about mental health is very personal and can give rise to strong feelings. I encourage you to participate in a personal wellness practice today. This means taking time to do things you enjoy and that make you feel a sense of well-being.”

Remind students they can access the wellness handouts provided in previous lessons or educators may find them under [Classroom Resources](#).

Optional video: Share the body scan guided relaxation practice offered to help students wrap up the lesson and prepare to move on to whatever they have next in their day.

[Finding Calm - Body Scan Visualization Exercise](#) – YouTube (2.5 minutes)

Teacher prompt: “We are going to participate in a relaxation activity. The activity asks you to think about where you carry tension in your body and then try to relax it. You may close your eyes and just listen, or watch the video, if you prefer. The video is available online, so if you find it helpful you can use it again.”

NOTE: This type of brief practice can also be a good way to help students transition into your classroom.

SAFETY

NOTE: Part 5 of the Student Journal also includes student resources and supports

Teacher prompt: “While there are many things we can do to help during tests and exams and other assessments and evaluations, we can’t and we don’t control everything, and sometimes things get in the way of our ability to do well. If you try these strategies and they aren’t helping, if your worry is really big and long-lasting, or if the things outside of school that are distracting you are hard to manage, you don’t have to do it on your own. There are people who can help and remember, you deserve support. If you aren’t sure how to start the conversation, you can use words such as these:

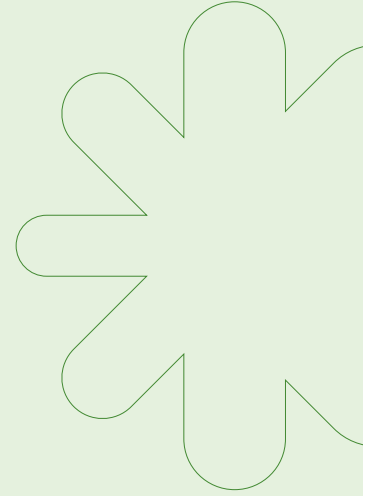
- ▶ *Something has been bothering me. Can you help me find someone to talk to about it?*
- ▶ *I’ve been feeling stressed a lot lately. Can I talk to you about it?*
- ▶ *Do you have some time to meet with me? There’s something I need help with.”*



Student resource: [My Circle of Support Pocketbook – Student Help-Seeking Resource](#)

Remind students that, if they are feeling unwell (e.g., overwhelmed, anxious, sad) for any reason, they can talk to you or another adult they trust. There are people who work in schools, and in our community, who are there to help them find ways to feel better. Let students know who is available to help in their school, provide them with the additional resource list below, and encourage help-seeking.

- ▶ **Kids Help Phone**
Call: 1-800-668-6868
Text: CONNECT to 686868
- ▶ **First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line**
Call: 1-855-242-3310
- ▶ **Black Youth Helpline**
Call: 416-285-9944 or toll-free 1-833-294-8650
- ▶ **LGBT YouthLine**
Text: 647-694-4275
- ▶ **Trans Lifeline**
Call: 877-330-6366



