Coping with Exam Anxiety – by Zehra Kamal

“I am not very happy with my test marks; I could have certainly done better”.

“I am sure that I will fail in my Chemistry exam and that would be a huge embarrassment”.

“The thought of not doing well stresses me out so much that I can’t get myself to study and forget even the things that I know”.

These are extracts of conversations with children experiencing exams related anxiety, a twelve year old who is convinced that ninety percent marks are not that great and that he could have certainly secured ninety six percent, a panicked fifteen year old who usually does well in school and a thirteen year old struggling to improve her grades.

A bit of nervousness and stress before and during the exams is perfectly normal for most children and in some ways helps them take their studies seriously and prepare better. However, for some children the anxiety becomes so intense that it is no longer helpful and requires parental and sometimes professional support to help calm down. As it’s the exams month for most of the children, understanding exam anxiety and useful ways of helping children with a tendency to get anxious manage it could be useful.

Most researches indicate that biologically some children and adults are more prone to anxiety than others. There are more chances of a child to be anxious if there is an anxious parent. Children who want to do well and aren’t really prepared; children who worry about too many things; children who constantly seek approval of adults and want to be accepted; children who are perfectionists and have difficulty accepting failure or mistakes; children who are highly competitive, etc. may also be more prone to anxiety.

Anxiety exhibits itself among children in the following ways:

- Stomach aches, headaches and nausea
- Racing heart beat
- Faint feeling, sweating and shaking
- Inability to sleep or getting up more frequently at night
- Constant fear and thoughts about not doing well or missing out important points
- Feeling a lack of control and helpless over the situation resulting in frequent crying spells or a state of panic

Some of the things that children can be taught to do in case they experience similar feelings are to:

- Get them to make a time table/study plan in advance of the exams, keeping ample time for preparation of subjects that they find most difficult. Managing and planning their study time will help them cope with stress and avoid the last minute panic and anxiety experienced by many.
• Let children talk about their fears and worries. Talking openly also gives children an opportunity to share if there are other issues such as bullying, abuse, conflict at home, etc. that may be bothering them and adding to the exam anxiety.

• While accepting that the fear children experience is real, help them identify how some of the fears and feelings may not be very rational and thus do not allow them to calm down.

• Get children to build upon their existing coping skills. Help them recall previous situations in their lives in which they felt anxious and worried and how they overcame these. Ask them to consider using some of the same ways for calming themselves.

• Help them understand the physical manifestations of anxiety and how the anxiety plays on the mind and body leading to a feeling of being out of control. Anxiety often produces bodily symptoms such as sweating, erratic breathing, fast heartbeat etc. Help children practice calming techniques such as deep breathing and visualization as ways of easing the physical symptoms of anxiety. Teach children to inhale from the nose and exhale slowly from the mouth and get them to visualize a calm place such as a forest, green mountains, lake etc. while focusing on the breathing. Make sure the breathing and visualization is initially practiced when the child is relatively calm as it may not be very effective when levels of anxiety are extremely high. Let children practice these in a quiet and comfortable room.

• Get children to identify physical and other pleasurable activities that help them calm down so these can be made part of their daily routine. Pursuing a hobby, talking to friends etc. can also help deal with the anxiety.

• Help them identify and minimize unhelpful thoughts such as ‘I will be a failure, ‘I need to be the best in everything’, ‘My parents will be so disappointed in me’, ‘I am so dumb’ etc. as they just add to the anxiety. Help them replace these with helpful thoughts such as ‘I am going to try my best’, ‘I may not know a few things but will work to improve them’, ‘I don’t have to be perfect in everything’. If it helps, ask them to write down these helpful thoughts and say these out loud every day while standing in front of the mirror.

• Get children to see their mistakes and shortcomings as opportunities to learn, accept and improve themselves and not as big failures or put downs to the self.

• Praise them whenever they make efforts to change the patterns that cause anxiety.

• Keep a check on your own expectations from the child’s performance, behaviour and abilities to ensure that these are not unrealistic and adding to the child’s anxiety.
• Make sure that children get enough rest and sleep and eat a balanced diet. A recent study has shown that people who sleep for 8 hours before taking a Math’s test are three times more likely to understand and solve the math’s problems as compared to people who stay awake all night.