EXAM PREP BOOKLET

Everything you need for those "I can't do this" moments.

Eastwood High School

CONTENTS

The Anxiety Loop

All of our exam stress starts with a thought. The first step in feeling less anxious, is to start recognising the thoughts that are putting our brain in ‘alert’ mode.

The CBT Cycle

THOUGHT

What popped into your mind? What story are you telling yourself?

FEELING

What emotion did that thought create in your body?

BEHAVIOUR

What did you do next? Avoid? Panic? Withdraw? Push through?

Challenging the Thought

Step 1: Spot the thought.
Start recognising what the little ‘voice in your head’ is saying when you get anxious.

Step 2: Catching the Negative Thought
When you notice anxiety rising, pause and ask yourself:
• What am I thinking right now?
• Is this thought 100% true?
• Is my mind jumping to the worst-case scenario?

Step 3: Flipping the Thought
Try replacing an unhelpful thought with something more realistic and helpful — not perfect or overly positive.
Try this: ‘Even though… I can…’
Example: ‘Even though I'm worried I'll mess up this presentation… I can take it one step at a time and use what I’ve practised.’

Step 4: Helpful Replacement Thoughts
Try to replace the unhelpful thought with one that is realistic and is going to help your brain stay calm.

Give this a practice on the next page!

Flip the Thought

Think of your exams. What thoughts show up?

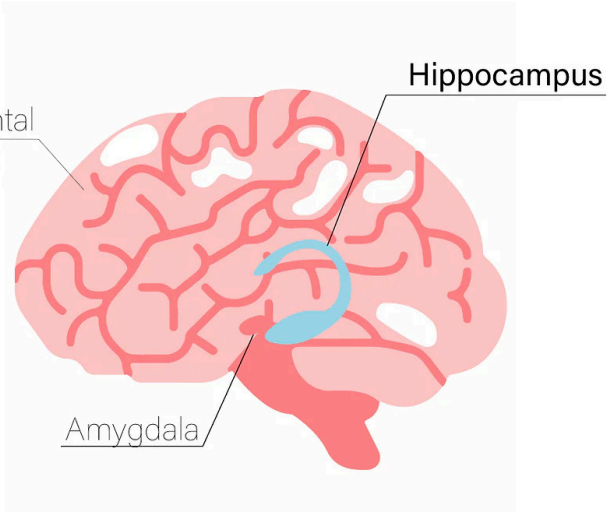
Step 1: Write down all the thoughts you are having about exams.
Step 2: Recognise which thoughts are logical and which are emotional.
Step 3: 'Flip' each thought to allow for it to be more positive or realistic.

This process stops the 'emotional' part of the brain from activating and avoids you going into fight, flight or freeze in your exams..

My Thought	Flip the Thought
Eg. I can't do this subject *Eg. Everyone else is more prepared than me.*	*Eg. I don't need to know everything — I just need to focus on what I do know* *Eg. I can't know what anyone else has done — all I can control is my own effort.*

The Brain

A key step in understanding your anxiety, is understanding your brain.



Prefrontal Cortex (PFC)
The “thinking brain”

- Responsible for decision-making, problem-solving, planning and logic
- Helps you stay calm, rational, and in control
- When anxiety is high, this part goes offline

Amygdala
The “alarm system” or “security guard”

- Detects danger (real or imagined) in less than a second
- Sends your body into fight, flight, or freeze mode
- Amazing at keeping you alive — not amazing at working out false alarms

Hippocampus
The “memory centre”

- Stores memories of what’s safe and what’s dangerous
- Helps put things into context (“I’ve done this before — it was fine”)
- If the amygdala is activated too often, the hippocampus gets confused and starts tagging safe things as dangerous

What happens when the amygdala becomes activated?

1. The amygdala detects a threat
This can be a real danger (a car speeding towards you) or a perceived danger (a presentation, exam, new social situation).

2. It sends an emergency signal to the body
Before the thinking brain (PFC) has time to decide if the danger is real.

3. The "thinking brain" goes offline
The prefrontal cortex literally switches off to save energy for survival mode.
This is why young people say things like:

- "My mind went blank."
- "I couldn't think straight."
- "I just panicked."

