

Dealing with Exam Stress

Self-help Guide



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<https://rise.childrensociety.org.uk/>

click or scan:



Introduction

This booklet aims to help you become aware of your own stressors and help to provide you with some practical strategies to stop exam related stress from feeling overwhelming.

Some pages have QR codes that you can click or scan to take you to a helpful video.

Need urgent support?

A mental health crisis is an emergency that has a direct and immediate threat to your physical or emotional well-being. In these situations, it's important to get help quickly.

Try to stay calm and ask someone for help if you need it. It could help to tell someone you trust, maybe a family member or a friend. They can be with you and help you decide what to do. They can also contact services on your behalf.

If there is any immediate risk to life, contact the emergency services by calling 999.

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What is stress?

Feeling stressed or worried is a natural response to pressure. It is evolutionary and helped us hunt and survive dangers in the past when we lived in ways that made us more exposed to physical dangers. When stressed the body releases chemicals to make you feel edgy, ready to perform or RUN! Over time these survival responses have become automatic so they happen without us deciding to do them.

Stress and worry can be helpful, most of all stress makes us perform, and can help us concentrate and become more alert when needed. It is however, important that we don't experience too much stress, as this can make us feel unwell, unhappy and stop us achieving our best.

On a scale of 0 to 10, how confident do you feel right now about going into an exam/test?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

**Not
confident**

**Very
confident**

When does stress become a problem?

Stress can become a problem when it starts to feel overwhelming, and we are no longer being productive.

This sometimes happens when we have too much stress and we don't know where to begin to break it down. When this happens it can stop us from actually doing anything and then can make us feel even worse.



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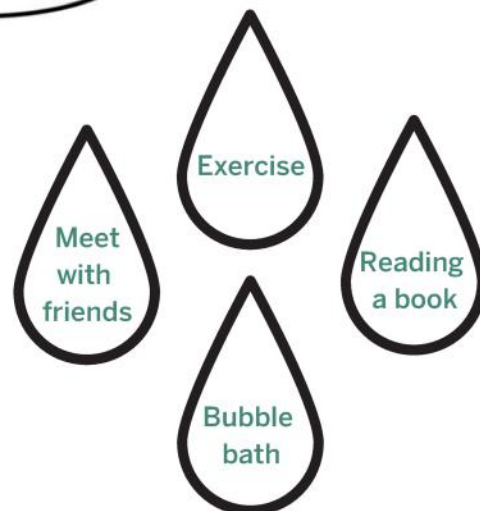
Stress Bucket

Watch our Stress Bucket video on the Rise YouTube channel to help identify and breakdown your stressors. In the rain clouds and/or bucket add all stressors you notice around you, then add water drops with strategies to represent all the things you can do to help you relax and let the stress go.

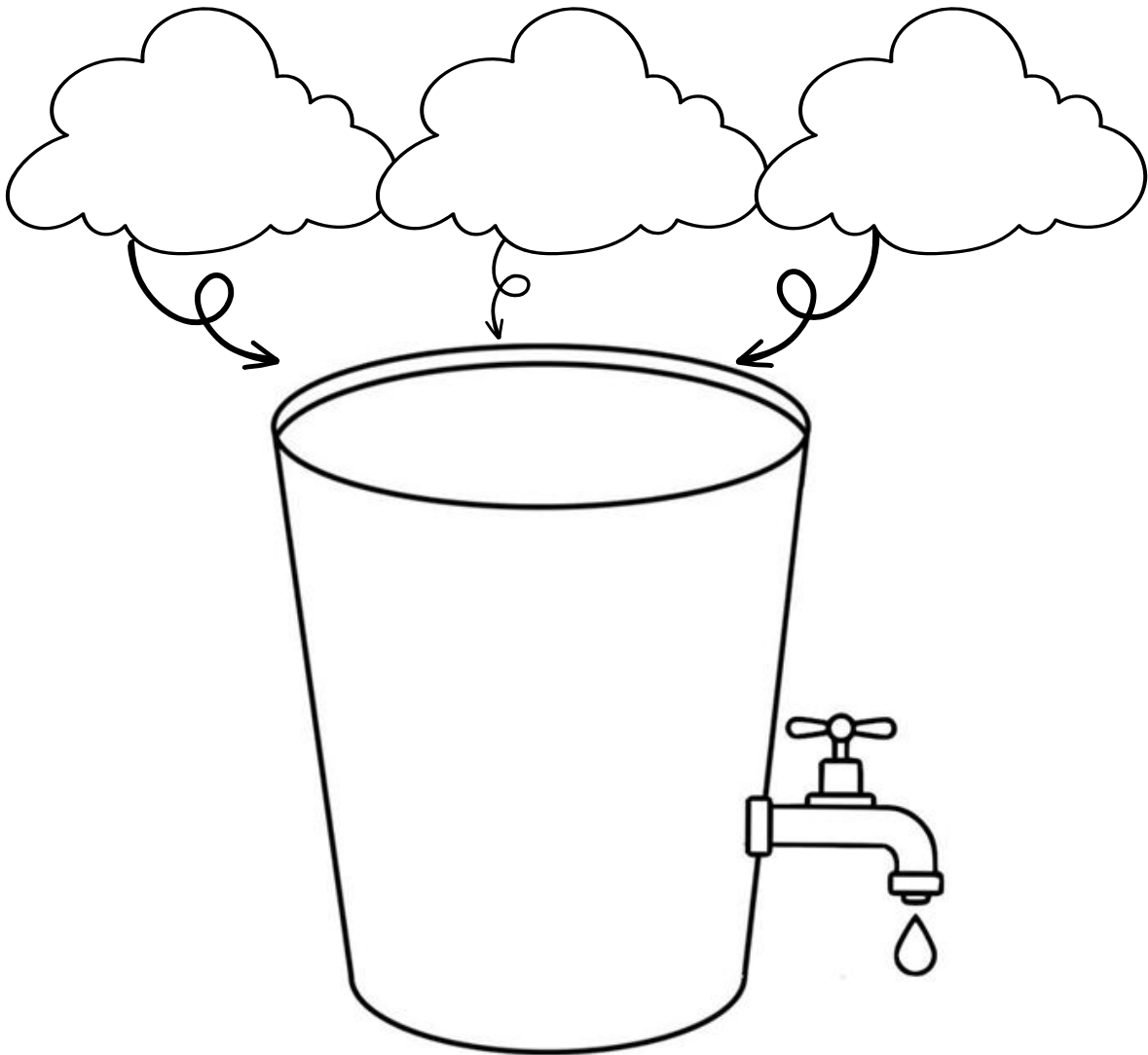


If your bucket gets too full or overflows it can lead to unhelpful thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Make sure your coping strategies are healthy and helpful. E.g., comfort eating is not healthy - it might help short term but not long term.



