

With thanks to Dunstable
and Leighton MHSTs

GETTING THROUGH EXAM SEASON

Tips for your wellbeing

City & Hackney Mental Health Support Team



NHS

East London
NHS Foundation Trust



WHAT IS THIS BOOKLET?

- Exams can be a stressful and overwhelming time for anybody
- This booklet is designed to help you understand stress and find some healthy ways to get through exam season

WHO CAN HELP ME TO MANAGE STRESS?

Some people like to try apps to help themselves, others prefer to speak with someone or attend a group. All options are great, as long as it helps you through your exams!

If you feel you need support, you can:

- Speak to a teacher or adult you trust - they might have access to support in school that you can try
- Ask to be referred to the EMHP (Educational Mental Health Practitioner) who comes to the school regularly. EMHPs can provide advice, resources, 1:1 or group sessions
- Visit cityandhackneycamhs.org.uk to find out more about the mental health support on offer locally

You can also try the apps and websites we highlight in these bubbles!



WHAT CAUSES EXAM STRESS?

Stress is a natural response to pressure. Exams can be stressful on their own but other things might cause you to feel worse:

Pressure from others

we may want to please others (e.g. parents, carers, teachers) who are important to us, which can put more pressure on us

Fear of failure

we may see our self-worth as attached to our test scores or grades, which puts more pressure on ourselves

Lack of preparation

If we are anxious, we may avoid studying, procrastinate and become distracted which then increases our stress, becoming a negative cycle

Worrying how you'll feel and perform during the exam itself

e.g. "I will forget everything I know", "I won't understand the questions"

Worrying about the future

like getting into the college/university/career we want

Comparing yourself

like believing we should get the same results as our friends

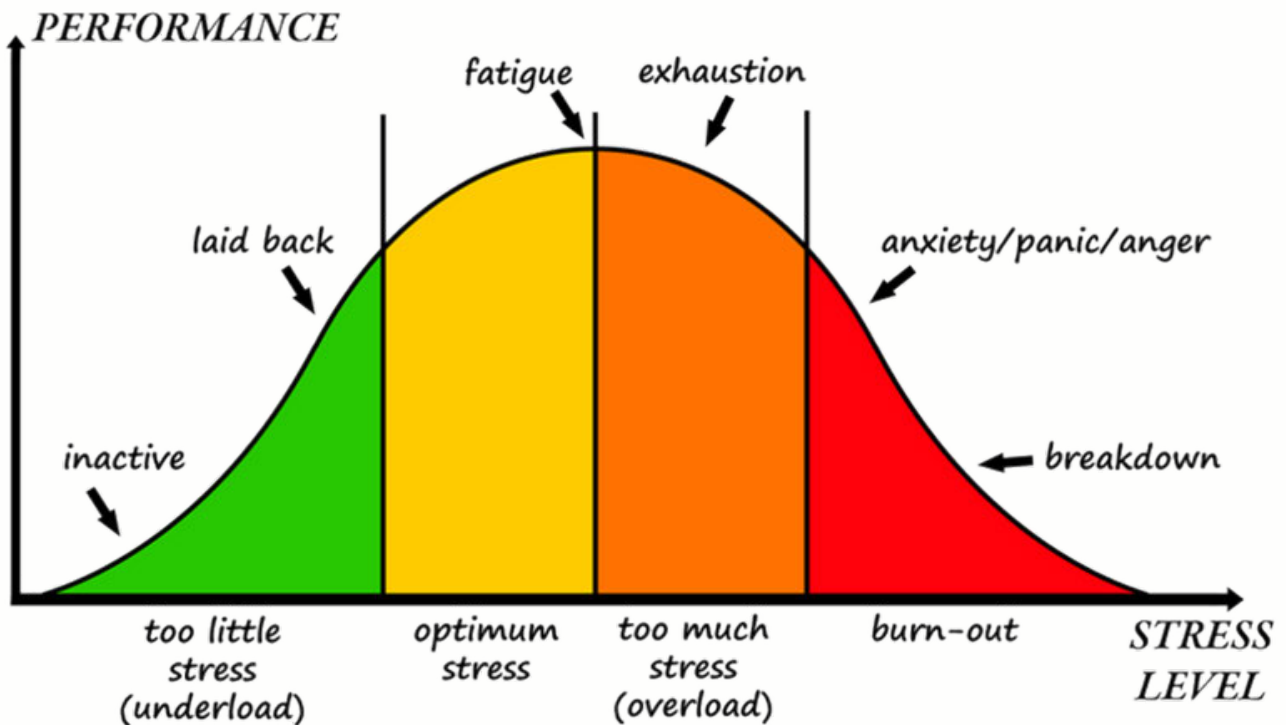
Having difficulties at home, or in our lives generally

