

An emotionally healthy approach to GCSEs

A guide for parents





GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) are what children and young people work towards achieving through their secondary education in the UK, culminating with a series of examinations in a variety of subjects. GCSEs are considered the launchpad into further education and improved job prospects for young people. The results are also used to compare how well schools are doing, as they reflect the academic success of their pupils.

While many young people enjoy the challenge of taking their GCSEs, there are others who will feel incredibly daunted by them, and it's important this isn't dismissed.

Why is this important?

Positive health and wellbeing – including mental health – contribute to a child's ability to flourish, thrive and achieve (Public Health England, 2014). Equipping young people with the skills to cope with potentially stressful situations will enable them to navigate the challenges that might lie ahead.

If young people are nurtured in an environment that promotes positive wellbeing, not only are they likely to meet or exceed their potential during GCSE examinations, but they will leave school and embark on further education or employment much more confidently.



What can I do as a parent or carer?

There are steps schools can take to promote wellbeing around GCSEs, and you can complement these at home:

TOP TIPS

- Attend any meetings the school invites you to about GCSEs. Hear firsthand from the teachers about how, where and when the exams will take place, so you can support your child to be organised and prepared for what's happening.
- Direct any questions or concerns you have about GCSEs to the school, rather than to your child.
- Encourage your child to complete homework and coursework in a timely manner, but also encourage them to rest, have fun and enjoy their hobbies. A rested child is more likely to retain information than one who studies round the clock.
- Encourage your child to engage in activities that involve going outside and avoid overuse of screens – this can apply to leisure pursuits as well as revision techniques.





TOP TIPS

- Encourage your child to talk to their teacher if they seem stressed or anxious about their GCSEs. Remember that a small amount of anxiety is normal and not harmful.
- Plan something nice and fun for the weekends before, during and after GCSE season – this will help your child start each week on a positive note and also give them something to look forward to. This could be something as simple as going out for a walk and hot chocolate together, or inviting friends round for some time off.
- Ensure your child is eating and drinking well, and getting a suitable amount of sleep.

ARE YOU OKAY?



What else should I know?

There are three important things you can help your child remember about GCSEs:

-  GCSEs largely focus on what they are capable of academically. They won't necessarily reflect how talented they may be in other areas, and they certainly won't highlight positive personal characteristics such as kindness and integrity – all of which are important.
-  GCSE results don't always tell the whole story. The results are graded, and the grading system has changed from alphabetical (grades A* to G) to numerical (grades 9 to 1). In any case, it is hard to compare results year on year as marking thresholds change. Remind them that, once they have done the exam, worrying about the results is not going to be helpful, so try to forget about it. Your child should be encouraged only to do their best.
-  GCSEs are for a season. They're important and need to be taken seriously but, however tough it may seem, they'll be over before you know it.

“However tough it may seem, they'll be over before you know it.”



What should I do if I'm worried about my child?

It would be unnatural for GCSEs not to induce a certain degree of worry or anxiety but there is, of course, a tipping point.

GCSEs should not:



- significantly affect a child's appetite or their ability to sleep
- alter a child's personality or affect their relationships
- induce panic or tears
- cause a child to avoid lessons or not want to attend school

If any of the above are evident, then your child may be feeling very stressed or anxious about their GCSEs and may benefit from additional support. This isn't about removing the reality of GCSEs, but rather equipping the child to cope with them and be stronger for it.





If you are worried about your child...

TOP TIPS

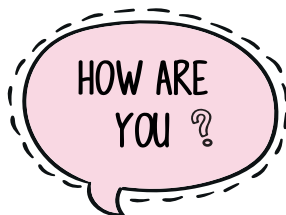
- Talk to the school. Is your child showing the same symptoms at school as they are at home? Is there anything else going on at home which may be contributing to your child's overall level of stress? Work with the school so everyone concerned can be offering the support that's needed.
- Spend time with your child to understand what concerns them most about GCSEs. Is it the fear of failing? Is it the worry of getting stuck on a paper? If your child can pinpoint what's bothering them most, you can take specific steps to help them.
- Make sure you haven't projected any of your own anxieties about GCSEs on to your child. If you don't believe in your child's ability to take exams then neither will they.



Steps to take...