My Stress Bucket



How do we recognise stress?

Stress can affect us in different ways;

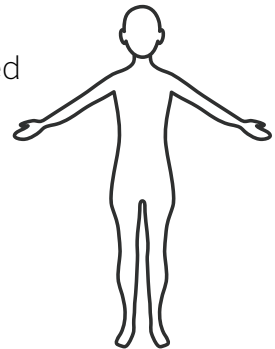
How I feel...

- Nervous
- Scared
- Pressured
- Like something dreadful will happen
- Tense
- Stressed
- Uptight
- On edge
- Unsettled
- Strange
- Woozy
- Detached
- Panicky
- Overwhelmed



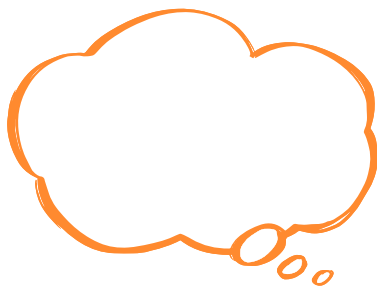
How my body reacts . . .

- Heart pounds, races and skips a beat
- Chest feels tight or painful
- Tingling or numbness in toes or fingers
- Stomach churning or butterflies
- Having to go to the toilet
- Tense muscles
- Body aching
- Sweating
- Breathing changes
- Dizzy and lightheaded
- Feeling sick



How I think . . .

- Constant worrying
- Can't concentrate
- Thoughts racing
- Mind jumping from one thing to another
- Imagining the worst and dwelling on it
- Going over the same worry again and again



How I might react. . .

- Pace up and down
- Start jobs and not finish
- Can't sit and relax
- On the go all the time
- Snappy and irritable behaviour
- Anger outbursts
- Mind racing

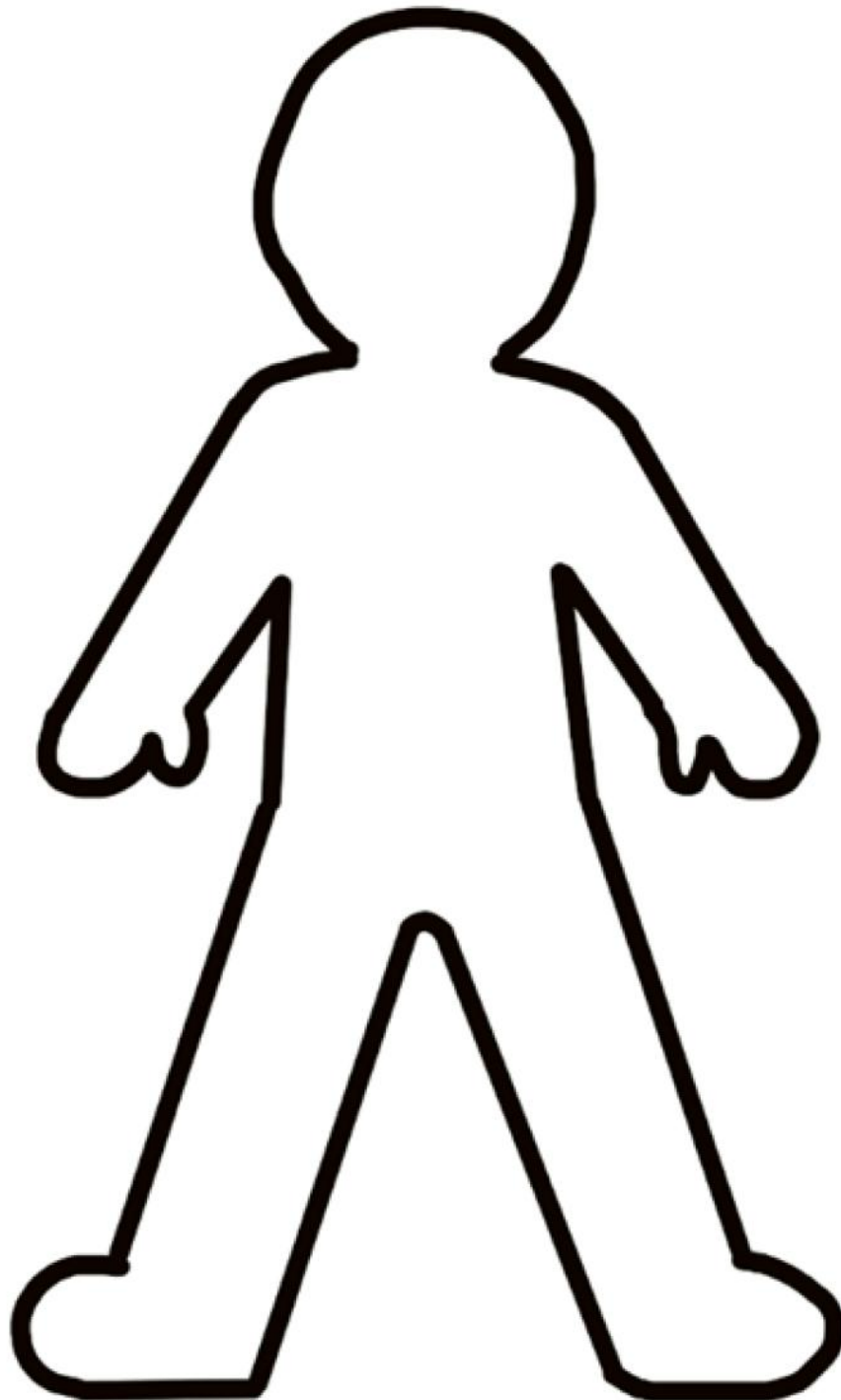




What does my stress feel like?

