

Supporting Your Child Through Stressful Periods

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We know that supporting a young swimmer through stressful periods (e.g. exams, assessments) can be challenging. These periods of time bring different obstacles to a regular training week that can make it physically and emotionally more challenging for young people to balance multiple areas of their lives (e.g. school and swimming).

Swim Wales, alongside staff from the Institute at Sport Wales have recently spoken with performance hub coaches, swimmers and parents/guardians at a National Squad camp (c. 40 parents from the Performance Foundations squad and c. 80 swimmers across the Performance Foundations, male and female squads).

To prepare your swimmer for upcoming stressful periods, you can help them as a parent by encouraging them to be proactive in communicating with their coaches. However, try not to be overbearing as it's important that they have the appropriate opportunity to develop life skills such as managing their schedules and communicating with adults.

Swimmers also told us that they valued having support for parents to assess the different options regarding training during this period; there is no one size fits all answer, and it doesn't have to be all or nothing.

Furthermore, your child's mind may be busy or a little preoccupied, so reminding them to pack drinks and snacks to help them to fuel and refuel effectively may be beneficial.

From the insight collected, we also heard that helping your child to maintain their wellbeing through stressful periods (e.g. nutrition and sleep) were areas where support would be welcomed. As such, the following subsections have been created, with the aim of addressing some of the identified challenges and providing some solutions for parents in supporting a young swimmer to thrive throughout stressful periods.

Nutrition for High-Performing Swimmers During Exam Periods

As a parent of a high-performing swimmer, you know how important it is for your child to excel both in the pool and outside of it, especially during stressful times like exams. One key aspect that often gets overlooked in the rush of exam prep is proper nutrition. A well-balanced diet can not only maintain physical health but also support mental clarity, energy levels, and overall well-being during this demanding period.

Fuelling the Brain and Body for Exam Success

A nutritious diet that includes a variety of foods—rich in wholegrain carbohydrates, lean proteins, healthy fats, and plenty of fruits and vegetables—will keep your swimmer's brain sharp, their mood stable, and their immune system strong. Here are some of the essential foods that should be included in their diet to promote optimal brain function and focus during exams:

- Oily Fish (salmon, mackerel, trout, anchovies)
- Eggs
- Nuts and Seeds
- Vegetables (broccoli, tomatoes, leafy greens)
- Fruits (citrus fruits, berries, apples)
- Dark Chocolate (choose varieties with >75% cocoa)

The Power of Breakfast

Breakfast plays a crucial role in starting the day right, especially for morning exams. It's the key meal to fuel your swimmer's brain and body after a long night's sleep, providing much-needed glucose for optimal brain function. To keep energy levels steady throughout the day and avoid mid-morning fatigue, focus on meals that offer sustained energy and keep them feeling full. Here are some breakfast ideas:

- **Overnight Oats** (easy to prep and full of fiber)
- **Greek Yogurt with Granola and Fruit** (a good balance of protein and carbs)
- **Eggs on Toast with Avocado and Tomatoes** (rich in protein and healthy fats)
- **Breakfast Burrito Wraps** (a convenient, nutrient-packed option)
- **Banana Pancakes** (tasty and filling with different topping options)

Hydration for Focus and Health

Staying hydrated is essential for maintaining concentration and supporting your swimmer's immune system. While water should be their main source of hydration, other fluids like fruit juices, milk, and squash can also help meet their hydration goals, especially around training sessions. Encourage your swimmer to aim for **2-3 litres of water per day**, with additional fluid to support their training needs. Every individual is different, so it's important to adjust fluid intake based on their activity level.

Be cautious with beverages that contain caffeine, such as tea, coffee, cola, and energy drinks. Excess caffeine can contribute to anxiety, disrupt sleep patterns, and negatively affect mood and energy levels, particularly when consumed in the afternoon or evening.