like coping with changes, family difficulties, caring for someone, experiencing illness



IS EXAM STRESS BAD FOR ME?

Below is the “Stress Performance Curve”, which shows how actually a small amount of stress can motivate us and help us to get stuff done:



When it comes to exams, we want to aim for the yellow zone of “optimum stress”, where we aren’t completely inactive (not doing any revision or preparation) but also aren’t completely exhausted and overwhelmed

- It’s important we are able to recognise the difference between healthy levels of stress and unhealthy levels of stress.
- When stress takes over and becomes overwhelming, it can feel out of control. We might notice uncomfortable feelings, bodily symptoms and it might cause us to behave in unhelpful ways (see next page!)

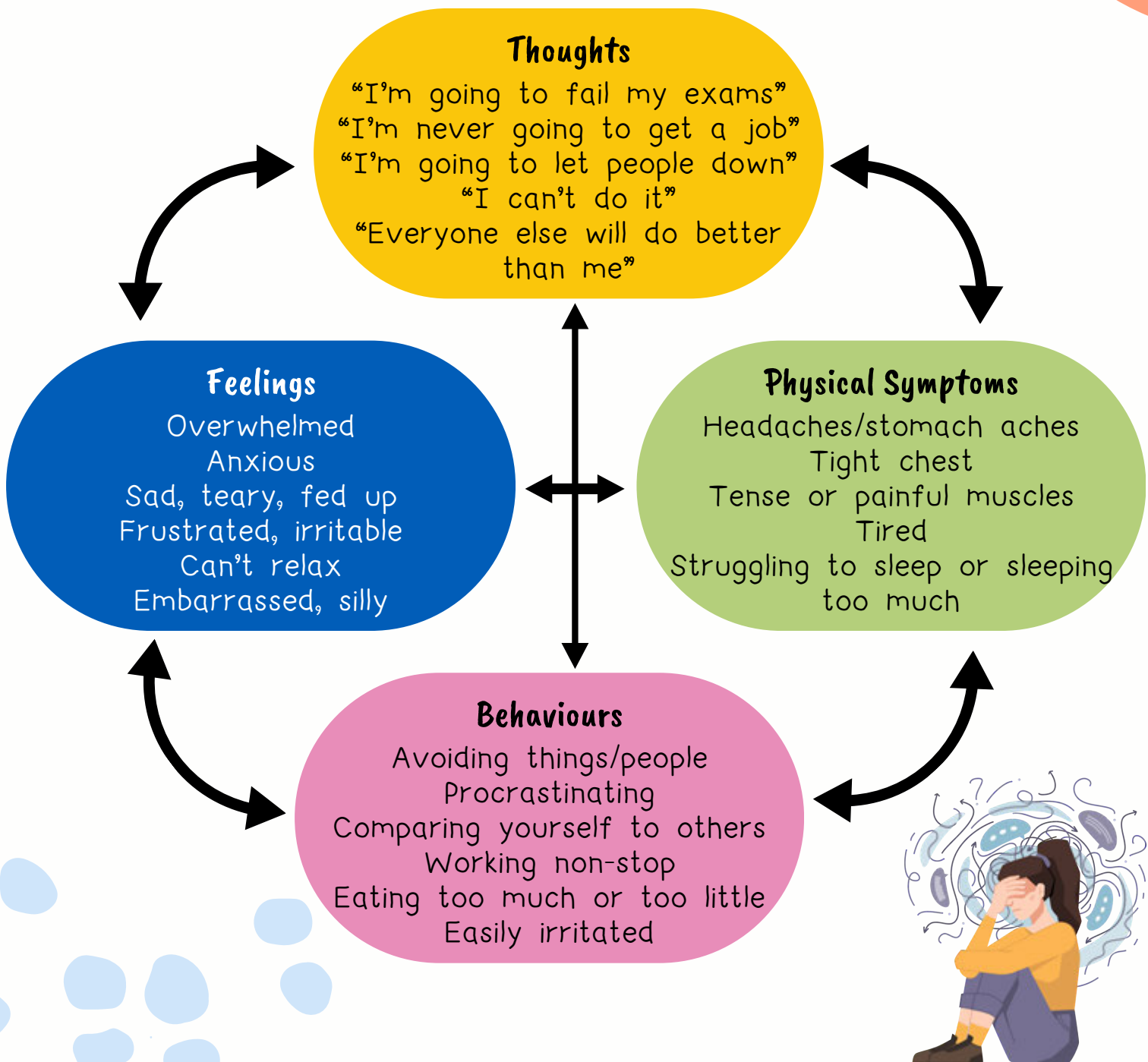
See “How to make stress your friend” TED Talk (Kelly McGonigal)