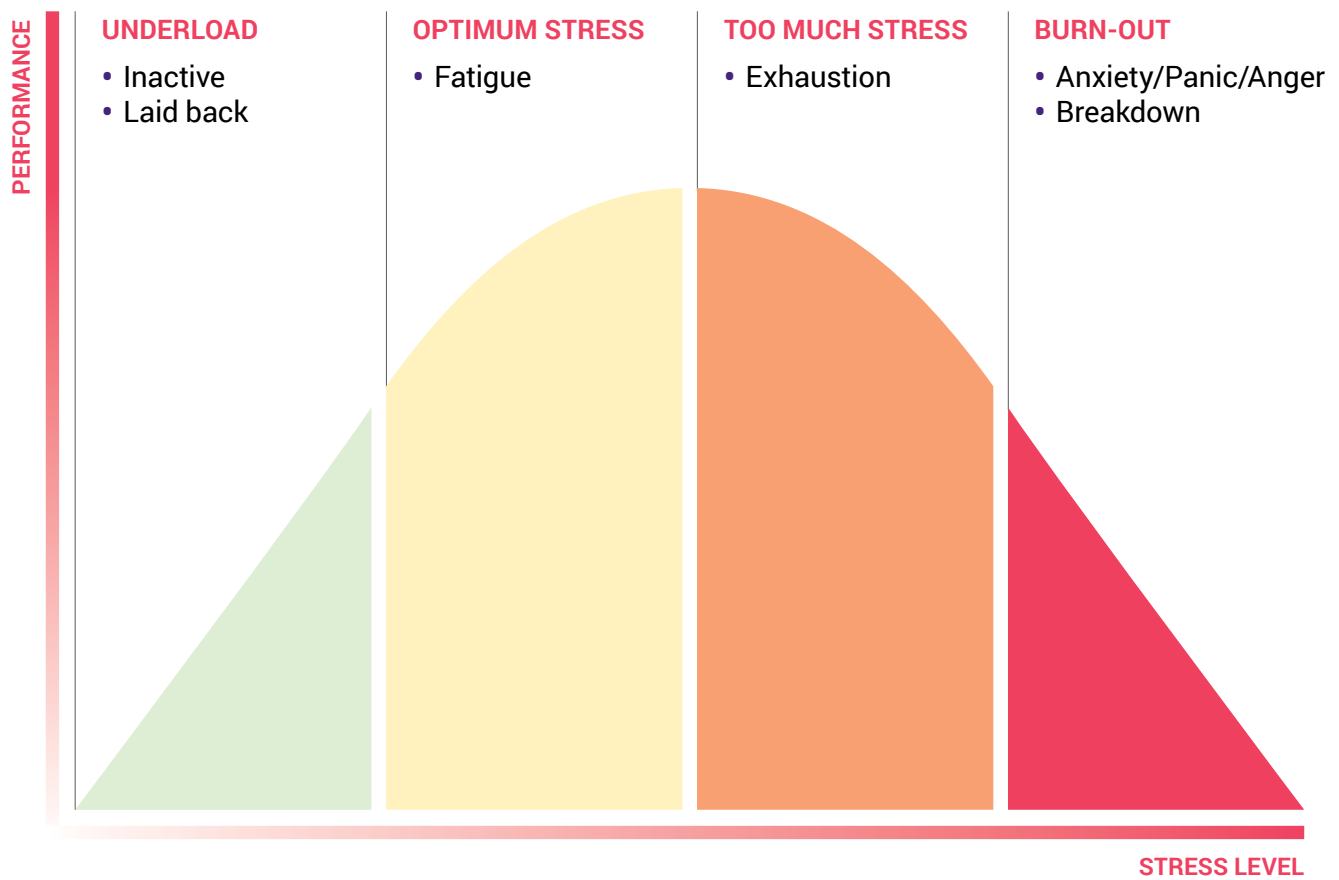
NOTE: Students may feel self-conscious about taking a picture or otherwise recording resources in front of others. It can be helpful to make resources available electronically on a class or school website. Students have shared that physical copies of resources placed in stairwells or on the back of washroom stall doors also offer privacy.





Appendix A

The Stress Performance Curve





Appendix B

Study and Test/Exam Taking Strategies

The full list of tips can be accessed by students on [School Mental Health Ontario's student blog](#).

NOTE: The skills and strategies noted below are good for all students but may be particularly relevant for students with learning challenges (e.g., students with challenges in language and/or short-term/working memory). For these students, it is important that their study skills suit their best learning style, and the direct/explicit teaching of these skills is beneficial for their optimal learning and ability to show what they know. Encourage all students to think about the strategies that work best for them. Do they prefer visual options? Things they can listen to? Things they can touch? Encourage them to personalize strategies from this resource.

STUDY AND TEST/EXAM TAKING STRATEGIES

Study strategies

- Gather the information you need about your course (e.g., the course requirements; what your teacher expects; the dates and times of tests, assignments, quizzes, and exams).
- Before you start studying, organize material in the way you best learn and remember information (e.g., make an infographic if you are a visual learner).
- Study in a distraction-free environment, if possible.
- First, focus on learning the content (understanding it); then focus on studying it (remembering it). Aim to understand the material, not just have it memorized.
- Plan your studying. Set up a study schedule that puts the most difficult aspects of each course as early as possible so if you need more time to learn and practise, you have it. Use time-management tools like an agenda and calendar (put in important dates; plot out your study time and breaks, too!).
- Avoid cramming (study in short spurts of less than an hour) and take breaks. One long study session is less effective than multiple short sessions. It's like training for a marathon. You can't do it all in one day!
- Review material often (e.g., 5-10 minutes per course per day – repetition, even just a little, helps memory).
- Avoid procrastination (try an easy task to get going or set a timer for five minutes and see if you can get in gear – it's easier to keep studying than to start).



