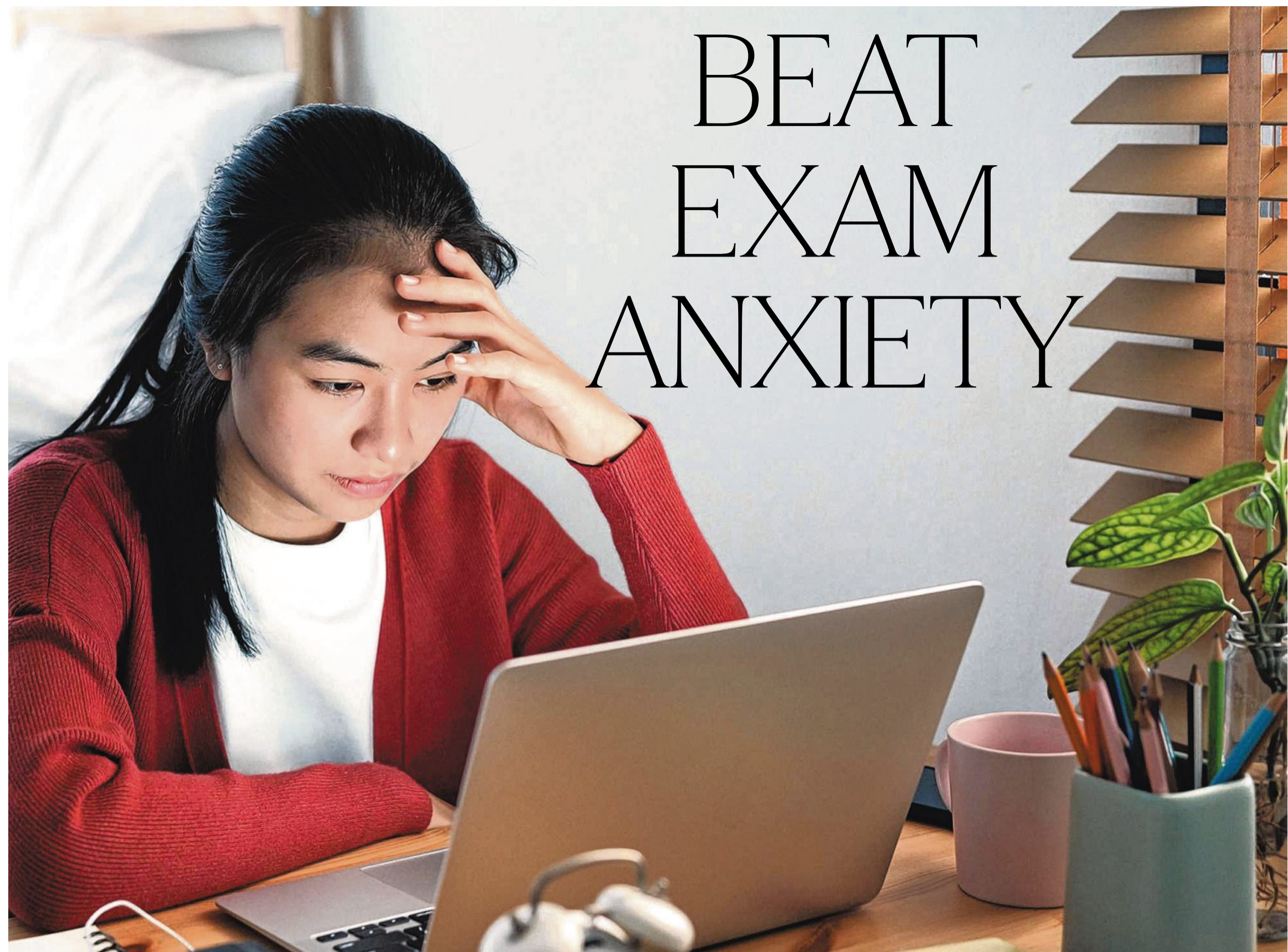


# BEAT EXAM ANXIETY



Mental health professionals see more cases of students facing exam stress in the run-up to national exams. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

## Planning ahead, making time for self-care and adopting a positive mindset are steps teens can take to alleviate the pressure



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When Chloe Ng was in Secondary 3 in 2022, she became terrified of taking examinations even though she had done her revision.

Chloe, now 16, in Secondary 4 and preparing to take her O-level exams, said she kept crying for no reason then. "I became very scared when I thought about exams and kept dreading them."