If you are worried that exam stress is taking over, remember you are not alone! This booklet has lots of ideas and tips that can help.

HOW DOES EXAM STRESS AFFECT ME?

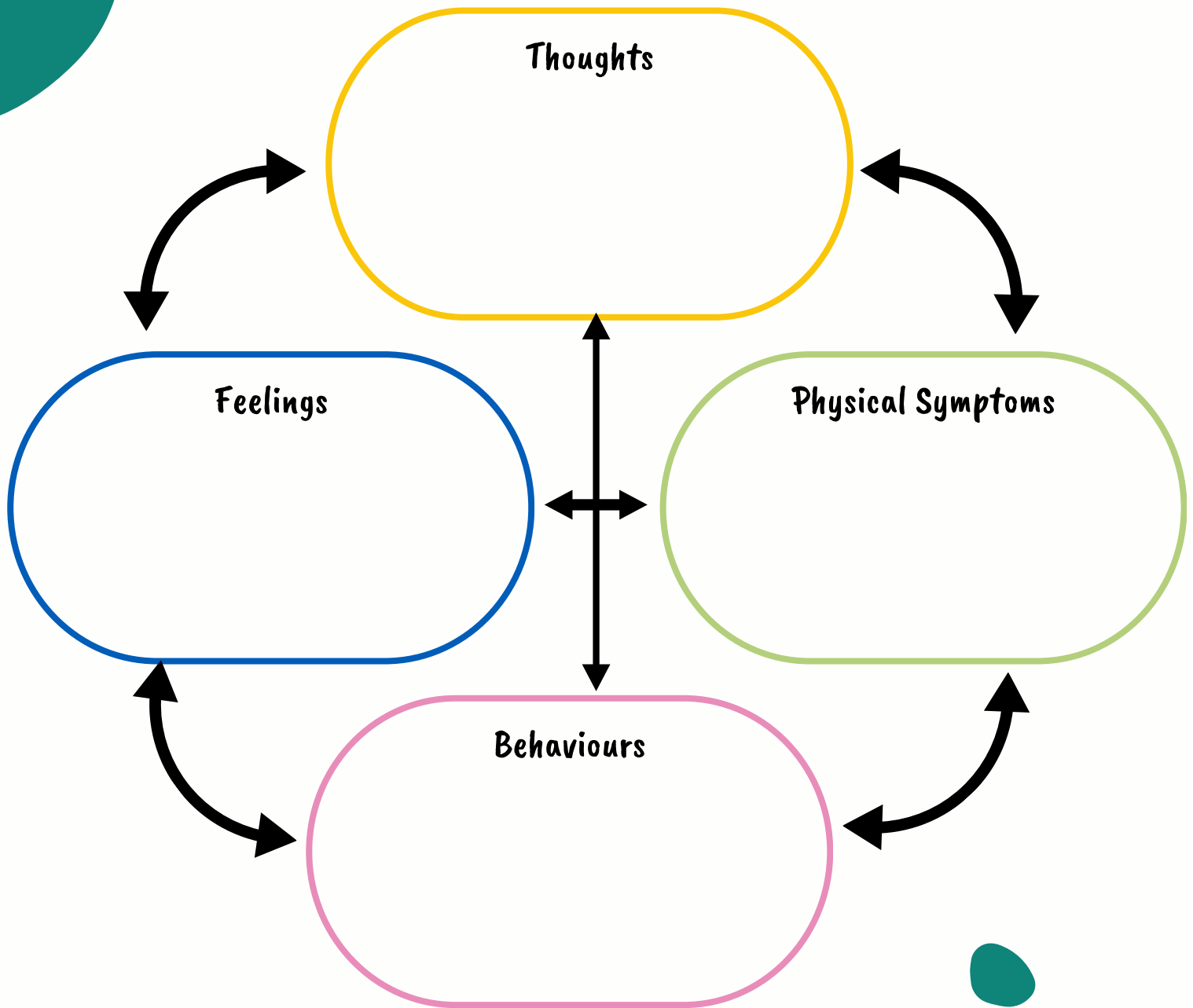
Exam stress can affect how we think, feel, and behave. These can all affect each other and when exam stress becomes too much it can feel like we are stuck in a cycle of unhealthy coping behaviours.

