

## BEATING EXAMINATION STRESS!

Academic competence and intelligence are not straightforward to measure and no method will fully capture the scope of a student's ability, but the fact remains that we need at least some formal system, otherwise the academic system will not work.

—by Dr. Hema Abhiroop, Principal, Amicus International School, Vadodara



Dr. Hema Abhiroop is currently working as Principal in Amicus International School, Vadodara, a unit of Amity Schools Bharuch (Gujarat). Earlier, she was Principal of Global Discovery School (GDS), Sevasi, Vadodara - Gujarat (A unit of Global Education Research Foundation). Her qualifications include Ph.D. (Edu.), M.Ed. (Edu. Tech.), B. Ed. M.Com. (Business Mgmt.). She has been awarded with Outstanding Performer award in JCI, Jodhpur; Awards and Certificates in Effective Public Speaking (EPS) conducted by JCI, Jodhpur and CCE Master Trainer certificate from Centre of Excellence, CBSE, Pune.

The Indian school education system is textbook-oriented that focuses on rote memorization of lessons and demands long hours of systematic study every day. All this causes a lot of stress on students. Here, Dr. Hema Abhiroop, Principal, Amicus International School, Vadodara, shares her views on examination system and how to handle stress in schools.

**TPS:** Does the performance of a learner in any given examination reflect his competence or his possible achievement profile?

**Dr. Hema:** Children are born with certain biological capacities for learning. They have an inherent sense of space, motion, number, and causality. Certain raw capacities of the human infant are actualized by the environment surrounding a newborn which supplies information, and equally important, provides structure to the information, as when parents draw an infant's attention to the sounds of her or his native language. Thus, developmental processes involve interactions between children's early competencies and their environmental and interpersonal supports. These supports serve to strengthen the capacities that are relevant to a child's surroundings and to prune those that are

not. Hence learning is promoted and regulated by the children's biology and their environments.

Academic competence and intelligence are not straightforward to measure and no method will fully capture the scope of a student's ability, but the fact remains that we need at least some formal system, otherwise the academic system will not work. We need divisions between ability levels and the amount of experience and knowledge students actually possess, otherwise students will be in environments unsuited to them and won't be able to learn properly. Exam is a way to divide them by testing them in a fair and impartial manner and its good because they are not vague — they have clear, measurable guidelines.

The system of testing exists for a purpose, which it may not serve 'perfectly' but serves to an extent. Tests can be improved and cheating can be reduced.

**TPS:** Does the current design of examinations serve that purpose? If not, why should the learners get misguided by such an event? Are there alternatives to examinations?

**Dr. Hema:** Student portfolios, grading with rubrics, such alternative assessment strategies can help to determine how well learning



outcomes have been achieved. This can measure applied proficiency more than that it measures knowledge and provides a means of assessing valued skills that cannot be directly assessed with traditional tests. It's a more realistic setting for student performance than traditional tests which focuses on student performance and the quality of work performed by students and can be easily aligned with established learning outcomes.

**TPS:** What is the role of assessment in the learning curve of an individual?

**Dr. Hema:** Assessment is a powerful learning tool that can enhance learning and education. The process of student assessment should align with curricular goals and educational objectives. Identifying the assessment strategies necessary for the proper evaluation of students' progress within individual programs is as important as establishing curricular content and delivery methods. Its tools are evaluated according to four main characteristics: relevance, feasibility, validity, and reliability.

Assessing implies a direct and active relationship between or among people. It could involve an observation by a teacher, a conversation between teacher and student, or reviewing a student's work. It typically includes interaction to provide feedback or find out more about the student's thinking or depth of knowledge. There are Cognitive, Affective, Behavioral Assessments that are used to measure learning outcomes accurately. Well-formulated assessments show how well the workforce has learned the concepts. If that are too easy, too difficult, or unclear, you may not get accurate results.

We know through our teaching-learning experience that learning is directly related to

effort made; and effort is not made if there is no assessment and reward for the effort made. Well-designed assessment can encourage active learning especially when the assessment delivery is innovative and engaging. Peer and self-assessment, for instance, can foster a number of skills, such as reflection, critical thinking and self-awareness – as well as giving students insight into the assessment process.