STUDY AND TEST/EXAM TAKING STRATEGIES

Study strategies (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be active in your learning (e.g., create a short, personalized study guide or tools like flashcards, test yourself along the way, or teach the material to someone else). Only re-reading texts is usually not enough. • Connect new ideas to things you already know and understand (this can help you remember information). • Prioritize multiple tests/exams by both when they occur and their difficulty level. • Review past tests or exams if they are available (they can help you know what to expect and what to study). • Use stress busters during your studying (e.g., 12 instant stress busters – Kids Help Phone). • Ask for help sooner versus later (e.g., classmates and teachers). Request teacher-student conferences to prepare, if they are available and would be helpful. • If you have an individual education/learning plan (IEP) that includes accommodations, work with your teacher to make sure you will have access to them during the test or exam. Know what you are entitled to.
Before the test or exam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try not to study right up until the minute you write the test or exam. Give yourself at least a few minutes to take a break. Put on headphones, find a quiet space, or do something else that helps calm you. • Don't engage with friends/classmates who are stressing or cramming—and remember the impact you can have on those around you, too. • Do a brain dump of your worries. Write them all out and leave your worries at the door when you go to write the test. Or take five minutes right before the test to write down your thoughts and feelings about it on a piece of paper. Then crumple up the paper and throw it away.
General test-taking strategies	<p>Before you start the test or exam:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you have choice, select the seat where you feel you'll be least distracted. • Take some deep breaths and remind yourself to use breathing and other relaxation strategies throughout the test or exam. • If you feel keyed up, tell yourself, "I'm excited." • Do an information dump; jot down any memorized material you're concerned about remembering (e.g., formulas, equations, characters) on the margins or back of the exam.



STUDY AND TEST/EXAM TAKING STRATEGIES

<p>General test-taking strategies (continued)</p>	<p>During the test or exam:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey the exam. Take a quick look at the entire exam to help you decide where to begin and how much time to spend on each question. Plan your time based on the value of each section. • Read directions carefully and underline key terms and phrases like instructional verbs (e.g., compare, contrast, criticize, define, describe, explain, interpret and summarize) and words that shift meanings (e.g., all, always, never, none, few, many, some). • Do easy questions first. They can help give you clues for more challenging questions. Starting with questions you can answer easily can also help build your confidence. • Don't stay on questions that stress you out; mark them so you know to come back but move on to the rest of the test first. • If you get stuck, put down what you can. Start with anything! • If you have time, re-read your exam to catch mistakes and make sure you've answered questions thoroughly and clearly.
<p>Multiple choice tests and exams</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read directions carefully. • Read each question thoroughly and try to generate your own answer before reading the options; they are designed to be close to the answer and can distract you. • Read every word of each choice. Don't stop when you get to one that you think is the right answer. • Underline keywords and phrases. • Pay attention to qualifiers (e.g., "only" or "except") and negative words (e.g., "not"), which can confuse your understanding of what is being said. • Eliminate answers you know are incorrect. • Look for patterns that may help with the answer. • Mark up the test. Highlight, underline, cross things out, make notes, and make the test your own.
<p>Matching tests and exams</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read directions carefully. • Start with the column that has the longest statements and match those with shorter statements or terms. • Do easy matches first.



STUDY AND TEST/EXAM TAKING STRATEGIES

Short answer tests and exams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep sentences short and to the point to help you stay on topic and respond directly to the question. • Focus on including key information, such as facts, figures, examples, quotations, etc. • Look for clues (e.g., the sentence structure or number of blank lines). • Don't spend a lot of time looking for hidden meaning (short answer questions tend to test recall/memory). • Over-answer. If you can't decide between two answers, list them both (but try to be concise). You might get partial marks.
Essay questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey the exam. Read all the questions and decide how much time you are going to spend on each. • Analyze each question carefully. Understand what it is asking. Underline key terms and phrases. • Plan before you begin writing. Write down the main ideas and examples and create an outline. • Write your full answer (use your outline and fill in the details). • Include one main idea per paragraph. Offer evidence and explanation. • Review and ensure you answered all parts of the question. • Check the details (e.g., capitalization, spelling, and punctuation). • When a test includes a long reading passage, read the questions first. They will help you focus on what you are looking for.
Take-home and online tests and exams – general strategies	<p>These exams still require studying and careful preparation. Being familiar with the material will help save you time looking for it because you likely won't have time to learn as you go. Remote exams often focus on the quality of your thinking or the depth of your knowledge; consider this as you study.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize your materials and notes so you'll be able to find information quickly and effectively. • Be sure to know how the exam will run before you begin (e.g., are you allowed to go back to previous questions and change your answers?). • Choose your space carefully; try to find one without unwanted interruptions and distractions and with reliable internet. • Let those around you know that you will be writing an exam and need to concentrate. • If you are distracted by phone notifications, put your phone on silent or turn it off. • Have all your materials ready (e.g., computer and power cable, textbooks, notes, paper, and pencil).