She decided to speak to her teacher when she felt increasingly tired, lacked the energy to socialise with her friends and lost the drive to push on in her studies.

"I found exam stress to be a hard topic to bring up to my parents. I thought it was something I had to overcome by myself as it is someth-

ing that people go through in life," she said.

Chloe said talking to her teacher helped as she shared a news article on ways to destress, referred her to the school counsellor and encouraged her to open up to her parents.

The girl also spoke to her parents and felt better afterwards, as they told her it did not matter how long she took to finish her education, and they would rather she enjoy the process.

Her mother, Madam Karen Quek, a 48-year-old administrative manager, said she was glad Chloe opened up to her.

She motivated Chloe with her favourite snacks and encouraged her to plan a timetable to better manage her time.

"She has been a perfectionist since a young age, so I kept reminding her that exams don't determine her future. She has many strengths that will help her do well in life," said Madam Quek.

With national exams such as the O and A levels around the corner, experts say it is important to learn strategies to cope so that exam anxiety does not undo the hard work a teenager has put in for revision.

Exam or test anxiety is defined as anxiety that students experience when they know their performance in an important area of life will be evaluated, said Associate Professor Gregory Arief D. Liem from the National Institute of Education (NIE), who teaches educational psychology.

Behavioural symptoms of exam

anxiety include feeling helpless or worrying about doing badly, while physical symptoms include being unable to relax or having headaches, palpitations or nausea.

Mental health professionals, like Institute of Mental Health child psychiatrist Jeremy Heng, said students seeking help for distress from exams tend to coincide with the week leading up to major national exams.

Psychologist Amanda Ang at The Therapy Room, a clinic which provides psychological services and therapeutic interventions, saw an increase in the number of students seeking support in the period before the exams when she previously worked in a secondary school for five years.

While some students may find talking to a trusted adult helpful, others may need professional help.

Psychologist and NIE senior lecturer Kit Phey Ling said she once had a teenage client who reacted so badly to his first test failure in Secondary 3 that he started fearing taking examinations to the extent of skipping some papers.

By the time he was referred to her for help, he was unable to leave his home and she could meet him only on Zoom.

"We spent six months working on his sources of anxiety, which included an intense fear of failure and the belief that he was not good enough to perform well," she said.

With her help, he learnt to reframe his thoughts and picked up techniques to manage his anxiety

and completed his O-level examinations, said Dr Kit.

### CAUSES OF EXAM STRESS

Dr Kit said examination stress usually occurs when an individual fears that he or she cannot do well enough to achieve what he or she wants.

For example, if a teenager has a specific post-secondary course in mind but did not do well enough for his preliminary examination, he may start to worry that his dreams will not become a reality and focus on the worst-case scenario of failing.

If he over-worries, it may keep him up at night, resulting in him being unable to focus in the day, she said.

Exam stress could also occur when adults around teenagers have unrealistic expectations, promising them large rewards for doing well and severe punishments otherwise, said Dr Kit.

"Since many teenagers want to meet their parents' expectations, they may put excessive pressure on themselves," she said.

Another possible cause of exam stress is previous negative experiences with exam-taking.

"Some teenagers react by over-preparing, to the point of not sleeping or eating properly. Others may procrastinate and focus on stress-relieving activities, such as gaming. Some students even engage in self-harm behaviour or become suicidal," said Dr Kit.



**It is better to address these issues early rather than wait for them to escalate.**



**MS VIVYAN CHEE (above)**, deputy director and head of Oasis for Minds Services at Singapore Children's Society, on how students should not wait to seek help if stress affects their daily functioning

Dr Heng added that if a young person has an underlying condition, such as depression, it will make him more vulnerable to exam stress as his condition might make it harder for him to study effectively.

Another reason could be a teenager's personality. For example, a teen who is perfectionistic or very driven often places more pressure on himself to excel, said Dr Heng.

### WHEN SHOULD STUDENTS SEEK HELP

Ms Vivyan Chee, deputy director and head of Oasis for Minds Services at Singapore Children's Society, said students should seek help when stress affects their daily functioning, for instance, ability to focus in school or interact with others.

"It is better to address these issues early rather than wait for them to escalate," she said.

She said parents should look out for signs when stress becomes "toxic", for example, persistent sadness, drastic changes in behaviour or withdrawal from friends, family and favourite activities.

Ms Ang encouraged students to seek support early to pick up stress management techniques or problem-solving skills.

Students can speak to their school counsellor, who will assess the symptoms and refer the student for follow-ups, if necessary.