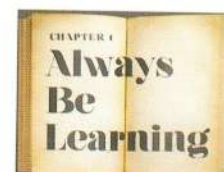
In any environment, if a person is assigned to do the same task, then after a period of time, there is an improvement in his performance. If data points are collected over a period of time, the curve constructed on the graph will show a decrease in effort per unit for repetitive operations. This curve is very important in cost analysis, cost estimation and efficiency studies. This curve is called the learning curve which shows that if a task is performed over and over then less time will be required at each iteration.

**TPS:** If learning is a continuous life-long process, why are examinations the source of stress?

**Dr. Hema:** Lifelong learning may be broadly defined as learning that is pursued throughout life: that is flexible, diverse and available at different times and in different places. It crosses sectors, promoting learning beyond traditional schooling and throughout adult life.

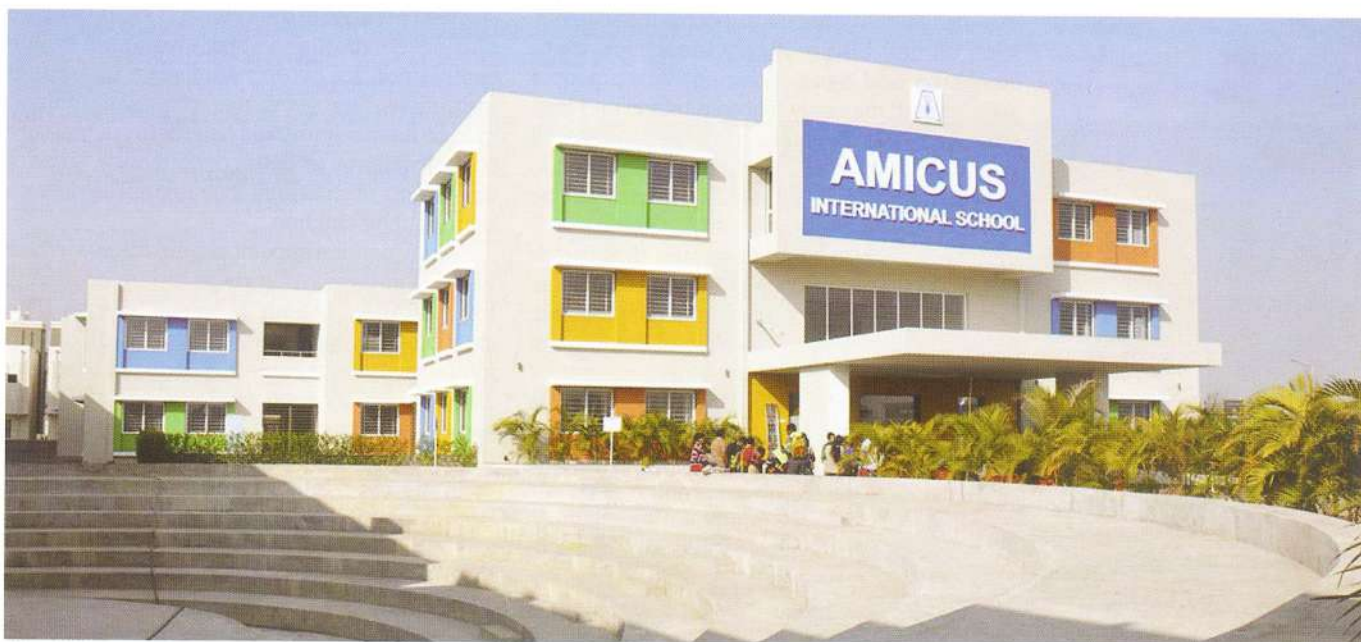
Exam stress starts when students feel they can't cope with revision, or feel pressure from the school or family. Students preparing for exams often feel under pressure. The pressure may result in feelings of anxiety or nervousness. While a certain amount of stress may be beneficial, too much exam stress can cause individuals to perform poorly on tests that mean so much to them.

Its main causes are external pressure (from



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parents, teachers, peers), internal pressure (struggle with the mind set) and lack of preparation.