When we experience feelings, they can present both emotionally and physically. We have physical responses to how we are feeling. At these times your body can experience temporary changes, which might feel uncomfortable and scary. Although, some stress is not always a bad thing, it can help us be productive, perform on tests, focus and concentrate.

Can you label the picture below to show how your body responds to stress?

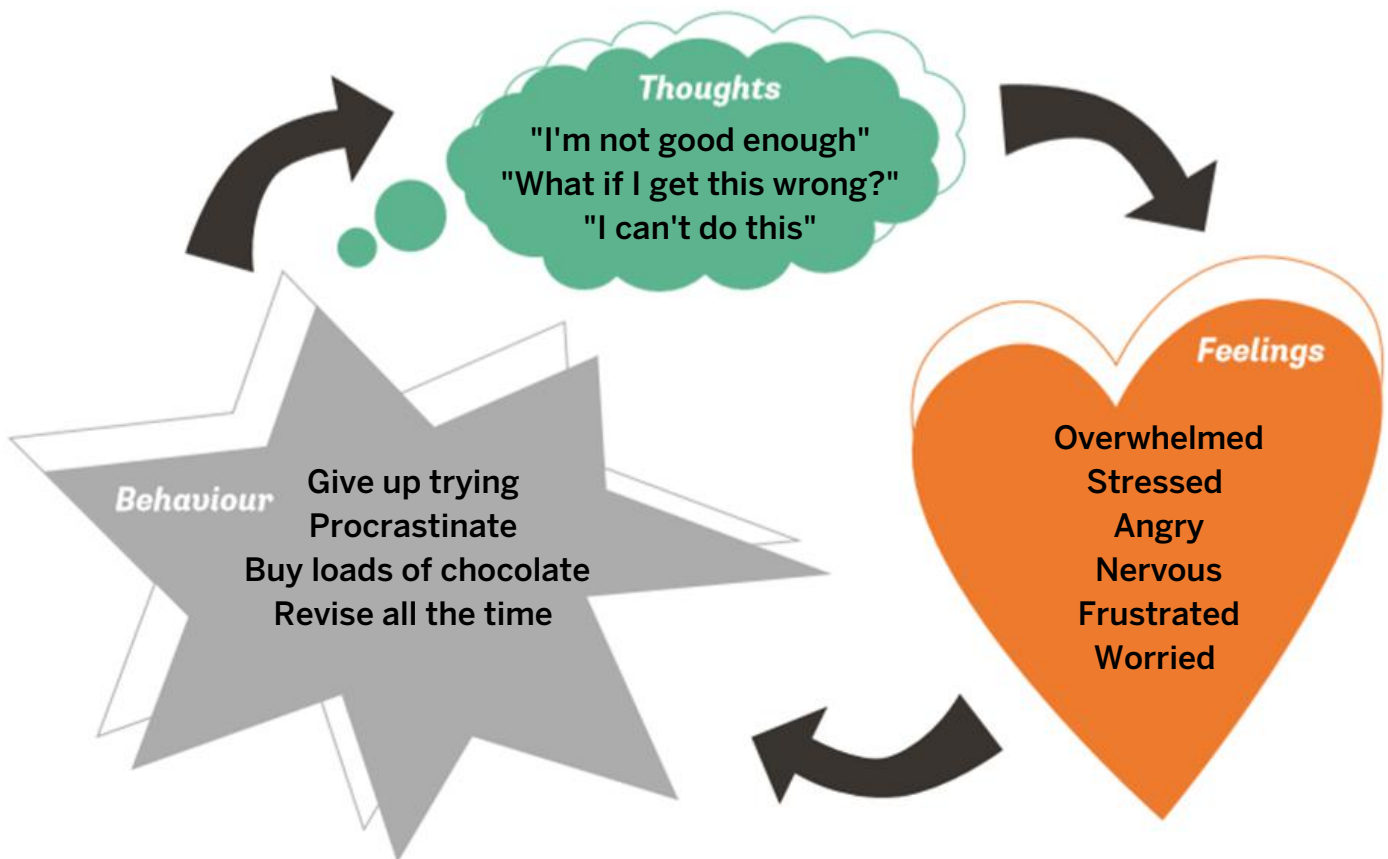


Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviour Cycle

Our thoughts, feelings and behaviours are linked and can influence each other. If we have **unhelpful** thoughts in our head they can make us feel worse about ourselves and less likely to do our best.

"I can't do it, I don't understand, I'm useless, I'm going to fail"