Managing Nutrition During Lower Training Loads

If your swimmer's training schedule has reduced during exams, it's normal for their energy requirements to decrease as well. However, hunger may take a little longer to adjust. To manage this, it's helpful to **increase fiber-rich and water-rich foods** like fruits, vegetables, beans, and pulses while reducing high-fat, high-sugar options that could cause energy crashes.

Make sure your swimmer still gets quality sources of protein at every meal (such as lean meats, fish, eggs, and dairy products), as this will help them feel fuller for longer and support muscle repair from previous training sessions.

Balance is Key

Remember, food is more than just fuel—it's also a social and emotional experience. Let your swimmer enjoy their favourite foods during times of celebration, relaxation, or stress, as this helps foster a healthy relationship with food. Strive for an **80%-20% balance** between healthy eating habits and indulging in less nutritious options. This approach supports both their mental and physical health while keeping their energy and mood balanced.

By keeping these tips in mind, your swimmer can stay nourished, focused, and ready to perform at their best—whether they're in the pool or preparing for an exam.

Nutrition

Consuming a balanced diet will help to maintain your physical and mental health through an exam period. A wide variety of foods, with an emphasis on wholegrain carbohydrates, lean proteins, healthy fats and fruits and vegetables, will help to maintain brain function, boost mood, and ensure good immune function.

There are a few key foods to include that will promote healthy brain function. Examples are:

- Oily fish, like salmon, mackerel, trout and anchovies
- Eggs
- Nuts and seeds
- Vegetables, such as broccoli and tomatoes
- Fruits, such as citrus fruits and berries
- Dark chocolate (>75% cocoa)

Breakfast is a particularly key meal, as it will provide the brain with much needed glucose for it to function properly, especially for a morning exam. The main priorities are having a sustained source of energy as well as keeping fuller for longer. Suggested options include:

- Overnight oats
- Yogurt with granola and fruit
- Eggs on toast with avocado and tomatoes
- Breakfast burrito wraps
- Banana pancakes

Staying hydrated is also important, to maintain concentration and to ensure optimum function of the immune system. Water is the best fluid for hydration, but also include fruit juices, squash, and milk, especially to help fit your nutrition goals around training. Everyone will require a different amount of fluid, but aim for 2-3L per day, with additional fluid to suit your training requirements.

Be mindful of the caffeine content in beverages such as tea, coffee, cola and energy drinks. Excess caffeine can lead to increased anxiety and negative effects on sleep, especially when consumed late in the day. High fat or high sugar foods (when not consumed around a training session) can also lead to energy 'crashes', or increased drowsiness, and may be taking the place of other more beneficial nutrients.

If training load has decreased during exam period, then understand that energy requirements will also decrease. However, hunger levels may need time to catch up with this! To help manage this, reduce foods high in fat and increase high fibre and water-rich foods such as fruits, vegetables, beans and pulses. Ensuring high quality protein sources at each meal (meat and fish, eggs, dairy products) will also help decrease hunger. That said, food is an important emotional and social construct, and favourite foods should be enjoyed with friends and family, and during times of celebration, stress or sadness. Getting the balance right is important and will help foster a positive relationship with food outside of training. Typically, an 80%-20% balance of healthy behaviours to non-healthy behaviours works best for athletes!

SLEEP

Sleep and rest is incredibly important for teenage athletes as it directly affects performance, recovery, and overall health. Teenage athletes often face a lot of pressure during exam periods, and this stress can significantly impact their sleep and performance. The combination of academic pressure, worries about results, over-scheduling and compromised training can make it hard for them to relax and rest.

Coaches and parents can play an important role in promoting sleep hygiene. By fostering an environment that values the importance of sleep, they can help swimmers prioritize rest in their busy lives. Encouraging proper time management for school, training, and sleep can reduce stress and allow for better performance on all fronts.