4. The body moves into survival mode: fight / flight / freeze

- Fight: anger, irritability, snapping
- Flight: avoidance, running off, shutting down
- Freeze: mind blank, stuck, can't move or speak

5. Physical symptoms kick in
Because the body is preparing to protect you:

- heart racing
- sweaty hands
- stomach knots
- shaky hands/legs
- needing the toilet
- tight chest
- dizziness

6. The amygdala learns through repetition
If a pupil avoids the situation, the amygdala thinks it was dangerous and becomes more sensitive next time — creating the anxiety loop.

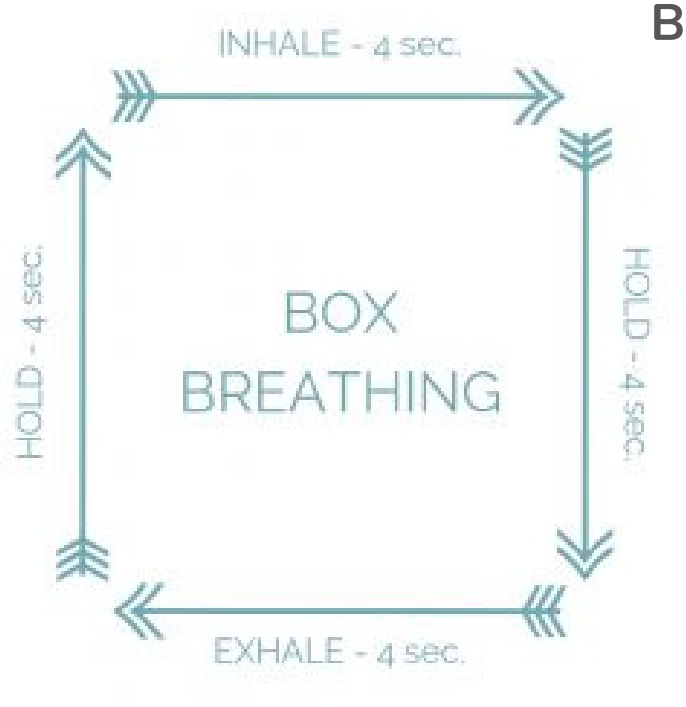
Breathing Exercises

When we become extremely worried or anxious our brain goes into the state referred to as **'fight, flight or freeze'**. This process leads to oxygen leaving the brain and flooding to other areas of the body.

During this process the brain cannot function fully, as there is not enough oxygen left to sustain all parts. This can lead to your brain being being unable to use **logical and rational thinking,** or access **previously learnt knowledge and information** in stressful situations, such as exams!

The only way to reverse this process is to get oxygen back up to the brain...through **deep breathing** exercises.

Breathing Exercises



BOX BREATHING

- Breathe in for 4
- Hold for 4
- Breathe out for 4
- Hold for 4

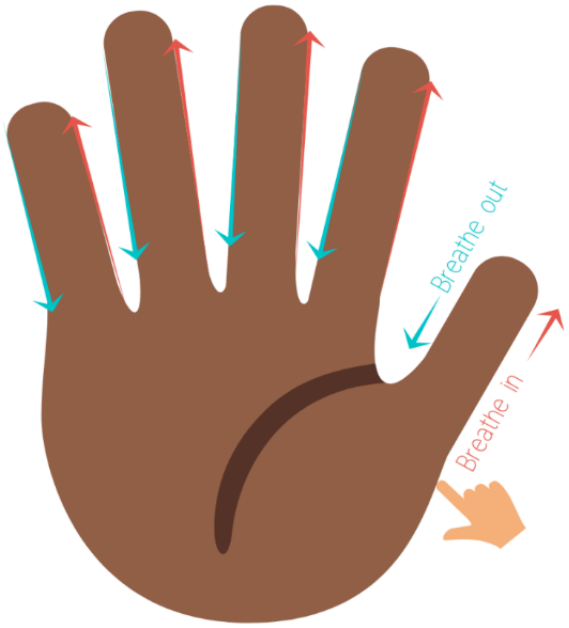
Repeat

STAR BREATHING

- Trace the shape of the star with your finger.
- As you do follow the instructions on the picture to breathe in, hold and breathe out.

Repeat

FINGER BREATHING



- Hold one of your hands in a ‘star’ shape.
- Use a finger on your other hand to trace the sides of your finger.
- Follow the instructions on the picture as you breathe in, hold at the top, then breathe out.

Repeat

BALLOON BREATHING

- Imagine a balloon, what colour would your balloon be?
- Hold your (imaginary) balloon in your mouth while taking as big a breath as you can through your nose then start to breathe air into your balloon until you have no air left in your lungs.
- Carry on till your (imaginary) balloon is full!