Below are some common thoughts, feelings, physical symptoms and behaviours associated with exam stress...



BREAKING THE CYCLE

Identifying our own personal experience of the exam stress cycle can be a helpful place to start. Try it out below...



APP: you can use the Daylio app to track your stress levels and daily mood

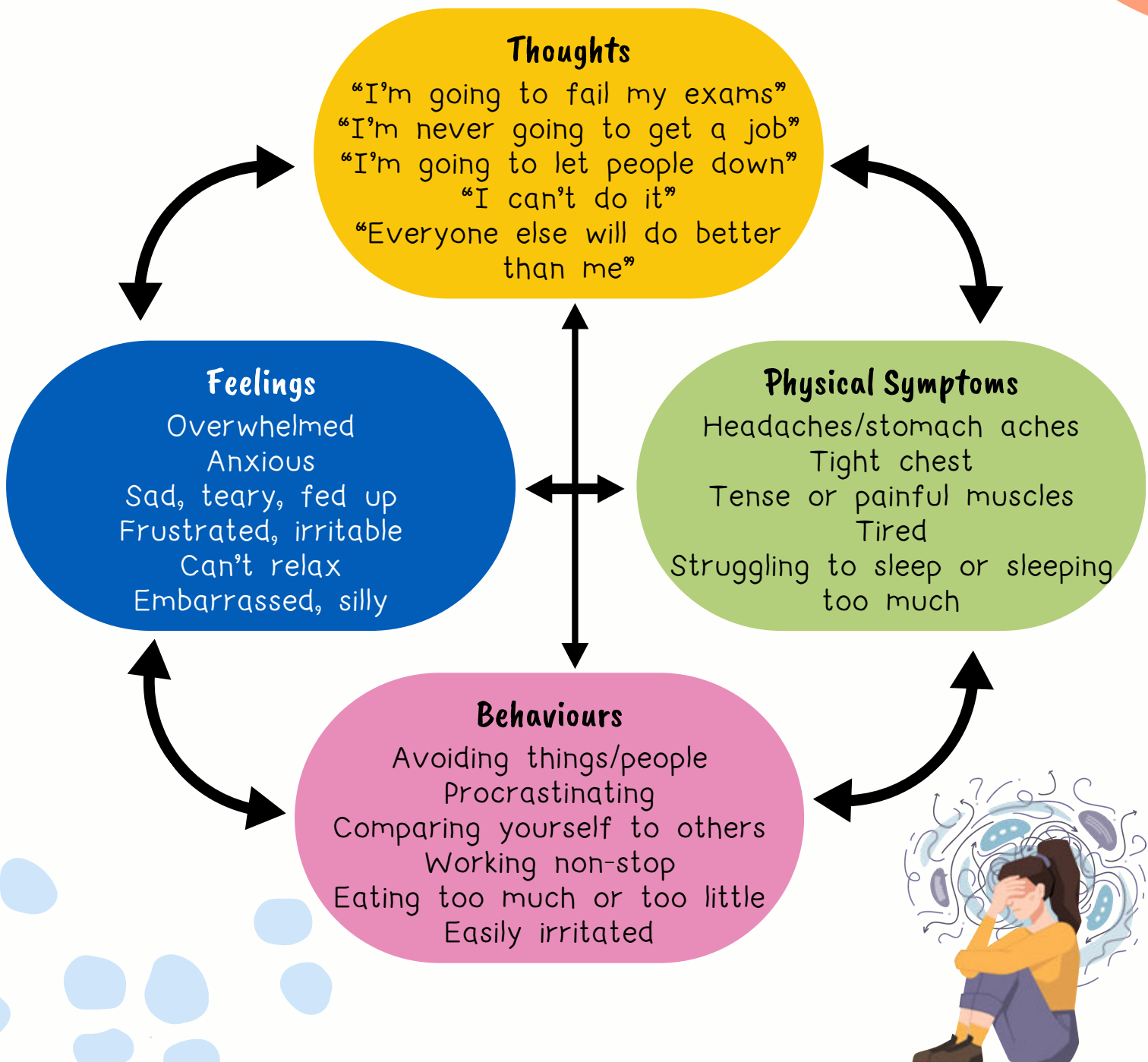


Spotting the signs of stress early can help us make changes to our lifestyle to keep our stress under control!

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MANAGING EXAM STRESS

I am worrying a lot...

Exam stress and anxiety can make us think the absolute worst will happen and make us focus on the negatives. Try to notice when this type of thought is happening, and see if you can replace it with a more helpful thought.

We sometimes call this “hot and cold thoughts”. Hot thoughts make us feel anxious, upset or uncomfortable, whilst cold thoughts cool us down and make us feel calmer.

 Hot Thoughts		Cold Thoughts 
I'm going to fail	→	I'm going to do my best
My mocks show I can't do it and I won't achieve the result I want	→	My mocks show what I know and where I need to revise
If I don't pass I'll be worth nothing	→	If I don't pass, I can always try again
	→	
	→	



CLEARFEAR

APP: the ClearFear app helps to challenge anxious thoughts

I am worrying a lot...

