Managing HSC Stress
A Guide For Parents

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What Challenges is my child likely to face this year?

Adolescent Developmental challenges:

1. Establishing their identity (who am I? What do I want to do with my life? How am I different from my parents?)

2. Moving from dependence to independence (challenging parental values, questioning rules, arguing!)

Specific HSC challenges:

- How do I stop myself procrastinating?
- Will I get a good enough ATAR to get into university?
- I have 3 assessments at once how can I do all of these?
- I can't fit in homework and revision for exams/assignments
- Am I doing enough homework?
- How do I motivate myself?
- I don't really know what my goals are
- Others are doing more than me
What can I do to help my child get through the year?

1. Don't panic with them – set a good example and stay calm!

2. Foster family connectedness:
   - Use active listening skills
   - Validate thoughts and feelings
   - No nagging!
   - Only give advice & solutions if asked
   - Verbalise praise
   - Have a family meal together
   - Catch-up before bed
   - Take an interest in their interests

3. Avoid Buying into the common HSC myths:

   Myth 1 - The HSC is a year of ceaseless toil:
   An unbalanced lifestyle leads to physical & emotional problems, loss of motivation and burnout. Your adolescent needs a balance of study, socialising, regular exercise, good food and good sleep.

   Myth 2 - Your ATAR determines your future success and worth as a person:
   There are many pathways to success and many successful people who did not do well in the HSC. Keep it in perspective! Your child's health and wellbeing are more important than any academic result.

   (Surviving Year 12 – Dr Michael Carr-Gregg)
4. **Beware of negative self-talk in yourself as well as your child:**

Often, it’s not so much the situation, but how you THINK ABOUT the situation that causes stress: e.g. “I can’t handle this”, “he’s going to fail”, “she’ll never get a good job”

Our thoughts have a direct effect on how we feel: the way we think about a situation can make it easier to handle the situation or harder to handle.

If you notice yourself or your child getting caught up in negative thinking patterns see if you can find a more realistic, helpful way of looking at the situation. Ask yourself (or them):

- Where is the evidence that tells me this thought is true? Where’s the evidence that tells me it’s NOT true?
- What would I say to a good friend in this situation?
- Is it really that bad?
- What else might happen instead? Are there other ways of looking at this?
- Is this way of thinking helpful to me? Does it help me get on and achieve my goals?
Some Common Negative Thought Patterns:
(Which of these do you get caught in? Tick the ones that apply most to you)

Black & White / All-or-nothing
You think about things in extremes. Things are either good or bad—there is no in-between.

“I’m a terrible parent”
“If she doesn’t do well in everything, she’ll fail”

Catastrophising
You always predict the worst outcome

“He’ll never get a good job”
“She’s not going to get the assignment done”

Unfair to Compare
You compare yourself to other people’s strengths

“Why can’t I be as organised as her/him?”

Filtering
You tend to focus on all the negatives in the situation.

Focus on the “B” grade amongst all “A” grades

Labelling
You label yourself and others

“He’s so lazy,” “I’m an idiot”

Mind Reading
You assume that you know what other people are thinking

“They think I’m a bad parent”
5. Help your child take Action!

Action is the opposite of Avoidance!

If procrastination is a problem for your child:
- Adopt a “gently gently” approach
- Feedback observations about the procrastinating behaviour
- Avoid nagging
- Seek reasons and listen closely (e.g. is it due to a fear of failure?)
- Gently challenge unhelpful self-talk
- Remind them that procrastination only makes things worse – encourage them to do ONE thing rather than nothing

Help them build good study habits: Plan, Plan, Plan!!
- Setting clear, short-term goals
- Writing a ‘to-do’ list and prioritising tasks
- Using a timetable to schedule in study AND leisure activities
- Study ‘smart’ i.e. keep weightings in mind
- Only study for a set number of hours per day
- Remind them to reward themselves with study breaks or pleasant activities. But only after they’ve worked on their goals
6. Be Their Greatest Supporter

You can’t (and shouldn’t) do it for them, but you can:

- Provide a calm, supportive environment
- Remind them you love them no matter what
- Ask what you can do to help
- Encourage them to find a balance of study and other activities
- Make sure there is plenty of healthy nutritious food for them to eat
- Encourage them to do regular exercise
- Encourage good sleep habits
- Avoid nagging!!!

7. Look After Yourself!

- Monitor your own stress levels and self-talk
- Avoid buying into HSC myths
- Spend time on your own self-care away from your teenager - think of yourself like a savings account, you can’t keep giving out without putting some deposits back in. Go for a walk, have a facial, take time-out for yourself
- Talk to parents of other teenagers- it helps to know you’re all in the same boat!
8. **Monitor Early Warning Signs of More Serious Problems**

You know your adolescent better than anyone else - so you’re the best person to monitor your teenager’s ability to cope with the demands of the HSC year:

Here are some warning signs to look out for:

- Significant changes in usual routine
- Poor sleep
- Loss of appetite/overeating
- Loss of interest or pleasure in enjoyable activities
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- More teary than usual
- Complaints of feeling blue
- Grades drop
- Suddenly irritable or aggressive
- Self-harming
- Talking about death or suicide

Where can you go for help?

- School Counsellor
- Your GP
- Local Community Health centres
- Private psychologists/psychiatrists
- Health Psychology Unit, UTS
  - Individual and group therapy
  - Parents and teenagers
  - 9514 4077 or health.psychology@uts.edu.au