STUDY AND TEST/EXAM TAKING STRATEGIES

<p>Take-home and online tests and exams – general strategies (continued)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check and recheck that both your computer and your Wi-Fi connection are working. Have a backup plan if one or the other is not behaving as expected. • Make sure you know what tools are and are not allowed, if any. • Follow the honour system in place for these types of exams (e.g., don't contact friends writing the same exam, share answers, or copy or share the questions when the exam is finished). • Stay on the exam website; use another browser window to search for any information you need. • Check your work for mistakes. • Save backups of information in case of glitches. • If you have technical problems, contact your teacher right away. • Take short breaks, as time allows.
<p>Take-home and online tests and exams – essays and long answers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create your own study and reference notes by using charts, graphic organizers, concept maps or reference guides to organize main topics, themes and information (e.g., an index of topics and page references will help you work more quickly). • Brainstorm likely subjects and think about questions that might be asked (e.g., some compare-and-contrast examples that fit the themes of the course). • Essays involve various stages of work: developing an idea, planning an outline, finding required information and references, writing and editing. Plan time for all the stages. • Take breaks when you need them. It can be more effective to write in short bursts than in one long rushed period.
<p>Take-home and online tests and exams – timed short answers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a short and focused tip sheet (e.g., a list of formulas, equations, and keywords). • Design your tip sheet to help you find information quickly. • Practise with a timer, and make sure you can use your keyboard effectively. • Your preparation should be as similar as possible to the real thing. • If possible, have plenty of paper on hand to jot down ideas. • Keep your rough work in order if you are allowed to go back and check your answers before submitting them. • A notebook or numbered pages can help you find the “scratch” work that you've done.



STUDY AND TEST/EXAM TAKING STRATEGIES

After the test or exam

- Avoid searching back through your notes to see what you got wrong or forgot to include.
- Avoid comparing your answers with those of your classmates.
- Keep practising positive self-talk (e.g., “I did my best. I’m proud of the studying I did.”).
- Once your test or exam has been marked, look at it and reflect. What went well and what didn’t?
 - What type of question did you find easy? Why?
 - What study strategies were most effective?
 - Identify why you might have missed a question. Did you read it correctly? Did you prepare for it?
 - Did you run out of time?
 - Were there any stress management strategies you used that helped you before or during the test or exam?
- Make and implement a plan to help you do even better next time.
- Reward yourself. Do something you enjoy!

Sources:

- ▶ [Exam Anxiety Workshop \(Barbara VanIngen, Counselling Psychologist, Concordia University\)](#)
- ▶ [Test and exam study tips - UofT Student Life \(utoronto.ca\)](#)





Appendix C

Challenge Your Thinking Activity

Ask yourself...

- ▶ *How likely is this?*
- ▶ *Does my entire future really depend on _____ ?*
- ▶ *What can I control?*
- ▶ *What will I do if this happens?*
- ▶ *How have I handled challenges in the past?*
- ▶ *What would I say to a friend?*
- ▶ *Who could help me?*

INSTEAD OF...	TRY...
"I'm not smart enough."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can't know everything. No one does. But I've passed tests before and there are things that I'm good at. • There are many reasons why people don't do well on a test that have nothing to do with how smart they are.
"I don't understand anything!"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That isn't true. I'm just nervous right now. • I'll focus on what I understand instead of what I don't.
"I have to pass, or I'll never have a good career."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One test isn't going to determine my entire future or happiness in life. • Many things that make me happy have nothing to do with school.
"I'm going to get a terrible mark."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I haven't seen the test yet and I don't know what mark I'll get. I do know that I spent time carefully preparing. • I'll focus on what I will do, not on the mark I will get.