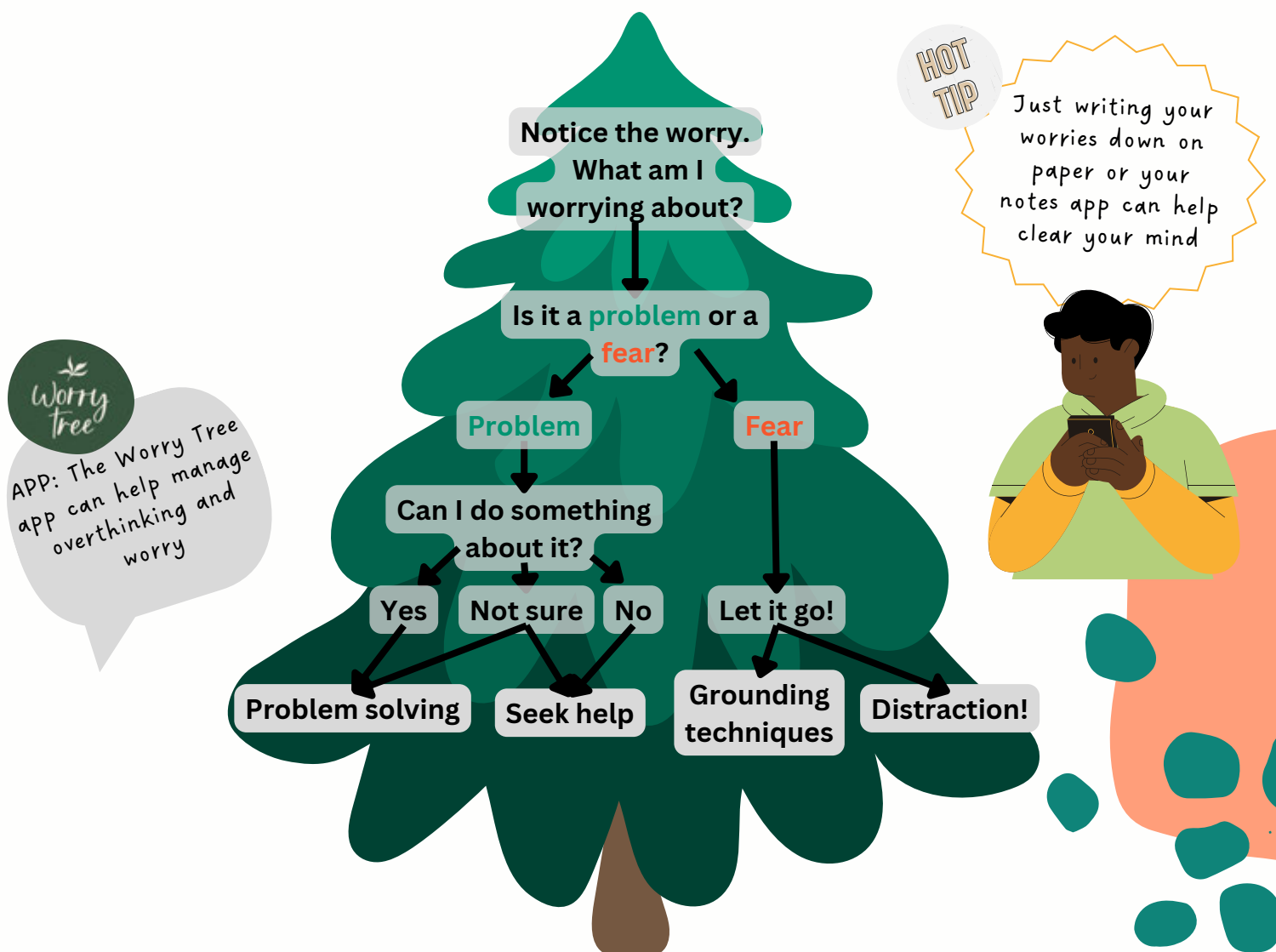
Anxious thoughts can be hypothetical **fears** or practical **problems**.

Fears = hypothetical, may or may not happen, often about the future, out of our control

Problems = practical, happening now or definitely going to happen soon, an obstacle we need to overcome

Fears	Problems
What if I fail everything?	I don't understand this
I'm going to forget everything I know when in the exam	I don't have time to study
I'm going to let people down	I am not eating/sleeping enough

If you catch yourself worrying, you can use the **worry tree**



Problem Solving...

When you have identified you are worrying about a **problem** you can actually do something about, you can follow the steps below to come up with a plan



Step 1: What is the problem?