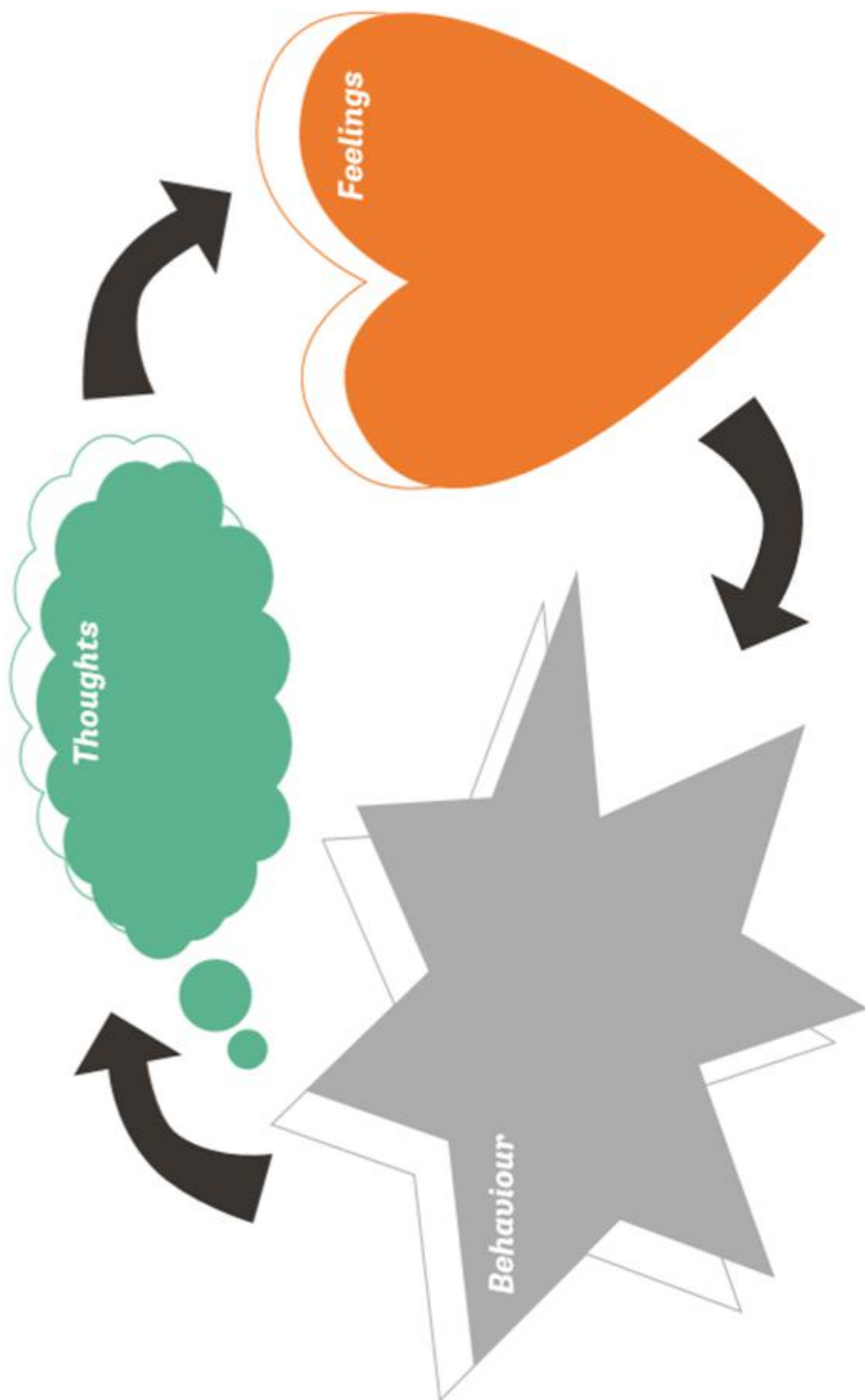
Situation: Upcoming exams



Why not try and draw your own cycle on the next page to show what is going on for you.

Right now, what are your thoughts about exams? How does this make you feel?







Automatic thoughts

Our thoughts are automatic, they pop into our heads whenever they choose and can be hard to ignore. They can be happy or helpful but sometimes they can also be unhelpful and upsetting. We can't control what thoughts pop into our heads but we can control what we do with them.

Automatic thoughts can be words, images, memories, sounds or just a sense of knowing. We tend to believe our thoughts automatically, without thinking. Our thoughts can also be repeated over and over. The more this happens, the more we believe them and the stronger they feel.

Our thoughts are powerful. They influence how we feel and what we do.

For example:

Situation: You're in a maths exam



Our thought is
"I never get anything
right in maths"



We might feel stupid,
upset, overwhelmed,
ashamed, fed up.



Our action: We may
give up or rush through
the exam to get it over
with.

The alternative:



Our thought is
"I've got things right
before, I can do this if I
keep trying and focus"



We might feel
motivated, excited,
pleased, strong.



Our action: We might keep
trying our best.
(And have a better chance
of getting things right!)

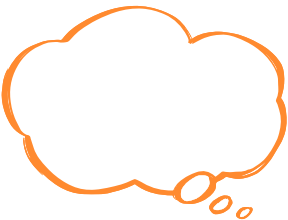
Unhelpful Thinking styles

Usain Bolt certainly didn't start his 100m sprint thinking he was going to lose. He was practising positive self-talk to help him feel prepared and confident.

Reflect on previous exams and tests in your life. You have taken exams and tests before and you will take them again in future. Over time, our thoughts can get stuck in a regular pattern and way of thinking. Have you have experienced any of the thinking styles below?