**TPS:** Do you think the psychological stress associated with the examinations is more injurious to the learner rather than the curricular or learning stress?

**Dr. Hema:** The Indian school education system is textbook-oriented that focuses on rote memorization of lessons and demands long hours of systematic study every day. The study routines that are expected by high school students span from the morning till late evening hours, leaving little time for socialization and recreation.

Excessive levels of academic stress can result in an increased prevalence of psychological and physical problems like depression, anxiety, nervousness and stress related disorders, which in turn can affect their academic results. Stress can also lead to change in people's behaviors, such as nail biting, heavy breathing, teeth clenching and hand wringing. When people are stressed, they may feel cold hands and feet, butterflies in stomach, and some times increased heart rate, which all are regarded as common physiological effects of stress, which can be connected to emotion of anxiety.

There is often a lot of pressure that comes along with pursuing a degree and one's education. There is studying, homework, tests, labs, reading, and quizzes. There is the stress of doing all of the work, balancing the time and finding time for extra-curricular activities. Academic stress is especially hard on school students who are often living away from home for the first time. Teachers expect work to be completed on time. Students may underestimate the amount of time it takes to complete reading and writing assignments, to print out copies of their work.

Anxiety has substantial negative effects on children's social, emotional and academic

success also. Depression is becoming the most common mental health problem in college students these days. The self-worth of students in the Indian society is mostly determined by good academic performance, and not by vocational and/or other individual qualities.

Indian parents report removing their TV cable connections and vastly cutting down on their own social lives in order to monitor their children's homework. Because of academic stress and failure in examination, students commit suicide. Pushed by the parents to 'be the best' in art or music lessons and under pressure to score well in school, some students cannot cope with the demands any more and emotionally collapse when the stress is high. Constantly pushed to perform better in both academic and extra-curricular activities, some children develop deep rooted nervous disorders in early childhood.

Parents put pressure on their children to succeed because of their concern for the welfare of their children and their awareness of the competition for getting admission in reputed institutions. The overall unemployment situation in India has also provoked parents to put pressure on their children for better performance. Some of the parents wish to fulfil their unfulfilled dreams through their children.

Many parents appoint private tutors for their wards. On days when there are no academic tuitions, there are art or music lessons. The students hardly get time to watch TV, to play or to interact with neighbours or even to get adequate sleep. Naturally such students end up being nervous wrecks when the examination pressure mounts. Female students experience more examination-related anxiety and psychiatric cases than their male counterparts.

**TPS:** What are the sources of such psychological stress and how to beat them?

**Dr. Hema:** Psychological stress refers to the

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emotional and physiological reactions experienced when an individual confronts a situation in which the demands go beyond their coping resources like death of a loved one, abuse, health problems, financial crises etc.

Partnerships between teachers and doctors could help students and school. Pediatricians can help build resilience in both children and teachers to counter the effects of traumatic childhood experiences. Provide students with a better understanding of how stress works. Explaining the science behind stress. This will help them to get past their initial negative feelings and move towards making clearer decisions.

**Mindfulness matters:** It is said that mindfulness can help the brain to stay alert and improve mental toughness. There are even some schools that have replaced detention with meditation classes, and have seen a significant improvement in student behavior. Time being a factor, short breathing and meditation exercises can be done at points during the school day to help students to stay calm and focus on the task at hand.

It is believed that extra-curricular activities could be one of the mediating factors for academic stress. Students should be involved in extra-curricular activities like games and sports, cultural programs, National Cadet Corps (NCC) and National Social Service (NSS)

**How to beat the stress.** Meditation is the only medication for every agitation.

If you have stress in your life, meditation can be an immense help to you. Meditation, however, enlists the super consciousness, the infinite awareness at the core of our being. It is from this deep level that lasting changes come. Learn to flow with life and much of your stress will disappear.

We must learn to be more accepting of life. Life is a school and we draw to ourselves the events, circumstances, and relationships we need to help us grow. Every problem offers us two choices — to expand or contract our consciousness. Do we become defensive and self-protective? Or do we see challenges as opportunities to become stronger, to learn and expand? Eventually, through meditation, we can discover an underlying joy that doesn't change under any circumstance. And expansion of consciousness is the essence of spiritual growth.