Repeat

Distraction Techniques

The following pages outline a range of distraction techniques that you can use to help regulate your emotions during revision or exams.

Distraction techniques engage the 'logical thinking' part of the brain, which can help to stop 'emotional thinking' taking over.

Distraction techniques help to regulate the brain and avoid it going into 'fight, flight or freeze'.

Distraction Activities

1

Senses activity

Look and listen around you and find;

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can hear
- 3 things you can touch
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste.

Repeat this as many times as you can.

2

Lists activity

How many things can you think of that;

- Are the colour red
- Start with the letter G
- Only come out at night time
- Are the colour yellow
- Start with the letter O
- Come in pairs

3

Tapping activity

Think of a song. For eg. "Happy Birthday"

- Tap your finger and thumb together to the beat of the song.
- Repeat this as many times as you can.

Distraction Doodling

Colour, or shade the picture below, using your pen or pencil.

Other Coping Techniques

Why Journaling Helps an Anxious, Overwhelmed Brain

When anxiety builds up, thoughts can feel tangled, overwhelming, or stuck on repeat. Journaling helps because it gets those thoughts out of the mind and onto paper, which instantly reduces mental load. Writing activates the thinking part of the brain, making worries feel more organised and less intense. It also creates distance. Once a thought is written down, the brain treats it as something recorded rather than something it needs to keep looping. Journaling can calm the amygdala, lower stress, and make it easier to spot patterns, triggers, and more helpful ways of thinking.

Why Recognising What We Can and Can't Control Helps Anxiety

Anxiety often focuses on things we can't control — other people's reactions, the future, "what ifs," or things that haven't even happened yet. When the brain tries to manage the unmanageable, the amygdala stays on high alert. Noticing the difference between what is in our control and what isn't helps the brain stand down. It redirects energy toward actions we can take and lets go of what isn't our responsibility. This reduces overwhelm, builds confidence, and helps the thinking brain take over instead of the fear response.

MY THOUGHTS

Write down everything you are feeling and all the anxious/sad/angry thought in your head. Your teacher will not read this unless you ask them to.

If you want someone to read what you write, make sure you give it to your teacher or pastoral care teacher and ask them to read it.

What I Can Control

Think of an anxious or worrying situation you are facing .

Step 1: Write down all the things you cannot control about the situation.
Step 2: Write down all the things you can control or do to help yourself in the situation.

Revision Tips

The following pages outline a range of distraction techniques that you can use to help regulate your emotions during revision or exams.

Distraction techniques engage the 'logical thinking' part of the brain, which can help to stop 'emotional thinking' taking over.

Distraction techniques help to regulate the brain and avoid it going into 'fight, flight or freeze'.

The Pomodoro Technique

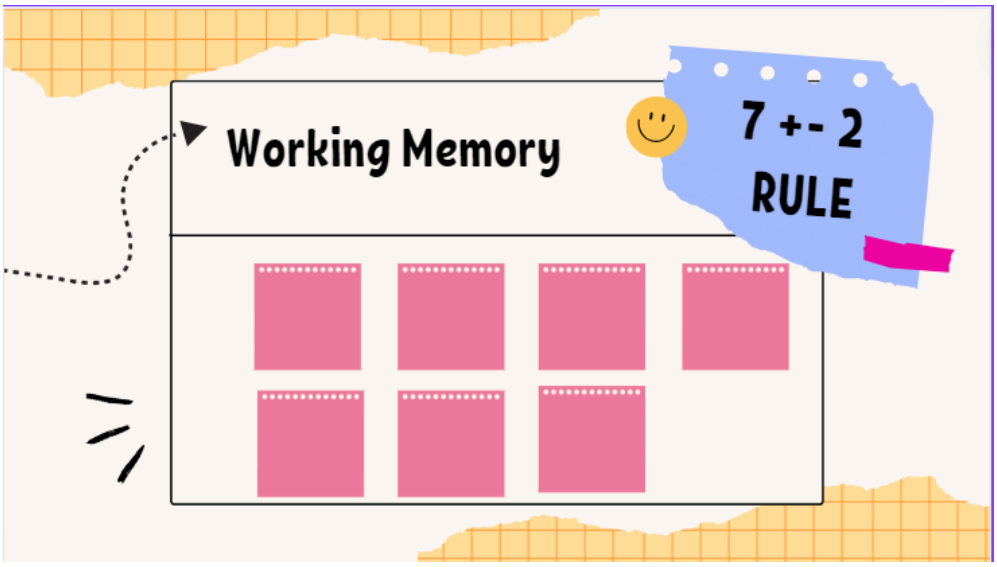
The Pomodoro Technique works because it breaks revision into small, manageable chunks that your brain can handle without becoming overwhelmed. Working for 25 minutes is long enough to focus but short enough that it doesn't feel stressful, which helps reduce procrastination and anxiety.

