



KS4 · GCSE · YEARS 11-12

Wellbeing & Balance

My Focus Toolkit (Year 11) · My Exam Toolkit (Year 12)

Your GCSE years are busier and the stakes feel higher. The techniques in your toolkit work best when you're rested, fed and not running on empty. Some pressure before exams is normal and can even sharpen your focus, but revision should never cost you your sleep, food or mental health.

We are a Take 5 school

Parkhall is a Take 5 school. The Take 5 Steps to Wellbeing are the Public Health Agency's five evidence-based actions for good mental health, based on the Five Ways to Wellbeing. Building them into exam season helps you stay balanced as well as productive.

1 Connect	Keep time for friends and family during exam season. Study with a classmate and test each other.
2 Keep Learning	Keep a hobby or interest that isn't on any exam. Learning for enjoyment builds confidence.
3 Be Active	Aim for an average of 60 minutes a day. A walk between Pomodoros counts.
4 Take Notice	Use breaks to step outside and notice your surroundings. Before an exam, take a minute to notice your breathing.
5 Give	Help a classmate with a topic, volunteer, or simply thank someone. Giving boosts your own wellbeing too.

Find out more about Take 5: www.mindingyourhead.info/Take5

Sleep: the revision you do with your eyes shut

Sleep is when your brain files the day's learning into long-term memory. Cutting sleep to fit in more revision usually means you remember less.

How much? Teenagers need 8-10 hours a night (American Academy of Sleep Medicine). Too little sleep is linked to poorer attention, learning and mood.

- Keep your bedtime and wake-up time similar every day, including weekends.
- Finish revising at least an hour before bed so your brain can switch off.
- Charge your phone outside your room. A 2026 study that tracked 230 teenagers' phones found that on nights they used their phone more in the hour before bed, they also used it more after midnight.
- Avoid energy drinks. England plans to ban sales of high-caffeine energy drinks to under-16s because of links to poor sleep, anxiety and poor concentration, and Northern Ireland is considering the same.



- Never pull an all-nighter before an exam. You'll recall less on the day.

Breaks and the Pomodoro Technique

TAKE 5 • TAKE NOTICE

Breaks aren't lazy – they're part of how memory consolidates. Knowing a break is coming also makes it easier to focus now.

- Work for 25 minutes on ONE task, then take a 5-minute break. After four Pomodoros, take a longer 15–20 minute break.
- Make breaks real: stand up, stretch, get water, look out of a window. Scrolling isn't a break.
- Space your subjects across the week. Little and often reduces panic and pressure closer to exams.

Move your body

TAKE 5 • BE ACTIVE

Being active improves sleep, mood and concentration – exactly what you need in exam season.

The guideline UK Chief Medical Officers (2026): aim for an average of at least 60 minutes of activity a day across the week, spread through the day. Anything that makes you breathe faster and feel warmer counts.

- Don't drop your sport or club for exams. It protects your mental health and your sleep.
- Use activity as a reset between revision blocks: a 10-minute walk, a few stretches, a kickabout.
- Cut long stretches of sitting – stand up at least every half hour.

Fuel and water

- Eat regular meals, starting with breakfast, so your energy stays steady.
- Keep water with you during revision and exams.
- Don't rely on sugar or caffeine to keep going. The crash afterwards makes it harder to concentrate.

Managing exam stress – what the research says

Stress isn't always the enemy. These strategies have been tested with real students in real exams.

- Reframe the nerves. In a 2019 study, students who learned that a racing heart and sweaty palms are the body getting ready to perform – not a sign of failure – reported less test anxiety (Rozek et al., 2019).
- Write it out. Spend about 10 minutes before an exam writing honestly about your worries. Students who did this scored higher, and anxious students did as well as calmer classmates (Ramirez & Beilock, 2011).

- Plan, Do, Check, Act on your mistakes. Every mark lost on a past paper shows you exactly what to fix next. Mistakes in practice are part of learning, not proof you can't do it.
- Control what you can: plan your timetable, pack your equipment the night before, and check your exam times.
- Don't compare revision hours with friends. What matters is how you revise, not how long.

Phones and social media

- Turn notifications off – or put your phone in another room – while you revise.
- Set app time limits during exam season.
- Remember that social media shows other people's highlights, not their whole day. If an app leaves you feeling worse, take a break from it.

Talk about it

TAKE 5 • CONNECT

If revision is making you feel overwhelmed, tell someone. You don't have to carry it alone.

- In school: your form tutor, Head of Year or any trusted adult. Ask them about the school's counselling support.
- At home: a parent, carer or anyone you trust.
- If low mood or anxiety goes on for more than a couple of weeks, or stops you doing everyday things, speak to your GP.

If it ever feels like too much It's okay to ask for help. Talk to your form tutor, Head of Year or a trusted adult – that's exactly what they're there for.

Childline	0800 1111	Free, 24/7, for anyone under 19. Phone, 1-2-1 online chat or message at childline.org.uk .
Lifeline	0808 808 8000	Northern Ireland's crisis helpline. Free, 24/7. Textphone: 18001 0808 808 8000.
Shout	Text SHOUT to 85258	Free text support, 24/7, from all major UK mobile networks.
Samaritans	116 123	Free to call, any time. Email: jo@samaritans.org
Minding Your Head	mindingyourhead.info	Public Health Agency site listing local mental health support across Northern Ireland.
Emergency	999	If you or someone else is in danger right now.

My wellbeing week

Fill this in each day for a week. Look for patterns – how does your sleep affect your mood?

Day	Hours of sleep	60 mins active ✓	Pomodoro breaks ✓	Phone out of room ✓	Mood (1-5)
Mon					
Tue					
Wed					
Thu					
Fri					
Sat					
Sun					

My Take 5 this week

Step	What I did	✓
Connect		☐
Keep Learning		☐
Be Active		☐
Take Notice		☐
Give		☐

This week, I'm averaging _____ hours of sleep a night.

Signs I need a break (e.g. snapping at people, can't focus, not sleeping):

Where this advice comes from

1. Public Health Agency (2025) "Campaign urges people to 'Take 5' for better mental health" – Take 5 Steps to Wellbeing: Connect, Keep Learning, Be Active, Take Notice, Give. mindingyourhead.info/Take5 **2.** Parkhall Integrated College: Study Skills Mapping – Wellbeing strand for Years 11–14. **3.** American Academy of Sleep Medicine (2016) Recommended amount of sleep for teenagers (consensus statement, Paruthi et al., Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine). **4.** UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines for children and young people (2026). **5.** Mathew, G. M. et al. (2026) Bedtime smartphone use and overnight phone activity in adolescents. SLEEP 2026 abstract, Sleep 49 (Supplement 1). Early findings, not yet a full paper. **6.** UK Government (2026) plans to end sales of high-caffeine energy drinks to under-16s in England; Northern Ireland considering similar rules. **7.** Rozek, C. S. et al. (2019) Reducing socioeconomic disparities in the STEM pipeline through student emotion regulation. PNAS, 116(5). **8.** Ramirez, G. & Beilock, S. L. (2011) Writing about testing worries boosts exam performance in the classroom. Science, 331(6014). **9.** Childline (childline.org.uk), Lifeline (lifelinehelpline.info), Shout (giveusashout.org), Samaritans (samaritans.org), Department of Health NI helpline list, Minding Your Head (mindingyourhead.info). Checked October 2026.