Music has an incredibly powerful effect on our consciousness. And try to spend more time with those friends who are positive and self-contained, those who can help magnetize you into a state of being even-minded and calm. Most important of all is that you get more in touch with your spiritual nature. Tune into your deeper essence, the joy and peace that lie within you.

**Break tasks down.** Live by the motto; "Hit the ball that is in front of you." The most productive way to get through the day is to focus solely on the task at hand. When we focus on one task at a time we are guaranteed to produce higher quality work, rather than producing larger quantities of work that may have received a 1/3 of our attention. One thing at a time and that done very well is the good thing that many can tell.

**Prioritize your schedule.** A hectic schedule is a major cause of stress. On good days, we can probably do the work of ten people, but day after day this becomes unmanageable. To have longevity, we must simplify what is on our schedules by reducing the number of commitments we have to those that are the most essential and

beneficial to us. We must practice the skill of saying No when we need to say No. This helps us weed out extra commitments that become time consuming success-stealers. To start, we can begin scheduling fewer commitments each day and allow for time in between each meeting.

**Get moving.** Healthy brain chemistry is dependent upon being active. We can do something as simple as walk, play a sport, go for a light run, do yoga, hike or hit the gym. Movement, in any form, is enough to greatly reduce stress. We are crammed indoors most of the day, so getting outside gives us the pure oxygen our brains need to recharge and de-stress.

Develop healthy living habits, find calming activities, simplify finances, live with joy, be creative, Clear your clutter.

**Arrive early.** There is nothing more stressful than not being good with time. To decrease our stress and the stress levels of others, make being on time a habit.

**TPS:** Pursuit of 'Competitive Excellence' rather than 'Personal excellence' appears to be one of the reasons for increasing stress levels. However, a number of social and market forces trigger and support such ideas for their own reasons. How can we diffuse this situation and help in promoting the individual excellence of the learners?

**Dr. Hema:** Excellence means surpassing or outstanding achievement. E.g. Breaking a record in Olympics, climbing an unscaled peak, winning a Nobel prize, making outstanding contribution in his/her field.

Personal Excellence is defined as the ability to create solutions in difficult situations to enable yourself to overcome these situations successfully. In short, self-management refers to "managing" your own mental and emotional state. The mental sphere is the most important, followed by the emotional.

Following these key principles of personal excellence will go a long way in bringing you to excellence:

- Have the hunger for excellence
- Benchmark against the best
- Believe that you can do it
- Build concrete strategy & plans
- Learn from the best
- Do not limit yourself
- Go all out; Work really hard
- Focus your efforts. Excellence means greatness — the very best.





Achieving excellence is never easy to do. It is the quality of excelling, of being truly the best at something. Getting an A+ shows excellence.

Competitive excellence is not only competing at a high level and caring about the result, but it's handling the level of intensity the right way. It results from handling all of the things that go along with competing at a high level. It's being able to control yourself and excel in an intense environment.

**TPS:** What steps should be taken by schools?

**Dr. Hema:** Incorporate yoga or something like it into PE classes.

Evidence is mounting that yoga can improve the mental health of students of all ages. "Yoga classes have positive psychological effects for high school students."

Other than this following are some of the steps to be taken by school:

- No homework on weekends/holidays
- Better buddy programs
- Play music
- Keep kids moving — study time can be outdoor anywhere in the school camps, break the monotony of the classrooms
- Schedule time to organize
- Teach time management
- The importance of acknowledging student effort
- Teach mindfulness
- Keep humor and laughter in the classroom
- Lessons should strive to reach that deeper learning level
- Create a "mental suitcase"
- Visualize a successful performance
- Have a "To Do" list that you follow each day.
- Plan for the unexpected.
- Eat a nutritious lunch.

**TPS:** Social polarization of certain types of careers as rewarding and iconic, triggers the learners to search the gateways for entry into such corridors, least realizing the aptitude and competencies for such careers. Oftentimes, gaining entry into such courses, the students give themselves to self-pity and lose their self-esteem. Resultant self-defeating situations provoke them to suicidal tendencies. How do we cope with this situation by refocusing school careers?