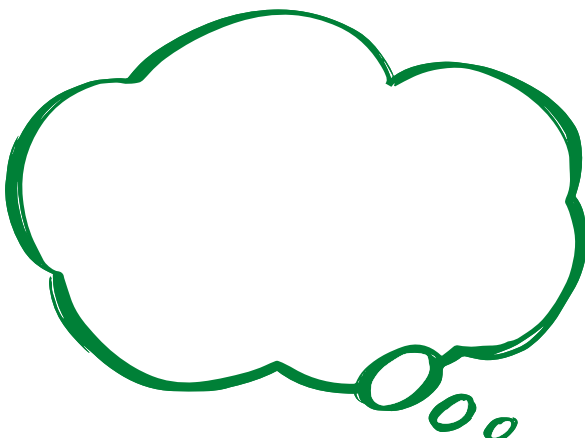
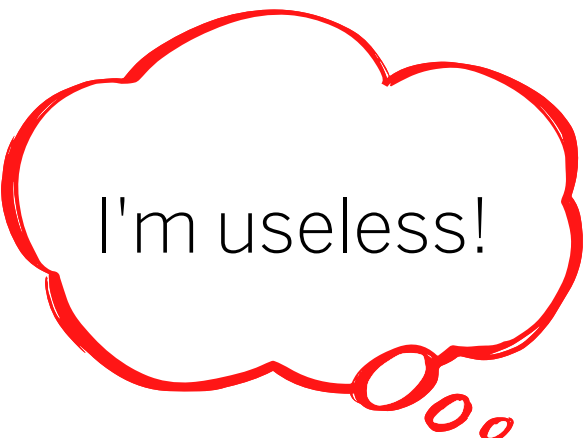
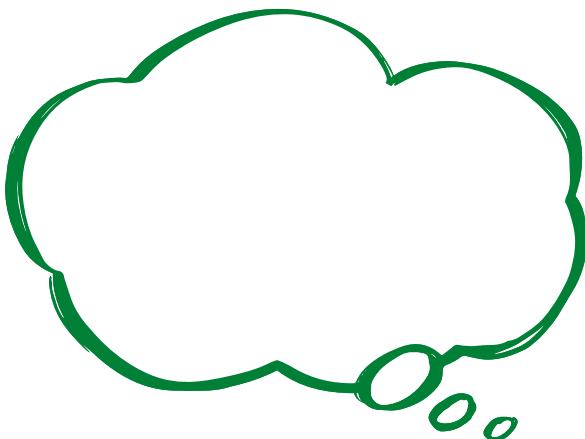
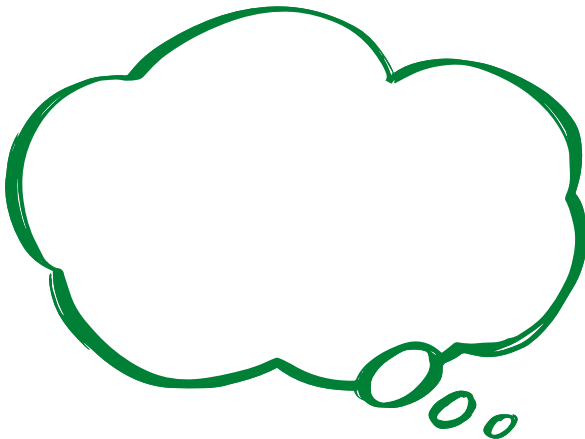
The following thinking styles are taken from weheartcbt.com

 <p>predictions</p> <p>I will fail the test</p> <p>I make negative predictions about what might happen in the future even though I have no way of knowing this.</p>	 <p>judgements</p> <p>They looked at me funny</p> <p>I make judgements about things even though there is no evidence or facts to back this up.</p>	 <p>catastrophising</p> <p>The car will crash</p> <p>I always think that the worst thing or that something really bad is going to happen.</p>
 <p>perfectionist</p> <p>I have to get everything right</p> <p>I put a lot of pressure on myself to do well and set unrealistically high expectations for myself.</p>	 <p>negative glasses</p> <p>Today has been terrible</p> <p>When I have my negative glasses on, I only see the bad things and don't notice any of the good things.</p>	 <p>feelings</p> <p>I feel bad so that means today will be bad</p> <p>If I notice negative feelings in myself or by body, I automatically think that it means something bad is happening.</p>
 <p>mountains & molehills</p> <p>I can't believe I only got 8 out of 10</p> <p>I tend to take more notice of the negative things in a situation and down play the positive things.</p>	 <p>memories</p> <p>Something bad happened here so something bad will happen again</p> <p>Some things trigger my negative memories which makes me think something bad will happen again now.</p>	 <p>black&white thoughts</p> <p>This day is ruined now</p> <p>I usually think things are either really good or really bad with nothing in between.</p>
 <p>mind reading</p> <p>They think I look silly</p> <p>I assume I know what other people are thinking and this is usually negative things about me.</p>	 <p>compare & despair</p> <p>They are so clever, why can't I be like that?</p> <p>I notice positive things about other people but then compare myself negatively to them.</p>	 <p>self critical</p> <p>I'm stupid</p> <p>I am very critical of my own abilities and about myself.</p>



Thought Challenging

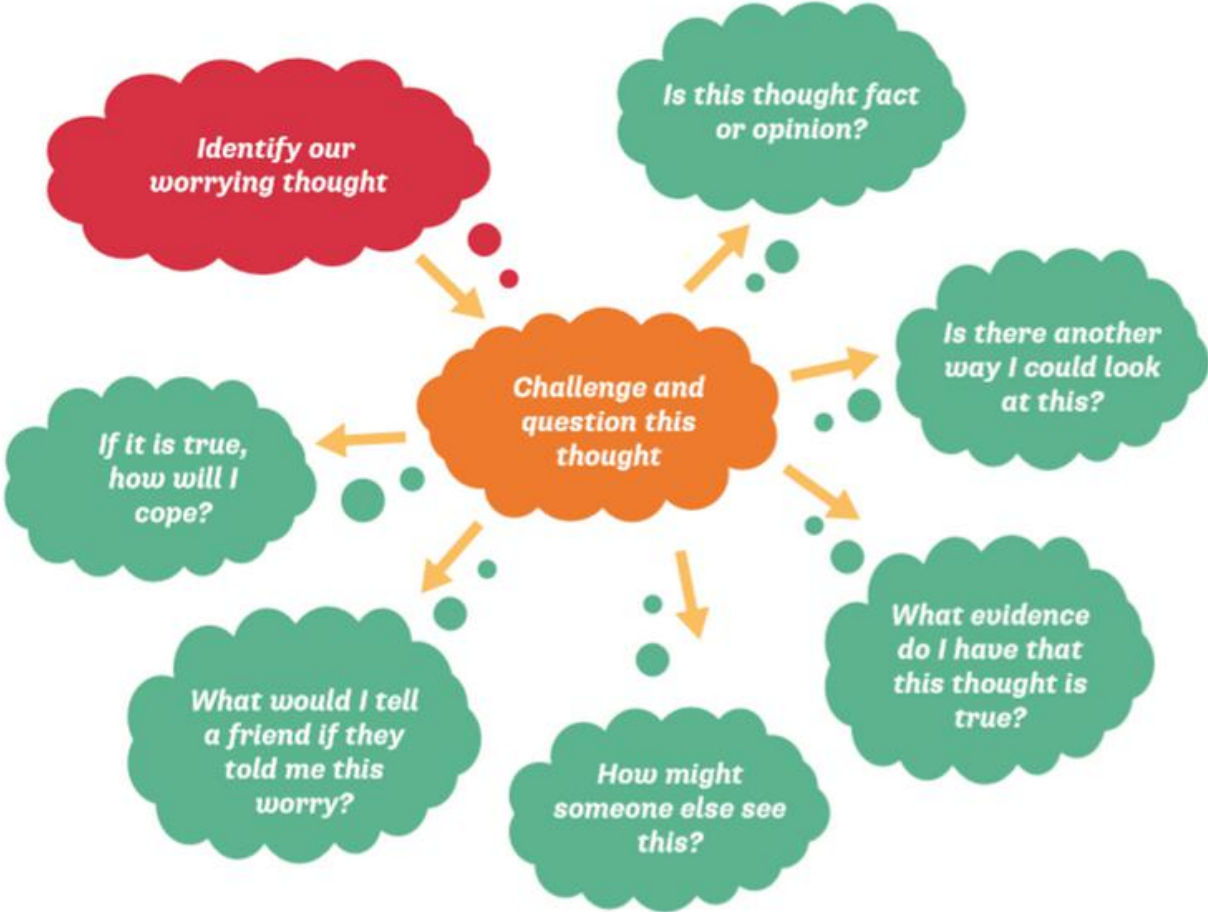
Rather than believe our **unhelpful** thoughts, we can try to flip them to become more **helpful**. Can you flip these unhelpful thoughts into something that feels more helpful for you?





