



KS5 • A LEVEL • YEARS 13-14

Wellbeing & Balance

My Mastery Toolkit • Years 13 and 14

Sixth form brings more independence and more competing demands: heavier content, free periods to manage, applications, part-time work and life outside school. Cognitive science is clear that memory, attention and decision-making all depend on sleep, movement and how you manage stress. Looking after yourself isn't a distraction from your studies – it's part of studying well.

We are a Take 5 school

Parkhall is a Take 5 school. The Public Health Agency's Take 5 Steps to Wellbeing – based on the evidence-based Five Ways to Wellbeing – are five actions that protect mental health. In sixth form, when study is more independent, they are a useful check that your week has balance.

1 Connect	Protect time with friends and family. During study leave, plan study sessions with others so you aren't isolated.
2 Keep Learning	Read beyond the specification or learn a skill outside your subjects – cooking, an instrument, a language.
3 Be Active	Build movement into study days: walk, train, play. It improves sleep, mood and focus.
4 Take Notice	Take short, mindful pauses. Notice early warning signs of stress in yourself and act on them.
5 Give	Volunteer, mentor younger students or support a friend. Giving strengthens connection and purpose.

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

Sleep and memory

During sleep, the brain consolidates what you learned that day, strengthening it in long-term memory. Sacrificing sleep for extra study time is a poor trade.

How much? Sleep experts recommend 8–10 hours a night for 13–18 year olds. Regularly getting less is linked to poorer attention, learning and mental health (American Academy of Sleep Medicine).

- Keep a consistent wake-up time, even on free-period mornings and weekends. It anchors your body clock.
- Be strategic with caffeine. Its effects last several hours, so a coffee or energy drink in the afternoon can still disrupt your sleep at night.
- Keep your phone out of the bedroom. A 2026 study tracking 230 teenagers' phones found more phone use before bed predicted more use after midnight.



- Avoid all-nighters before deadlines and exams. You'll recall and reason less well the next day.

Managing your workload

Independent study needs structure. Plan rest the same way you plan study.

- Use free periods for focused study so your evenings aren't overloaded.
- Work in Pomodoros (25 minutes on, 5 off; a longer break after four). Treat breaks as part of the method, not a reward.
- Write Cornell Notes within 24 hours of each lesson. Small, regular consolidation stops work piling up.
- If you have a part-time job, agree hours that leave room for study and rest – especially in exam terms.
- Learn to say no. Protect at least one evening or half-day each week that's completely off.

Pressure, perfectionism and exam stress

TAKE 5 • TAKE NOTICE

Some stress helps performance. Too much – or the wrong kind of thinking about it – gets in the way. These approaches are supported by research with students.

- Reappraise physical anxiety. Treat a racing heart as your body preparing to perform. A 2019 study found this simple reframe reduced students' test anxiety (Rozek et al., PNAS, 2019).
- Use expressive writing. Ten minutes writing openly about your worries before an exam improved performance, especially for anxious students (Ramirez & Beilock, Science, 2011).
- Question anxious thoughts. Ask: Is this thought true? What's the evidence for and against it? In one study, this kind of inquiry reduced test anxiety and procrastination (Krispenz et al., 2019).
- Watch for perfectionism. Done and improved beats perfect and late. Feedback on a flawed draft is worth more than an essay you never finish.
- Compare yourself with your own progress, not other people's grades, offers or study hours.

Move, eat, connect

TAKE 5 • BE ACTIVE • CONNECT

The guideline UK Chief Medical Officers (2026): an average of at least 60 minutes of activity a day across the week up to age 18, spread through the day and including activities that build strength.

- Build movement into study days: walk to school, stretch between Pomodoros, keep up a sport or the gym.
- Eat regular meals and stay hydrated. Long stretches without food make concentration and mood worse.
- Keep doing things you enjoy and time with friends. Social connection is one of the strongest protectors of wellbeing.
- Notice your digital habits. Turn notifications off while studying and be wary of late-night scrolling and comparison.

Knowing when to get help

TAKE 5 • CONNECT

Asking for help is a skill, not a weakness. Watch for early warning signs: struggling to sleep, losing interest in things you usually enjoy, avoiding work, or feeling constantly on edge.

- In school: your form tutor, Head of Sixth Form, Head of Year or any trusted member of staff. Ask about the school's counselling support.
- If low mood or anxiety lasts more than a couple of weeks, or affects day-to-day life, make an appointment with your GP.
- If things ever feel unmanageable, contact one of the services below straight away.

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 weekly balance check

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

Day	Hours of sleep	Active ✓	Study hours	Rest / social time	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		☐

My early warning signs that I'm overloaded:

What helps me reset (people, places, activities):

One commitment for my wellbeing this week:

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. Rozek, C. S. et al. (2019) Reducing socioeconomic disparities in the STEM pipeline through student emotion regulation. PNAS, 116(5). 7. Ramirez, G. & Beilock, S. L. (2011) Writing about testing worries boosts exam performance in the classroom. Science, 331(6014). 8. Krispenz, A., Gort, C., Schültke, L. & Dickhäuser, O. (2019) How to reduce test anxiety and academic procrastination through inquiry of cognitive appraisals. Frontiers in Psychology, 10. 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.

