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Teens urged to keep calm

HUNTER students who are feeling stressed about sitting the upcoming Higher School Certificate exams should remember no test is worth damaging their mental health – and trying to prevent anxiety is better than cure.

NewPsych clinical psychology registrar Louis Silberberg said he had been seeing many teenagers who were feeling “burned out” in the lead up to the exam period, which starts on Thursday. “It’s their first real exposure to quite intense academic pressure, and that’s coming both from themselves and from external sources like their parents and teachers,” Mr Silberberg said. “Often by the time the HSC comes around they’re feeling quite burned out and there can be feelings of resentment towards their schools for not preparing them better.

There’s a fear of failure and the two most common responses are perfectionism, or not trying so they can’t be disappointed in themselves. “We’re hoping to foster through therapy a balance between being brave enough to not be perfect, but also courageous enough to do your best, be happy with your best and know that your best is enough.”

Mr Silberberg said symptoms of stress and anxiety could include sleep disruption, headaches, overthinking, tiredness, dry mouth, nausea, sweating, a racing mind, increasing heart rate and a loss of appetite.

“When this happens you’re operating out of a primitive area of the brain, the reptilian brain, and it can be hard to make good decisions,” he said. “Managing that distress is really important. Figure out a way to identify the early signs of your anxiety – prevention is better than cure rather than getting into a full blown meltdown. Have relaxation strategies. Take a break, do some exercise, take deep breaths, practice mindfulness. If you’re having unhelpful thoughts you can challenge them. If you’re thinking ‘My life is over’, ask yourself ‘Well is it really over? It’s just an exam.’”



NewPsych clinical psychology registrar Louis Silberberg said parents should remind teens the HSC does not define them, “their worth is not measured by a piece of paper” and they’re loved regardless

Picture: Simone De Peak

Mr Silberberg said before exams, students should get enough sleep, eat well and stay active. If possible, they should surround themselves with people they are comfortable with and who are comfortable about the paper. “There’s contagious calm but there is also contagious anxiety. If you surround yourself with people who are extremely stressed you can start to second guess yourself and think ‘Maybe I should be too.’”

He said it was important for students to continue making time for things they enjoy, such as reading, socialising with friends and hobbies, and to keep the HSC in perspective. “There are lots of other educational pathways such as TAFE, Open Foundation and apprenticeships. Yes, it’s the biggest exam of your life but it’s not the end of your life.” Kids Help **Line 1800 55 1800**