Thought Challenging

To help flip your thoughts into a helpful positive thought, try and ask yourself some of these questions:





Positive Self-Talk

How would you like to feel on the exam day?
What positive self-talk can you say to yourself?

Examples:

I know that
I can do well

I am ready

I do know the material

I will stay calm and be
able to concentrate

My positive self-talk statements:

Before Exams - Tips and Strategies



Look at your sleep hygiene, are you getting enough sleep? Check out our YouTube [video](#) for ways to improve your sleep.



Music can be a powerful way to change feelings. Why not make an uplifting playlist, sing, dance, play an instrument to **help relax**.



Challenge unhelpful thoughts and think more positively.

Be kind to yourself.



Talk to someone: trusted friends, family, school staff or contacting a helpline can help when we struggle



Find a revision timetable that suits you.



Practising mindfulness can help improve your mood. Check out our [YouTube playlist](#) for guided meditations.



If you can, try to be active every day. This will help you concentrate and be mentally ready. Is there a sport or exercise you enjoy?

This can be in small ways such as going for a walk or stretching after long periods of sitting.

Relaxation Strategies

When you notice some of the physical symptoms in your body that indicate you are getting stressed try some relaxation techniques.

These are designed to help slow down your breathing and help you back to feeling in control of your body, helping you concentrate and remain focused.

You can find more of these strategies on our [website](#) under the Self-care section.

Belly breathing

Sit or lie comfortably, place your hand on your belly.

Breathe in deeply through your nose and feel your belly rise.

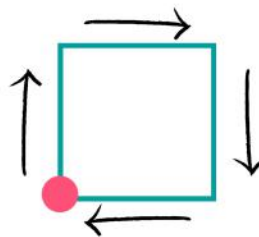
Breathe out deeply through your mouth as your belly relaxes back.



Square breathing

You can use your finger and trace around a square object, or trace an imaginary square with your finger.

Breathe in slowly for 4 seconds and out slowly for 4 seconds. Repeat if needed.



Hand breathing

Stretch out one hand so you have space between your fingers. With your pointer on the other hand, trace up and down around your fingers (starting with your little finger).

Breathe in slowly as you go up and breathe out slowly as you go down.



Balloon breathing

Sit comfortably and imagine there is a big balloon in your belly.

Place your hands over your belly.

Take a big deep breath in and make your belly puff out as if it was a balloon filling with air,

Then exhale slowly like you are letting the air out of a balloon, a little at a time.



Bubble breaths

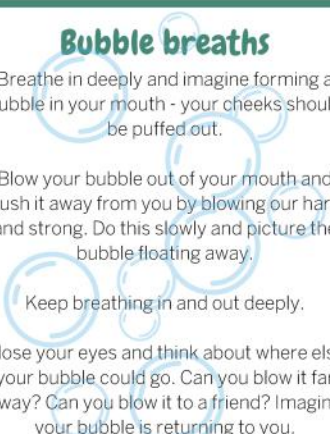
Breathe in deeply and imagine forming a bubble in your mouth - your cheeks should be puffed out.

Blow your bubble out of your mouth and push it away from you by blowing out hard and strong. Do this slowly and picture the bubble floating away.

Keep breathing in and out deeply.

Close your eyes and think about where else your bubble could go. Can you blow it far away? Can you blow it to a friend? Imagine your bubble is returning to you.

Open your mouth and catch it for the next time. Repeat.



Shoulder roll breathing

Choose a comfortable sitting position. As you take a slow deep in through your nose, raise your shoulder up towards your ears.

Breathe slowly out through your mouth, lowering your shoulders as you exhale.

Repeat slowly, rolling your shoulders up and down in time with your breath.



