

Help's just a mouse click away; Net offers support if stress is taking over HSC Extra

Melinda Ham. Sun Herald. Sydney, N.S.W.: Jun 17, 2007. pg. 81

AFTER spending most of their life at school, many students feel the HSC exams are not only the penultimate test of academic achievement but also an assessment of their success as a person.

This "Judgment Day" attitude can lead to undue stress and anxiety and can even exacerbate existing depression or compulsive and obsessive behaviours, say experts.

If a young person is slipping into this mindset, their first step to regain control is to identify and face the cause of the anxieties and seek strategies to cope, says Associate Professor Michael Baigent, the clinical adviser to depression support service BeyondBlue.

If a student's anxiety is fuelled by confusion about particular subject areas, one place to turn is a free online tutoring service called www.mytutor.com.au.

Schools and public libraries across Australia subscribe to this service and students just need a log in to receive tutoring - in all the core HSC subjects, study techniques and project writing.

It works like instant messaging, but there's also a whiteboard and internet access which both student and tutor can co-browse simultaneously.

The tutors are all specially trained in their subjects, have at least two years' tutoring experience and have gone through all the required security checks to deal with young people.

"The student is in control of the whole process immediately," says the service's CEO, Jack Goodman. "It takes the stress out of studying. They have a problem, they log on immediately and ask us how they can solve it."

The service operates from 4pm to 8pm five days a week and students are linked to a tutor within five minutes of signing on

But if young people raise non-academic problems, the online tutors are not trained counsellors, so they refer them to the Kids Help Line or support groups such as BeyondBlue (their youth site is www.ybblue.com.au) or www.reachout.com.au.

Professor Baigent says three groups of students are most susceptible to exam anxiety and stress: those who are high achieving, those who would like to achieve and those who are struggling.

Most high achievers are perfectionists, he says, and often focus too much on HSC study excluding key aspects of a balanced life, such as exercise, playing an instrument and social contact with peers.

"Girls, especially those who have an established eating disorder or signs they are heading that way, can get worse at exam time. When everything else seems out of control, they stop eating to take control of their inner world," he says.

Binge drinking, drug taking or self-harm are some other destructive outlets for anxiety.

To cope with stress, students need to identify the thoughts that automatically, irrationally come into their heads when they think of exams and then look at them in a clear-headed, rational way.

"Try to adopt an attitude that this is about doing your personal best and to do that you have to continue to do things that keep you happy and relaxed, so any addictive behaviour patterns can't creep in," Professor Baigent says.

The University of Technology Sydney's health psychology unit runs a free, four-week HSC stress management program at the Royal North Shore Hospital and also an outreach program for students, teachers and parents at about 50 high schools and libraries a year.

Lead a balanced life; eat well, exercise and leave time for enjoyment

Study smart. Develop a study plan and active study methods so you learn what you read and retain it.

Try controlled breathing exercises; breathe from your abdomen and count out loud.

Exercise. You release natural endorphins that make you feel great.

Source: Dr Rachael Murrhy, Royal North Shore Hospital