**Dr. Hema:** Students at times have the feelings of self-pity — unhappiness that one has about oneself and own problems, especially when this is unnecessary or greatly exaggerated. You cannot succeed at anything if you are miserable with yourself and your work.



If you want to break previous records, you have to break the previous chains that hold you back. You need to release the negative emotions and thoughts that block your way.

If you are truly driven to succeed, you will find ways to change the spot where you are right now. Self-pity is our worst enemy and if we yield to it, we can never do anything wise in this world. This results in:

- Social withdrawal, which typically manifests in the child's not wanting to participate in activities he or she once enjoyed;
- Sudden, unexpected change in personality;
- Oppositional behavior (e.g., running away from home, declining grades at school);
- Sleep disturbances.

Self-pity can make the negative mindset which can give birth to take the step which is extremely wrong and that is suicide or attempt to suicide. A child might be suicidal even if he or she doesn't meet the criteria for depression. So it is important to recognize other risk factors like:

- Family history of suicide or suicide attempts
- Alcohol and/or drug use
- Aggressive, disruptive behavior
- Extreme impulsivity
- Non-aggressive conduct disorder, such as truancy, stealing, or disregard for authority.

School can play an important role in helping the child to cope up with the self-defeating situations. They can appoint Career Counselors, Mental Health Counselors and Family Therapists, Psychologists, Rehabilitation Counselors, Social and Community Service Managers and Positive, charismatic teachers.

Teachers play an important role in nurturing a student's sense of dignity and self-worth. They can serve as charismatic adults and must possess a positive mindset.

- Every student desires to learn and be successful in school. If they are not, we must strive to understand the nature of their learning problems.
- If students are demonstrating self-defeating behaviors, such as quitting, or not trying, or acting like the class clown or class bully, we must recognize these are ineffective coping strategies that often mask feelings of vulnerability, low self-esteem, and hopelessness. Rather than impose punitive consequences, we must ask how to minimize the despair these youngsters experience each and every day.
- If we are to lessen the use of these ineffective coping behaviors, we must teach these youngsters in ways they can learn best. This implies that as teachers we must first change our approach and teaching style if students with learning problems are to adopt a more hopeful, positive approach. We must be comfortable in making accommodations when needed.
- Each child or adolescent possesses "islands of competence,"

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The first step in helping children with learning difficulties is for teachers and parents to appreciate the nature of these problems, help children understand their unique learning strengths and weaknesses, and make appropriate accommodations in their school programs.



or areas of strength, that must be identified, reinforced, and displayed by educators. A strength-based model does not deny the child's problems but recognizes the importance of using the child's strengths as an important component of any intervention program.

- We must actively invite and involve students in the process of their own education.

**Nurture self-esteem and resilience at school.**

If one accepts the tenets of this mindset, then it is easier for educators to rely upon attribution theory for offering guideposts for bolstering self-esteem and hope. This theory directs us to find ways for youngsters with learning

problems to feel an increasing sense of ownership, control, and responsibility for their successes and to view mistakes as experiences from which to learn rather than feel defeated. What follows are several key strategies with examples of how teachers might accomplish this task. Each educator should use these strategies in a way that most successfully meets the particular needs of each student.

**Demystifying the problems.** The first step in helping children with learning difficulties is for teachers and parents to appreciate the nature of these problems, help children understand their unique learning strengths and weaknesses, and make appropriate accommodations in their school programs.