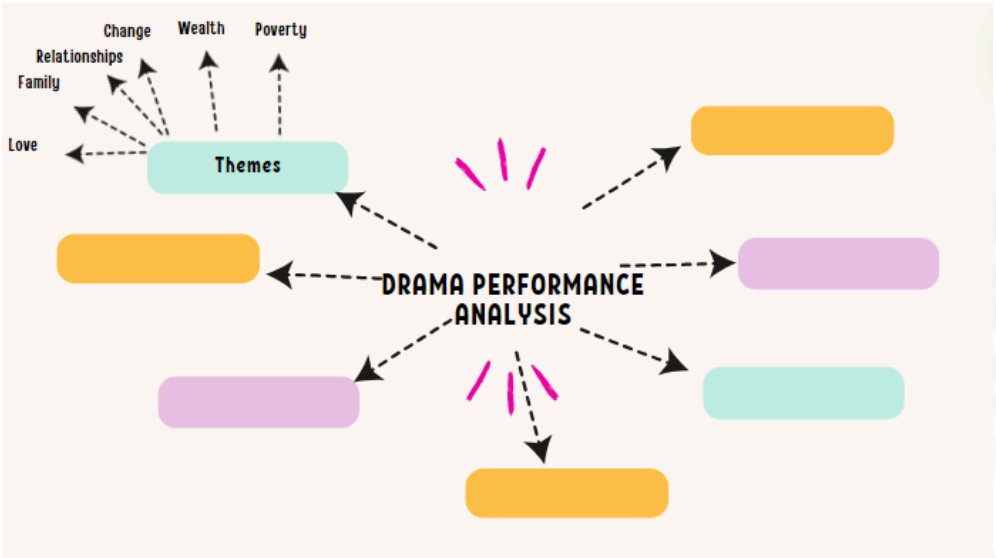
These focused bursts activate the thinking part of the brain while keeping the amygdala calm, and the regular short breaks prevent burnout and mental overload. By repeating this cycle, your brain stays fresher, your concentration improves, and revision feels more achievable — one chunk at a time.

The 7 +-2 Rule

Our brains can only hold around 7 pieces of information at once — plus or minus 2. This means most people can manage somewhere between 5 and 9 bits of information in their short-term memory before it becomes overloaded. When revising, if you try to take in too much at once, the brain becomes overwhelmed and stops remembering effectively.

Breaking revision into smaller chunks, organising information into simple groups, and spacing topics out helps your brain stay within its natural limit. This makes learning feel easier, reduces stress, and improves how much you actually remember.





Time Blocking

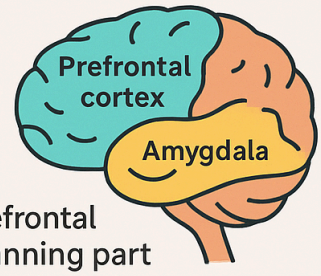
Time blocking works because it gives your brain structure, certainty, and clear boundaries. Instead of keeping everything in your head ("I need to revise... I should tidy my room... I still haven't done that homework..."), you decide when each task will happen. This reduces overwhelm and stops tasks from piling up mentally.

By giving each activity its own block of time, your brain can focus on one thing at a time without worrying about the rest. It also helps break big tasks into manageable pieces, reduces procrastination, and builds a predictable routine that supports concentration and lowers anxiety.

Why Time Blocking Helps the Brain
(More Than a To-Do List)

- Time blocking gives the brain structure, clarity, and a sense of safety.
- A to-do list shows a long pile of tasks with no clear order, which activates the amygdala and creates overwhelm.

1. By giving each task its own slot in the day, the brain knows exactly what to focus on and when it will finish.



2. This switches on the prefrontal cortex (the thinking, planning part of the brain) and reduces the noise, stress, and uncertainty that trigger anxiety.
3. Time blocking also prevents decision fatigue. Instead of constantly thinking, "What should I do next?" the plan is already made – which frees up mental energy for focus, memory, and problem-solving.

Time Blocking vs To-Do Lists