

## Context:

Starting GCSEs is a significant step - one that brings more subjects, more responsibility, and (understandably) more pressure. It can feel like a major shift for teenagers and families alike. This transition is not just academic - it's emotional and social too. Your support, reassurance, and patience during this stage can really help them grow in confidence. It's a great time to build positive study habits and show your teen that your focus is on their well-being, not just their performance. A calm and steady approach from home can make a world of difference.

### GCSE Study: What's Different

Teenagers at this stage are juggling a lot: hormones, social dynamics and the pressures of school. Some may feel motivated by studying.

GCSE study introduces:

- Increased homework and revision demands
- Subject specialisation (more depth, fewer subjects)
- Frequent assessments and tighter deadlines
- A greater expectation of independence and self-organisation

Rather than seeing it as one large, stressful shift, help your teen break down each change into manageable steps. Small wins build confidence.

## Good habits:

Building helpful routines from the start can reduce stress later. You can support your young person by:

- Creating a consistent daily routine with time for study, breaks, and relaxation
- Setting up a quiet, clutter-free space for homework and revision
- Encouraging use of tools like revision timetables, flashcards, or study apps
- Praising their effort, focus, and perseverance - not just grades

This is the time to focus on progress, not perfection. Help them see mistakes as part of the learning journey.

## Useful support:

The earlier support is offered, the more likely teens are to bounce back. The following resources may be useful if you feel that you need support;

- Subject teachers or the pastoral team in school
- BBC Bitesize GCSE: Subject specific and more general support available <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize>
- The Mix (for teens): [www.themix.org.uk](http://www.themix.org.uk)
- Anna Freud Centre: [www.annafreud.org](http://www.annafreud.org)
- YoungMinds - Exam Stress: [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

# Mental Health Support

Leaflet 12



Information for  
parents and carers  
helping their teen begin  
their GCSE journey

## How they're feeling:

Teenagers may not always express how they're feeling, but that doesn't mean they're not feeling it. Starting GCSEs can bring pride and excitement, but also anxiety, fear of failure, or worries about the future. It's common for teens to bottle things up or mask their stress with humour or withdrawal.

They may be thinking:

- 'What if I can't keep up?'
- 'Will I let people down?'
- 'What does this mean for my future?'

Keep communication open and let them know that it's okay to feel unsure. Your calm, steady presence reassures them that they don't have to face it alone.

## Warning signs:

It's normal for teens to have off days, but ongoing signs of distress may need more support. Look out for;

- Sudden changes in mood or behaviour
- Avoiding homework
- Refusing to go to school
- Persistent tiredness, irritability, or physical complaints (like headaches or stomach aches)
- Difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, or withdrawing from tasks they enjoy

If you're concerned it may be a good idea to contact school and talk to the pastoral team.

## What's different?:

GCSEs require students to take more ownership over their learning. Key changes include;

- A sharper focus on exams and results
- Greater pressure from teachers, schools, and sometimes peers
- A heavier workload and revision requirements
- Less day-to-day guidance compared to earlier years

This transition can feel intense, so helping your teen plan ahead and break things down is key to reducing stress.

## Talking to them:

Keep conversations casual and supportive. They don't need lectures - they need space to think and feel.

Try the following;

- 'What's gone well this week?'
- 'What subject's feeling tougher at the moment?'
- 'Do you want to vent, or would a distraction help?'

Avoid comparing your teen to others or focusing only on grades. Reassure them that asking for help is normal; it is a sign of strength, not failure.

Listening without immediately offering solutions is sometimes the most helpful thing you can do.

## Offering support:

Support means more than academic help. It also means making sure your teen has space to rest, play, and relax.

Try to:

- Keep school conversations pressure-free
- Encourage time for hobbies, exercise, and friendships
- Celebrate small achievements, like sticking to a revision slot or asking a teacher for help
- Help them break large tasks into bite-sized chunks

Let them know that their worth is not tied to exam results. Your support is unconditional.

### Maintaining motivation and balance:

This journey is a marathon, not a sprint. Encourage your teen to;

- Take regular breaks to recharge
- Get enough sleep and stay active
- Keep up with interests outside of school
- Celebrate small wins and progress

As a parent or carer, your calm presence and encouragement can make a huge difference. Simply being available to listen, without judgment, helps your teen feel safe to share their worries and stay resilient. Help them maintain perspective and remind them that doing their best is more important than being perfect.