**Accommodations that maximize success.** The following are a small selection of these accommodations:

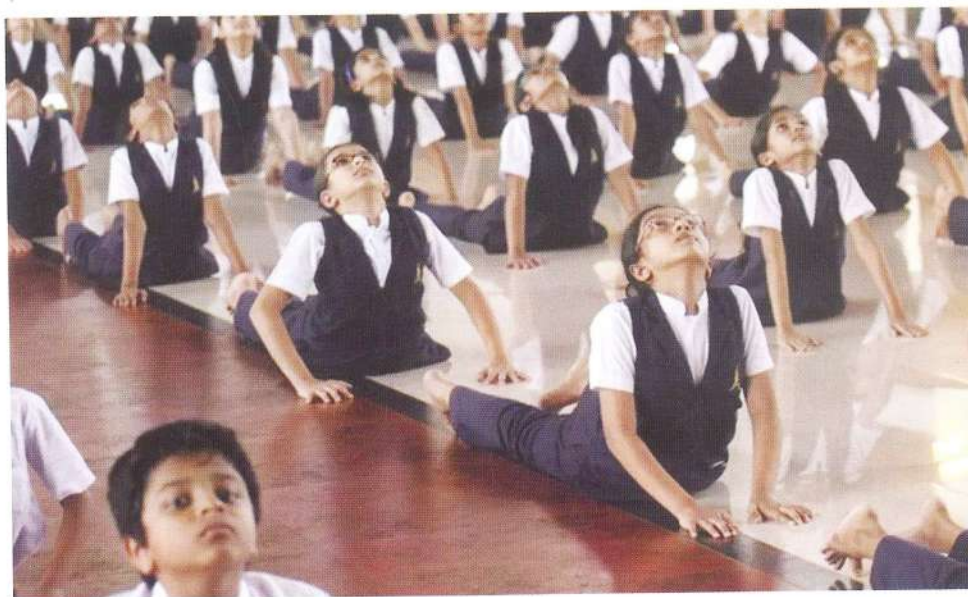
- Untimed tests should be provided. Removing the pressure of time lessens the anxiety.
- A maximum time for homework can be defined. We should ensure students know what the homework assignments are. Many students with learning problems have difficulty copying homework assignments from the blackboard. Providing the child with a monthly "syllabus" of assignments can be very helpful. Some teachers assign a "buddy" to ensure the child has an accurate picture of the homework required.
- Children should be permitted to use computers for their assignments. Many students who have difficulty transmitting their ideas on paper do much better with computers, they should be allowed to do so.

Teach decision making, problem solving

I continually emphasize that a basic feature of high self-esteem and resilience is the belief one has control over many areas of one's life and can accurately define these areas. This belief is tied to a feeling of ownership, a vital foundation for motivation. If we wish our children to develop this sense of control, it is essential we provide them with opportunities from an early age to learn and apply problem-solving and decision-making skills.

**Teachers can provide choices in many ways:**

- Teachers in one school gave a certain number of problems for homework but told the students, "Look at all six problems, and then do the four you think will help you learn best." By offering the students the choice to "do less," they actually received more homework than in the past.



- When children are having difficulty in learning, it is advantageous to discuss with them what they think might be most helpful and to attempt certain strategies. For this reason, when I consult with educators, I request they make a list of their students and what each contributes to the school environment. I have found that when students feel they are making a positive difference in school, they are more motivated to do well and are more willing to take appropriate risks in learning. These acts of caring can easily be linked with academic tasks. A few examples:

- Students with learning problems can be asked to read to younger children.
- Students can take care of plants in school, or paint murals on the wall, or hang up favorite drawings.
- Some schools use cooperative learning groups so students gain experience working together and helping each other. For some youngsters with learning problems, it is the first time they realize they have something to contribute to the school.

**It's okay to make mistakes.** All students are concerned about making mistakes and looking foolish. However, youngsters with learning problems typically experience more failure situations than peers who do not have these problems. Thus, they are even more vulnerable and fearful about failing. They feel especially "exposed" in school since it is an environment in which their learning problems are very evident. If we are to keep students from losing hope and quitting, we must help them develop a more positive attitude toward mistakes. This is best done during the "orientation" period mentioned earlier.

Rules can be established about how to call on students and how the teacher and other students should respond when a student does not know an answer. Such an environment is one in which students with learning problems will feel respected and their self-esteem, motivation, hope, and resilience will be nurtured.

One of the most precious gifts we can provide children and adolescents with learning problems is to develop their self-dignity and resilience. A wonderful legacy we can leave these children and students is to be the charismatic adults in their lives, knowing they have truly "gathered strength" from us. ■