Exam Time Tips and Strategies



The night before:

- Make sure you have all the equipment needed and know where you need to go
- Try to do something relaxing / self-care strategies
- Get a good night's sleep



The day of:

- Have a good breakfast - this will keep your blood sugar levels regular to stop you feeling weak or dizzy
- Take a bottle of water if you can
- Remember breathing exercises to focus your body and mind
- Go to the toilet before hand
- Think helpful thoughts: "I can do this, I'm going to try my best"



During the exam:

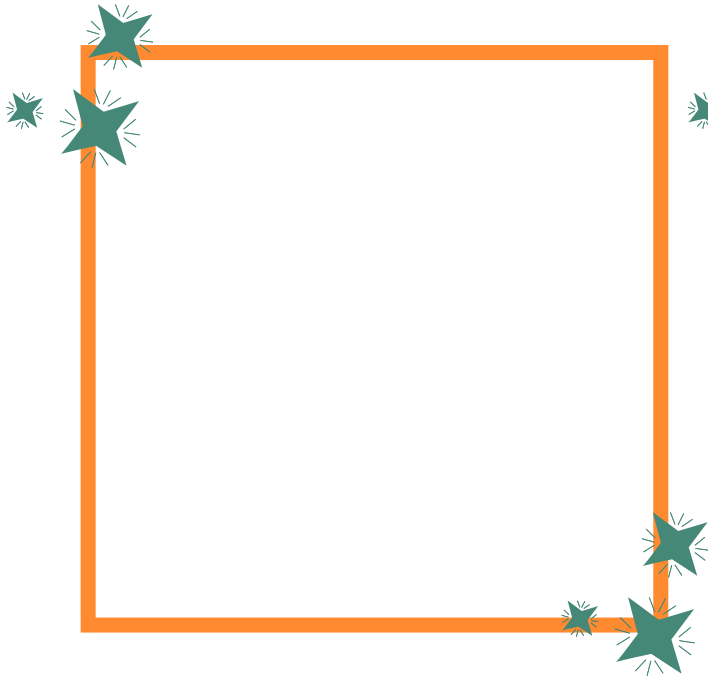
- Read the instructions carefully
- If you are stuck on a question, go on to the next. Come back and answer it later or have an intelligent guess.
- Leave time to read through and check answers

My Exam Plan

Note down what works for you;

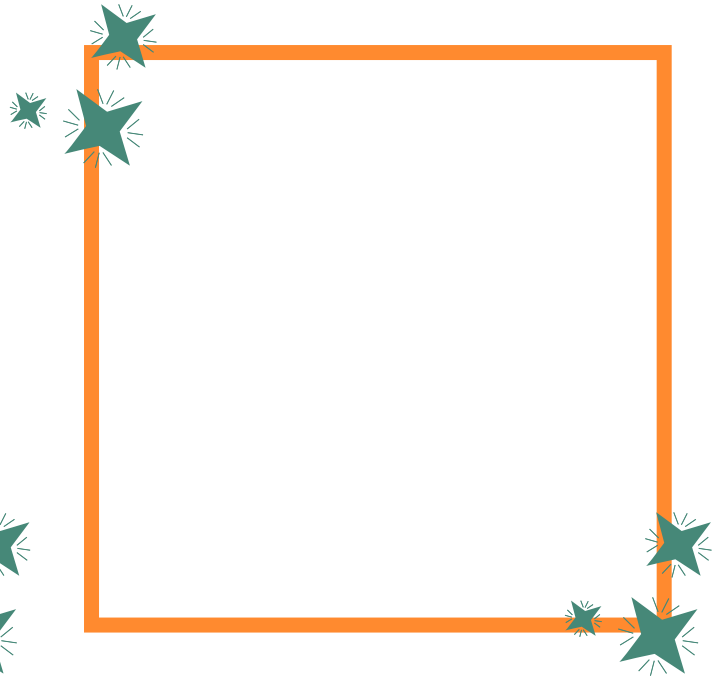
Positive Self-talk

What positive talk do I need to hear to build my confidence?



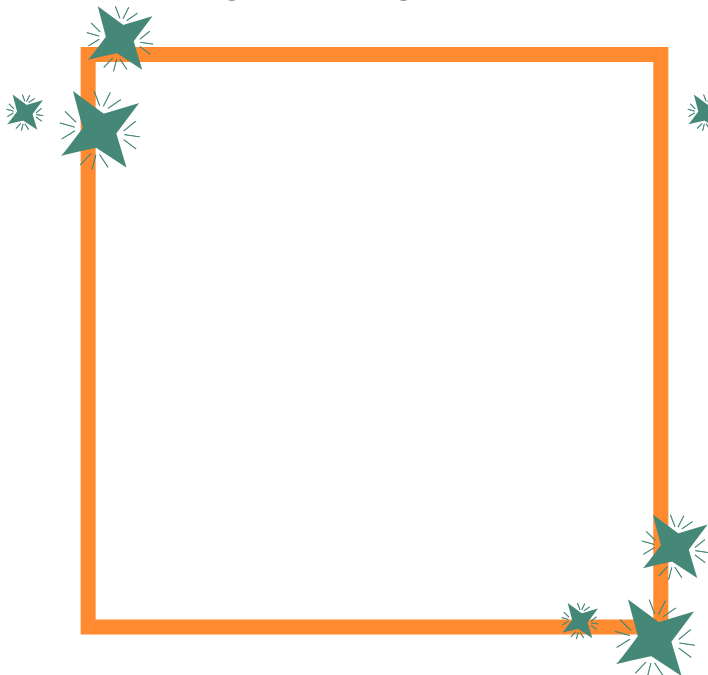
Relaxation

What helps me relax and stay grounded?



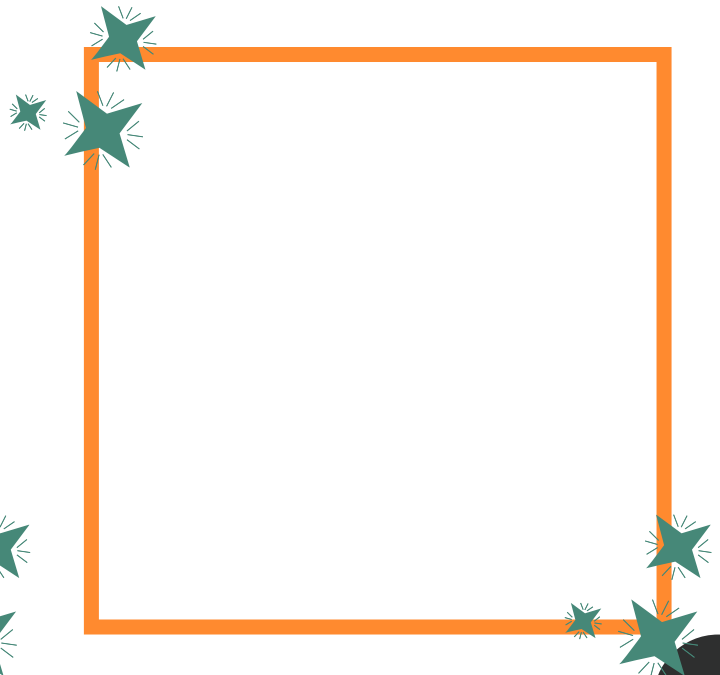
People I can talk to

Who are the people I can talk to when things are feeling too much?

