

How to Cope with Cancelled Exams during the COVID-19 Outbreak

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APRIL 2020: The UK government recently cancelled all public examinations, with teacher assessment based on tests and predicted grades set to replace exam grades. Concerns about this change and uncertainty around what the next steps might be in the future can be stressful for young people, damaging their mental health. Here are some answers to common questions and worries surrounding the cancellation of exams.

Worried about your future?

At times of uncertainty, mapping out a plan ahead can be helpful. First note your long-term goals—then work backwards. Plan what you have to do right now and then make note of the next steps.

Break each step into an achievable goal. Keep them SMART:

S(simple)

M(measurable)

A (achievable)

R (relevant)

T (time-bound)

Be ambitious, but also realistic. Keep things moving and you will get there.

Feeling lost without exams?

Like it or hate it, exams give us focus and a goal to work towards. Losing the goal and focus of exams can be shocking and destabilising. Even if you briefly feel relieved about not having to go through the pressure of exams, it is easy to feel lost, or to struggle with motivating yourself and making plans.

1. Give yourself some time to absorb the shock of what's happened. It may be hard to believe it's true. To help make it real, talk to friends and anyone from school or college if they are available.
2. Once the shock wears off, you might begin to feel hopeful and wonder if they will change their minds. However, this hope may fade to sadness when you realise that this is a final decision. Loss of focus is no different to any other loss and grieving for it is a completely normal response.



3. Take control of your situation. Understand that you can still have the same goals, as you will still be assessed. You will just be assessed differently. As the saying goes 'you can't change the direction of the wind but you can change the direction of your sails.'

Wondering what to do with your time?

It's easy to feel at a loss with what to do with your time after your exams have been cancelled since the purpose of doing work might seem lost. Structuring your day will help you to regain control of your time and focus. Start by creating a daily plan.

1. The plan should have balance – get up at a regular time, eat regularly and well, focus on doing some work during the day and reward yourself for completing each daily target with something you value.
2. Include a mixture of school/college work; self-care activities such as having a shower or exercising; safe social connectivity; and doing something for others. Some people find it hard to place limits on their behaviour so make a contract with yourself of timings, tell people around you to help with this and keep a record of what you do.

Still feeling stressed?

Getting stressed in the lead-up to exams is common. Your body produces a range of chemicals in order to help manage the extra energy that's needed when you are under pressure and when this pressure is taken away those chemicals take time to reduce. Some signs might be struggling to sleep, feeling agitated or on edge, headaches, overthinking or worrying, and changes in appetite.

Here are a few quick and easy ways to reduce stress:

- Set a timer for eight minutes at the end of every working hour and take a short break.
- Plan an activity you love to reward yourself with when you finish your work.
- Do something that relaxes you at the very end of the day.

Worried about your grades as a last-minute reviser?

It is normal to feel worried about your grade being impacted by your revision style, for example, if you were intending to start working hard closer to an exam. However, according to a study of 10,000 student scores by Rimfield et al in 2019* teacher predictions were as reliable as standardised test



scores. Remember also that those of you going to University will, in addition to accepting you on predictions, will also be doing screening tests.

Concerned about remembering this year positively?

You could:

- Create a collage of photos from your phone
- Create a yearbook online
- Plan a new class tradition – perhaps an organised cheer for everyone at a particular time
- Do something as a year for charity - this not only does good, but is something fun to do and leaves a class legacy to be proud of.

Trying to deal with the disappointment?

Try and deal with your disappointment of things not going according to plan by:

- Changing perspective. You can either view disappointment as a result of lost opportunities and desires or you can view it as an opportunity to make something new and different happen.
- Challenging ‘worse case’ scenario thinking. Rather than focussing on the worst possible conclusion (‘I will forever be the generation that didn’t do my exams and it will limit my opportunities’) focus on what may work in your favour and balance thinking by focussing on the ‘best case’ scenario too.

Wondering how to say goodbye?

For some students, completing public exams is also the start of another new chapter in their lives. Saying goodbye is sad but a necessary part of an ending. Try and make this ending positive, perhaps by:

- Making a class comments ‘box’ on line (each person writes something about their best memories at school. Teachers can be invited to do the same)
- Creating a class Instagram – personalise it as much as you can
- Getting each person on the register to write a goodbye postcard to the next person
- Organising an on-line farewell party!



stem4 also provides clinically developed mental health apps that can be accessed anywhere for free. Clear Fear has a range of techniques to help teens manage anxiety whilst Combined Minds helps parents and friends support someone who is anxious. They are based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and a Strengths-Based Approach respectively and are available to download now from both Google Play and the App Store.

*Rimfeld, K, Malanchin, M, Hannigan, L.J, Dale, P.S, Allen, R, Hart, A. and Plomin, R (2019) Teacher assessments during compulsory education are as reliable, stable and heritable as standardized test scores, The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, May 2019

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About stem4: stem4 is a Wimbledon based, award winning charity that supports teenage mental health. In order to foster positive teenage mental health, it provides evidence-based education, builds resilience, enhances motivation to change, and signposts to ensure early intervention and action. stem4 focuses on commonly occurring mental health issues in teenagers including eating disorders, anxiety, depression, self-harm and addiction. stem4's work is primarily provided digitally through their innovative education programme, pioneering mental health apps and clinically-informed website. They also host mental health conferences that contribute to helping young people and those around them flourish. stem4 targets and supports families, schools, health professionals and communities as well as the teenagers themselves.

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