INSTEAD OF...	TRY...
"I'm bad at math. I'll never be able to do it."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Math isn't my best subject, but I've been studying consistently so I'll be able to do my best.
"I'll never pass this exam."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am well prepared. I read all the material and reviewed it carefully, and my study notes were really good.
"It's too hard. I can't do this."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have done hard things before. • I will try my best.
"If I don't pass, my family will think less of me."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My family knows how hard I prepared. • They won't decide who I am as a person based on one test.
"I'll never get into college/ university."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are many tests and assignments that go into my final grades. • If I need extra help, I know where to get it.
"I have to get an A, or I'm worthless."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One test doesn't determine what kind of person I am or my value. • I am worthwhile no matter what I get on this test.
"I'm going to fail no matter what I do, so there's no point trying."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm going to focus on the question in front of me instead of my worries. • If I don't try, it will impact my mark. I want to give myself the chance to do the best I can.
"Everyone else is going to do better than me."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm going to focus on myself. Comparing myself to others doesn't help me.





Appendix D

Practise Scenario Script and Discussion Guide

SCRIPT

You have an exam coming in a subject that you think is not your best and you're worried about doing well. You've worked hard throughout the course and your marks so far have been okay, so you don't want the exam to bring them down. Whenever you think about the exam, you get a nervous feeling in your stomach. You also keep picturing yourself doing poorly, and you know that's not going to help you do well. You decide to take charge of your worry and start using strategies to help manage it. That way, you have the best chance to prepare and show what you know during the exam. What strategies might support you?

Pause for discussion

It's the day before the exam and you're feeling pretty nervous. Your stomach is upset, you're not sure you're going to sleep well, and you keep thinking everyone else is going to do better than you, which is not helping you study. You want to learn all you can and be at your best to write the exam. What strategies might support you?

Pause for discussion

It's the morning of the exam. You feel nervous and keyed up. You prepared well, and you want to show all you know during the exam, but you keep thinking about a test you didn't do well on. What strategies might support you?

Pause for discussion

The exam is over! You still have lots of adrenaline, but you're tired, too. It's been a busy time. You want to move on from the experience and take care of yourself as best you can, but everyone keeps asking you about your answers. What strategies might support you?

Pause for discussion

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Pause 1: strategies leading up to an exam

- Invite students to consider the healthy routines and study and test-taking, thought challenging, and relaxation strategies they have learned.
- Here you might focus on strategies that would support students throughout the entire course.



DISCUSSION GUIDE

<p>Pause 1: strategies leading up to an exam (continued)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy routines, study skills and habits might be relevant for many students, and you may wish to talk about how to build positive sustainable routines and practices. • You may also wish to discuss strategies to address specific issues. For example, relaxation strategies might help with the stomach symptoms, as might thought challenging. Thought challenging might also help with picturing yourself doing poorly (e.g., students could respond to that thought by focusing on more balanced thinking, such as, “I am preparing as carefully as I can. I’ll be as ready as I possibly can be.” Or they might try, “Even though it’s not my best subject, I’ve done okay in the course so far. My preparation is paying off and it will help with the exam, too.”
<p>Pause 2: strategies for the day before an exam</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite students to consider strategies. • Here they may wish to focus on addressing the specific issues raised in the scenario. • Relaxation may help with the stomach issues and sleep. Ask students for ideas. Would they suggest deep breathing? Or listening to some calming music while trying to fall asleep? • Thought challenging might also help. For example, students might try, “I’m going to focus on myself, not anyone else.” Invite students to generate other examples of balanced thoughts. • Students might also wish to think about study style and the value of taking some breaks rather than cramming all night. • Other strategies, such as packing their bag so they won’t have to do it in the morning, might help them feel prepared, too.
<p>Pause 3: strategies for the morning of an exam</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite students to consider strategies. • Students may wish to think about the value of eating a good breakfast (if possible), giving themselves plenty of time to get to the exam, and doing something that calms them (e.g., listening to music) rather than cramming until the moment the exam begins. • Students have now completed their exam preparation so the focus here may be on trying to stay calm and relaxed and challenging unhelpful thoughts (e.g., “I did everything I could to help me do my best.”). • They may also wish to avoid friends and classmates who are stressing. • During the exam, students may also wish to use specific test-taking strategies, such as beginning with easier questions, planning their time, and underlining key terms and phrases.
<p>Pause 4: strategies for after an exam</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite students to consider strategies. • Student may wish to focus here on doing something that supports their well-being, such as planning something relaxing for themselves to celebrate their efforts (e.g., taking a walk, watching a movie, or seeing a friend). • They may also wish to avoid debriefing the exam and second guessing their answers. They will have the opportunity to review their exam when it is returned and that is the best time to think about their preparation and what they might like to do the same or different next time.





