

Beat Exam Stress

By Frances Camilleri

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Exam time is becoming an uphill struggle for all concerned. It's understandable that parents have concerns for their children's future and want them to do well in their education, but are they stretching their children's aptitude which inevitably is resulting in unnecessary stress? Frances Camilleri met MARGARET ABELA and GRAZIELLA CASTILLO, two dedicated social workers who work with the sister national agencies *Sedqa* and *Appogg* respectively, with the scope to discover what necessitated the need to include exam stress management as one of their topics in the Prevention Programme set up for students and also to suggest ways to parents on how to offer support to their children and adolescents who are preparing for their exams.

Adults tend to view the world of children as happy and carefree. After all, children don't have jobs to keep or bills to pay, so what could they possibly have to worry about? Plenty! Even young children have worries and feel stress to a certain extent. In fact, studies show that stress can affect anyone – even a child – who may feel somewhat overwhelmed. Local experience has shown that a 10-year-old child in Year 6 can suffer from serious academic pressure because of the exams that they are bound to make at the end of their scholastic year.

The sedqa Prevention Service has several different programmes for primary school children of different ages however Margaret explained that the prevention programme in year 6, called *Qed Nikber*, started this scholastic year so it is relatively a pilot project and is considered a learning process for all concerned. By the end of this scholastic year, 20 schools with a total of 1,500 students from year 6 would have benefited from this programme. The aim of this Prevention Programme, is to help students with decision

making skills, healthy personality formation, values related to growing up and peer pressure. During this interview, we focused on one particular aspect aimed directly for Year 6 students – the topic of exam stress management.

Margaret and Graziella shared the same opinion – children and adolescents experience a lot of stress and tension. They worry that they will not do well in their Junior/Common entrance exams and thus let their families down. A common question asked by children is – “What will happen if I do not get the results that my parents want?”

In fact, exams are very much on their minds and sometimes well-meaning parents unwittingly add to the stress in their children’s lives. “So are the parents to blame?” I asked. “Are they the ones who are causing all this stress on their children?” Margaret explains that there are two types of parents. There are those who just want their children to do well in life or maybe benefit from what they have not been able to achieve themselves and then there are the high-achieving parents who have great expectations for their children and push them beyond what is normally expected in order to excel in everything they do. At times parents want their children to get good grades because they feel it is a reflection of their parenting skills.

There are also two indirect situations which are adding to the children’s anxiety. There may be children who are pressured into too many activities or private lessons, which may cause unnecessary stress and frustration. On the other hand, there are instances where parents become so obsessed with their children’s exams that they do not notice that their children are stressed out and continue to exclude them from all other activities that the children might enjoy attending. Both extremes are wrong and many professionals feel that children must have time to play creatively and relax after school. Exercise will help boost children’s energy levels, clear their mind and relieve stress. Walking, cycling, swimming and dancing are all effective ways of helping children deal with exam stress.

When *Sedqa* facilitators visit schools to do their programme including exam stress management, they make it a point that the class teachers are present because they would be the first to notice any abnormal behaviour indicating increased stress, though it is not always easy to recognise at an early stage when children are stressed out. Some children experience physical effects including stomach pains and headaches. Others have trouble concentrating and become withdrawn or spend a lot of time alone. Panic attacks, broken sleep, crying for no apparent reason and feeling sad are also symptoms of stress.

The time to seek professional attention is when any change in behaviour persists, when stress is causing the child serious anxiety. In some extreme cases, after consulting with the parents, *Appogg* can provide individual professional guidance primarily directed to help the child to cope with the situation, while also providing assistance and support to the parents/guardians.

Margaret emphasised that parents should *never* give their children any tranquilizer medicinals without a doctor's prescription. "This is a prescription to disaster," she boldly stated "as children will then associate substances as the easiest way out when faced with stressful circumstances even in their future." Graziella added that in their work they encounter situations of adolescents who opt to substances abuse such as drugs and alcohol when they face a stressful situation.

"Bhan-nahla nitghallem naghzel bejn it-tajjeb u l-hazin" (like a bee I will learn to choose between right and wrong) is the motto that is stressed throughout the Prevention Programme. With the help of this Programme, PSD teachers and councillors will be in a position to follow up, analyse the various situations and experiences and take the most appropriate action that is deemed fit in the circumstances.

In their life children come across various situations, their life is full of chances, it is full of choices, and children should be guided on how to decide to choose right from wrong. It is vital and very important to reassure children that there is life after exams, that they are not the only route to success, and that they will still be loved and valued, no matter how they perform.

It is not unusual for parents to be as nervous as – or more so than – their sons or daughters during exams. But parents have a major part to play in helping their children cope with the stresses of exam time. *Sedqa* and *Appogg* suggest also some tips for parents:

- Respect and acknowledge the fact that your child might be experiencing fear and pressure due to exams. It is not helpful to ignore what they are experiencing;
- Ask your child what is making him/her anxious and allow them to talk about it;
- Promises of gifts if they do well or threats if they don't, are not the best way of encouraging them before exams. It is far better if you help them appreciate and be satisfied about themselves;
- Highlighting the positive characteristics in your child leaves more effective results than repeating messages about what the child needs to improve
- Understand lost tempers and moodiness – don't blame or nag them and
- Keep calm yourself! It is of utmost important to be positive and reassuring and put the whole thing into perspective. Make it clear that you love and value your child for who they are and not for what happens in an exam.
- It is important to remember that the way we educate our children about the way that they face exam stress or other life difficulties, helps our child to learn how to confront other stressful situations in life.

As Graziella pointed out, children react differently to life stresses and comparing them to their siblings or other children is definitely not the ideal way of helping children deal with

exam or other life situations. It is important to keep in mind that we are all different and with our own unique characteristics and personalities – the same is for children and adolescents...! If the parent-child connection is consistent, positive, and characterized by warmth, kindness, love, and stability, children are more likely to flourish socially, psychologically and academically.

In short, the best message parents can give is: “If you’ve done your best, that’s all I can ask. Whatever your results are, I’ll still love you.”

Agenzija Sedqa (www.sedqa.gov.mt) and Agenzija Appogg (www.appogg.gov.mt) form part of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, which also incorporates Agenzija Sapport (www.sapport.gov.mt). Further information about the agencies, their services and programmes can be obtained from Supportline 179 and their respective website.