TOP TIPS

- If they've seen any media coverage criticising or being generally negative about GCSEs, then confront it. Look at articles together and ask them to talk about what they've seen and how they feel.
- Encourage your child to talk to their teacher. GCSEs are obviously something they are prepared for at school, so don't be surprised if they favour the reassurance of teachers above family members!
- Expect your child to do well, but be prepared to support them if they are disappointed with their results. Be encouraging and talk to the school about what options may be available.



Support your child

Support your child to learn how to be resilient and cope with stress and anxiety by encouraging them to:



Take a break



Express their feelings



Learn to solve problems
and overcome disappointments



Have fun



Eat and drink well



Get some exercise



Practise relaxation,
mindfulness and breathing techniques



Also from the Charlie Waller Trust...

If you have found this guide useful, you may also be interested in these free publications from the Charlie Waller Trust:

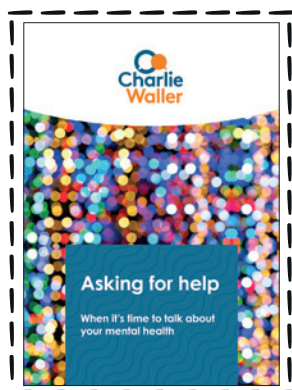
A parent's guide to depression



It can sometimes be difficult to distinguish normal adolescent behaviour from depression and it is not always easy to get the right sort of help. But there are a number of things that parents can do. This guide aims to help you feel more confident, more informed and better equipped to help your child.

It is based on the questions that parents ask us at the Trust and our experience over the last 20 years.

Asking for help



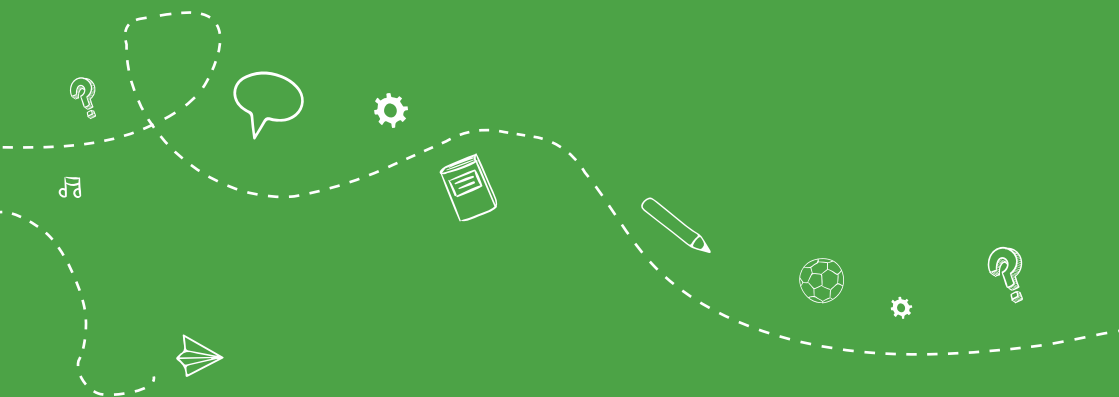
Designed for young people, this short booklet gives practical tips for when it's time to talk about their mental health, or if they want to help a friend.

Wellbeing action plan



Our *Wellbeing action plan* is a simple resource aimed at helping young people keep themselves mentally well. Featuring a range of ideas from a group of young people, it is designed to be informative and fun and can be returned to again and again.

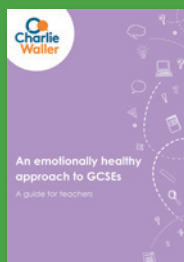
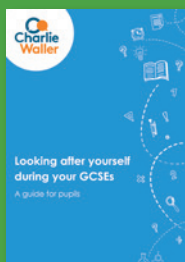
To order your free copies please visit www.charliewaller.org/resources



If you have found this leaflet helpful, please consider raising funds to help us continue our work: www.charliewaller.org

To order hard copies of this leaflet, please email resources@charliewaller.org, call 01635 869754 or visit www.charliewaller.org

This leaflet is one of a series of three. There are also pupil and teacher guides available:



The Charlie Waller Trust

32 High Street, Thatcham RG19 3JD

Registered Charity No: 1109984