Identify the specific problem that is bothering you

Step 2: Solutions

Think of as many possible solutions and write them down

Step 3: Pros and Cons

Tick the realistic and achievable solutions



Step 4: Pick a solution

Pick one (or two) option(s) and make a plan. Break it down into smaller steps if needed.

Step 5: DO IT!

Carry out the plan. How did it go? Anything you need to adjust?

LET'S GO!

Grounding Techniques...

Grounding techniques can help us let go of worries and overwhelming thoughts, by enabling us to focus back on the present moment
Here are a couple you can try out...you can try out...

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding

Connecting with the senses



Affirmations

Having a few go-to positive phrases you can ground yourself with by repeating out loud or in your head.

I am smart and confident in what I know

Exam season will pass

I deserve rest

I am more than my grades

It will be ok

I feel sick, panicked, tense and get headaches...

Physical symptoms of anxiety can be uncomfortable and a sign that our “fight, flight or freeze” stress response is activated. This is a completely normal response to pressure and stress but can get in the way of us trying to focus on revision or the exam itself.

There are some techniques we can use to help our bodies slow down and keep our thoughts calm.

Breathing Techniques

Slowing down and deepening our breathing counteracts the body’s stress response, lowering our heart rate and blood pressure.

Box Breathing



Alternate Nostril Breathing

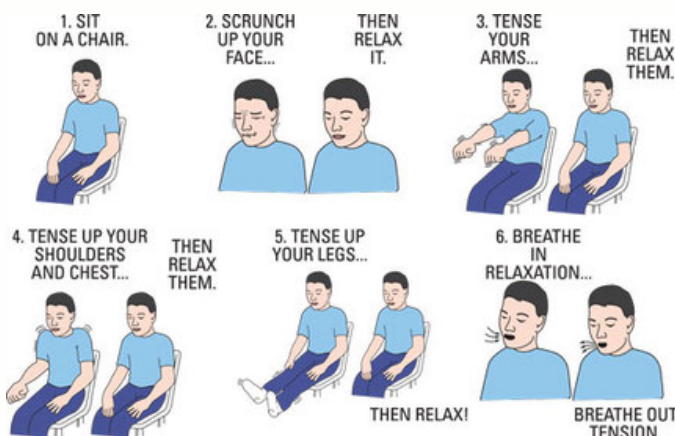


HOT TIP

You can even use these when you're in the actual exams!

Muscle Relaxation

Tensing and then releasing our muscle groups helps to relieve tension and relax our body



APP: The Calm app has lots of different breathing techniques to try. Or there are some on YouTube



I can't sleep...

Feeling stressed can have a negative impact on our sleep pattern which in turn can make school life and other day-to-day activities more difficult.

Getting good sleep can improve our mental and physical health and can help the brain to retain more information. Therefore, you are better off trying to get a good night's sleep rather than late-night cramming the night before an exam.



Take the sleep quiz and get tips to improve your sleep on teensleephub.org.uk

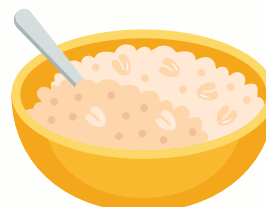
My appetite has changed...

When you are stressed you may notice that your appetite changes.

You might not feel hungry or skip meals to study, eating less than you usually would **OR** you might find that you overeat and crave comfort foods high in fat and sugar during times of stress. Both are normal responses, but can have a negative impact on our energy levels and mood if we let them take over.

Trying to eat regular meals even if you don't feel hungry can help you to feel well and have energy throughout the exam season. It might help to schedule meals and plan ahead. Without getting the nutrition your body and brain need, you will not be able to perform at your best.

Where possible, try to eat a variety of foods and choose some healthy snacks to get you through those long study days! Nuts, dried fruits, porridge, and yoghurts are some good brain-boosting options



If you are really concerned about your eating, and things feel out of control, please speak to your family friends and/or your GP

I feel irritable and I'm not enjoying anything right now...