Extensions

Extend the lessons for your class

Should you have time and feel that mental health literacy is particularly relevant to your curriculum area and/or group of students, below are additional activities for you and your class.

Thought Changing

Where it fits: Action Task (Strategy #3: Challenge Your Thoughts)

- ▶ Review [Thought-changing exercise bundles – School Mental Health Ontario](https://www.smho-smsso.ca/thought-changing-exercise-bundles) (smho-smsso.ca) (thought changing exercises bundle) with students.
- ▶ Brainstorm ways to share any resources students find helpful with other classes/your school. Could they be printed out and posted around the school? Shared on social media? Posted on a class or school website?

A Letter About Test Anxiety

Where it fits: Consolidation

- ▶ Review [Test Anxiety - Anxiety Canada](https://www.anxietycanada.com/test-anxiety/) with students.
- ▶ Ask students to think about what their own letter might say. Then ask them to play the role of the “expert” and respond, given what they have learned. Should you wish, this may be done as a creative writing exercise (with the letters being for student reflection, rather than assessment purposes).



Extend your learning as an educator

Mental health and well-being aren't just important during a few days or lessons a year. They are important all year long. **Look for opportunities to integrate well-being and mental health literacy into course content.** Health and physical education provide a natural connection, but they are not the only place for students to learn about mental health and well-being. Many novels also offer obvious links. Perhaps a creative writing project could provide opportunities. Or does the character trait or virtue of the month connect to well-being? Could you look at brain chemistry or structure and mental health within a science course? Or maybe a math course provides a chance to examine mental health statistics. There are many ways to embed well-being into the work students do every day.

Here are some additional ways to continue to bring well-being into your classroom and school.

Learn	Grow	Partner	Extend
<p>Access the School Mental Health Ontario Website for additional ideas about how to support student mental health and well-being: Take your learning deeper with the educator mental health literacy course developed collaboratively by School Mental Health Ontario and Wilfrid Laurier University. It's free and available online.</p>	<p>Student voice indicates that the majority of students are not currently involved in mental health leadership initiatives at their schools, but most would like to be. Students are also interested in opportunities to participate in mental health clubs, events, and other initiatives.</p> <p>HearNowON Student voice summary of findings</p> <p>Consider the opportunities in your school. Could you start a well-being club or student mental health leadership team? Student voice and participation are great ways to ensure well-being initiatives are engaging and meet the needs of your school community.</p>	<p>Take full advantage of your professional support services school team, if one is available. Professional support services staff can help you identify well-being priorities, resources, and supports; they can provide professional learning opportunities, such as lunch and learns; and they can partner with you in the delivery of programs. Have a conversation with your school team about the full range of supports and services they offer.</p>	<p>Continue to bring mental health and well-being into your classroom. There are a variety of resources available to assist you.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary Virtual Field Trip – Visualization • Anxiety Management and Coping Social Media Bundles for Secondary Students • Social Emotional Learning Posters for Secondary Students





Take care of yourself – educator mental health matters

We recognize that the mental health and well-being of students, staff, and families are inextricably linked. We know that you are doing all you can to help your students. We hope that you can prioritize your wellness and mental health, as well. Personal wellness looks different for everyone. There is no one way to maintain balance with the many challenges and demands we all sometimes face. Taking time for you, to engage in well-being practices and maintain connections that help you to feel well, is so very important, and sets an excellent example for our students.

[Take Care of Yourself](#)
(smso-smsso.ca)

[Coping with Stress and Anxiety](#)
(camh.ca)

If you feel you could benefit from support for your own mental health and well-being, connect with:

- ▶ Your family doctor
- ▶ Your board Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- ▶ [Mental Health & Addiction Treatment Services | Connex Ontario](#) Also available at 1-866-531-2600
- ▶ [Get medical advice: Telehealth Ontario | Ontario.ca](#) Also available at 1-866-797-0000
- ▶ [Wellness Together Canada | Home \(portal.gs\)](#)
- ▶ [Ontario 211 | Community and Social Services Help Line \(211ontario.ca\)](#)

If you are in crisis:

- ▶ [Crisis Text Line | Text HOME To 741741](#) Crisis Text Line, powered by Kids Help phone, provides free, 24/7, nationwide service to people of all ages in Canada
- ▶ Go to the emergency room of your local hospital or call 911 (if you feel safe to do so) right away. If you choose to call 911, you may request that a mental health professional who understands your culture be sent.