WHY IS SLEEP IMPORTANT ¹

- Sleep is a major contributor to athletic performance and as a fundamental feature of athlete mental health (IOC, International Olympic Committee).
- Teenagers need 8 to 10 hours of sleep per night to perform at their best in school and life. Swimmers may lean toward the higher end of this range, especially during periods of heavy training or competition.
- Athletes are at high risk of insufficient sleep duration (i.e., less than 7–8 hours per night), poor sleep quality (e.g., difficulty initiating or maintaining sleep, or other sleep difficulties), daytime sleepiness and fatigue, suboptimal sleep schedules (e.g., too early or late), irregular sleep schedules, and sleep & circadian disorders (especially insomnia and sleep apnoea).
- Insufficient sleep and poor sleep quality are prevalent among athletes, potentially due to time demands, physical demands, and developmental needs.
- When athletes are compared to non-athletes, they tend to sleep less and less efficiently.
- Evidence has shown that up to 40% of athletes reported insufficient sleep (< 7 hours) by self-report
- Sleep disturbances among athletes adversely impacts physical performance, mental performance, injury risk and recovery, medical health, and mental health

Common sleep issues with teenage athletes

'Racing thoughts'

The pressure to perform well both in exams and the pool can lead to anxiety. This can trigger the body's stress response - releasing hormones like cortisol that can make it harder to fall asleep or maintain deep sleep. Constant worrying can lead to *racing thoughts* that keep them

awake. We want to help them regulate the brain's emotional responses to stress and settle their minds.

A vicious cycle

When your teenager doesn't get enough sleep, they can struggle to focus and retain information. Lack of rest can become a vicious cycle of poor performance, anxiety and even less sleep.

Looooonnnngggggg days

Teenagers often stay up late studying, thinking that more hours of studying will help them perform better. However, staying up too late reduces the hours of sleep they get, and sleep is actually crucial for memory consolidation. Without it, their brains can't process the information they've studied effectively.

Performance Decline

Overtraining and Stress: Swimmers who train intensely may experience disrupted sleep due to overtraining or stress. Sleep deprivation can lead to mental and physical burnout, negatively affecting performance. Athletes who are chronically sleep-deprived are more likely to experience fatigue, lowered immune function, and decreased motivation, which can hinder training progress and race-day performance.

Pre-Competition Anxiety:

Some swimmers may experience anxiety or nervousness before big races, which can interfere with sleep. This anxiety can manifest as difficulty falling asleep, disrupted sleep during the night, or feeling unrested upon waking. This can lead to poor focus and reduced performance during the event. It's important for swimmers to develop mental techniques, such as deep breathing or mindfulness, to relax before bed and improve sleep quality.

Sleep Patterns

Teenagers naturally have a later sleep-wake cycle, and the early start times of schools often conflict with their biological sleep rhythms. When they're also under exam stress, it's even harder to align their sleep schedule properly.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVED SLEEP

Music

Create low-stress, sleep-friendly environments. Keep the car and house as chilled as possible during exam periods. Try designing some playlists (with your teens) to curate the mood that keeps the whole house calm. Or download some pre-mixed music here to help them sleep : <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0024qwd> (BBC Sounds 30 min sleep mixtape)

Time Management:

Helping your child plan study schedules helps avoid last-minute cramming can reduce stress and help improve sleep. Communicate with both the school and the coach to avoid conflict.

Relaxation Techniques

Practices like meditation, deep breathing, or even gentle stretches before bed can help calm the mind. See NHS 'BETTER MIND': <https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/how-to-meditate-for-beginners/>

Limit Screen Time

Reducing or avoiding screens (scrolling on phones, gaming) an hour or two before bed can improve sleep quality. If it's a problem, get some help <https://parentandteen.com/7-ways-parents-can-help-teens-manage-phone-use/>

Regular Sleep Routine

Try to maintain a consistent sleep schedule, even during exam periods, to keep the body's internal clock in rhythm.

Prioritize Sleep Hygiene

Keep the bedroom cool, dark, and quiet. Limit screen time before bed to avoid blue light interference. Create a mental association with the bed as a place of rest. Send signals to the brain that it's time to wind down.

Ask them how they Feel

Talk to your child about sleep in advance of exam stress. Work on identifying and changing unhelpful thoughts about sleep.