We might start to feel like this if we don't have a good balance between study and life. Revising for your exams is important, but too much revision can leave you missing out on the activities you enjoy.

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
REVISE	REVISE	REVISE	REVISE	REVISE	REVISE	REVISE

You can revise **AND** do activities you enjoy and it is important to keep these balanced during exam season. Taking regular breaks can recharge your brain and boost your mood and energy levels. We are not robots! We all need a break sometimes.

HOT TIP

Why not make a list of all the things you enjoy doing and schedule some of them into your revision plans to remind yourself!

TIME FOR A
BREAK



I feel low, I'm not coping...

When the pressure gets too much, we can fall into a place where we just stop everything.. Have you noticed any of the below changes for 2 weeks or more?

- No longer socialising with friends and family
- Not wanting to be around people
- Feeling tearful and helpless
- Not enjoying activities you usually like doing
- No longer going to school or doing any work
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Not feeling able to look after yourself (like brushing your teeth, showering, getting dressed)

You may want to seek support - whether from family and friends or through professional help. Speak to your GP or school for more information

Trying to get back into a routine can help to build up your emotional strength. Focus on the small things you can do and activities that help you to smile, laugh, care for yourself, and connect with others to feel those positive emotions again. Lastly, try to get some gentle exercise to release natural happy hormones.



APP: Mood Move can help you to set some goals and boost your mood



What if my fear of failure comes true...

Not getting the grades you hoped for on results day can feel devastating. It's okay to sit with any feelings that come up for a while

Once these feelings pass, try to hold on to the positives, as there will be plenty of these too. Life doesn't always go to plan, but stay calm - you are going to be okay. There are always loads of options available to you.

What can you do if you are unhappy with your results?

- Take your time - you don't need to make any snap decisions!
- Explore all your options - this could be getting a remark, retaking, or looking into different career paths
- Talk through next steps - with someone you trust. It may help to write things down, maybe use the problem solving technique!
- Apply for special considerations - if something was going on for you during exams (e.g. health, grief etc). Speak to someone at school or college about this
- You don't have to share your results - not even with your friends, you don't owe it to anyone

Be
KIND
TO
YOURSELF



You can call the free Exam Results Helpline on 0800 100 900 or visit the National Careers Service if you are unsure what to do next
nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/

Bonus Worksheets

<p>What is the problem?</p>	<p>List all the possible solutions (no matter how weird or wonderful!)</p>	<p>Pros and Cons?</p>	<p>How good Is the outcome out of 10</p>

Notice the worry.
What am I worrying
about?

[Blank box for writing the worry]

Is it a **problem** or a
fear?

Problem

Fear

Can I do something
about it?

Yes

Not sure

No

Let it go!

Problem solving

Seek help

Grounding
techniques

Distraction!

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Websites

- Young Minds - www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/coping-with-life/exam-stress/
- The Mix - www.themix.org.uk/work-and-study/study-and-exam-tips/the-pressure-to-do-well-in-exams-23966.html
- Anna Freud - www.annafreud.org/resources/children-and-young-peoples-wellbeing/self-care/revision/
- The Student Room (for study tips) - www.thestudentroom.co.uk/

Services in Hackney

- City and Hackney Mental Health Support in Schools Team (MHST) - there may well be an EMHP based in your school who can support you 1:1 or in a group to cope with stress, anxiety and/or low mood
- Growing Minds - offer counselling specifically for young people from African, Caribbean and Mixed Heritage backgrounds
- School Counselling - there may be a counselling service within your school, whether this is provided by school directly or a charity like A Space. They can offer a space to talk
- Off Centre - offer counselling, art therapy, advice and information

Please speak to your school Mental Health Lead or GP to find out more



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Website:
<https://cityandhackneycamhs.org.uk/>



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