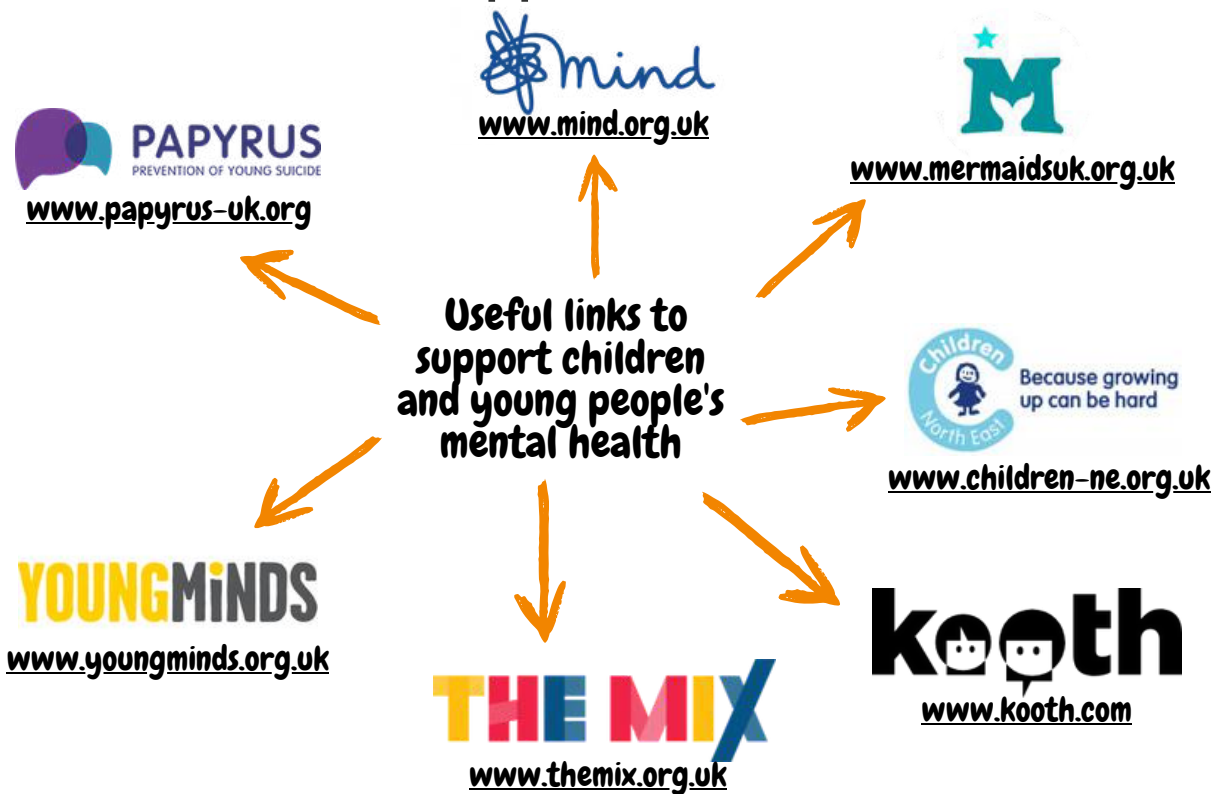


My breathing strategies

Which breathing strategies are most useful for me?



Further Support and Information



Apps



Headspace
A meditation app that acts as a personal guide to health and happiness.



MoodGym
An online cognitive behaviour therapy program for depression and anxiety.



Smiling Mind
A meditation program to help bring mindfulness into your life



Calm Harm
An app that helps young people manage the urge to self-harm.



ThinkNinja
Designed for children and young people (10-18 years old) to help with anxiety and low mood.



Clear Fear
An app that helps you face your fears and reduce the physical responses to anxiety.

Finding Help - Crisis Support Services

Need urgent support?

A mental health crisis is an emergency that has a direct and immediate threat to your physical or emotional well-being. In these situations, it's important to get help quickly.

Try to stay calm and ask someone for help if you need it. It could help to tell someone you trust, maybe a family member or a friend. They can be with you and help you decide what to do. They can also contact services on your behalf.

If there is any immediate risk to life, contact the emergency services by calling 999.



NHS

- Mental health services are free on the NHS. Check with your school to see if there are any mental health teams such as RISE in your school. Talk to your GP about a mental health referral.
- To get urgent medical help, use the NHS 111 online service, or call 111 if you're unable to get help online.



Shout

Shout is a 24/7 text service, free on all major mobile networks, for anyone in crisis anytime, anywhere. It's a place to go if you're struggling to cope and you need immediate help.

Text 85258 for immediate help.



Samaritans

You can access confidential emotional support at any time from Samaritans either by:

- Calling 116 123
- Emailing jo@samaritans.org
- www.samaritans.org/scotland/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/



Childline (www.childline.org.uk)

Childline is a free, private and confidential service that you can access online and on the phone. They can provide help and support for people up to their 19th birthday.



HOPELINE (www.papyrus-uk.org/papyrus-hopelineuk)

HOPELINEUK is a confidential support and advice service for:

- Children and young people under the age of 35 who are experiencing thoughts of suicide
- Anyone concerned that a young person could be thinking about suicide

Call 0800 068 4141 any day 9am - 12am (midnight)