

# BUILDING RESILIENCE



Toolkit of strategies to support teachers and students to improve performance under pressure.



Devised and collated by staff and students from:



## Introduction

This resource is the result of an Erasmus+ KA2 Strategic Partnership for Schools project 'Building resilience of students to improve positive outcomes' which was originally proposed by staff from Vision West Nottinghamshire College having identified a significant increase over time of students suffering from anxiety particularly linked to performance under pressure including exam stress.

Funding from the Erasmus+, the European Union's programme for education, training, youth and sport, allowed institutions from the United Kingdom, Germany and Finland collaborate to share their own experiences of students performing under pressure and to identify areas where more support could be provided to help manage performance under pressure better.

The areas in which the institutions thought were potential areas of greater support for tutors and students were:

1. Motivation
2. Setting priorities
3. Strategies for overcoming avoidance.
4. Ability to overcoming obstacles.
5. Distractions.
6. Self-criticism.
7. Support Networks.
8. When does positive stress turn negative?
9. Work/life balance.

The following activities are a result of sharing practice between teachers and students from the different institutions.

## Motivation – Developed in Germany

Elton Mayo identified in his Hawthorne study that working in teams is a motivator in the workplace and therefore it can be assumed that it is no different for the classroom.

Working together in teams enhances the ability of students to work with others and to help remove the fear of making mistakes. Encouraging team work helps develop a key competence that is heavily sought after by employers.

The following activities support tutors to encourage students to work in team by giving them the opportunity to experience cooperative interactions which sow the seeds for motivated students.

### **Things for teachers to consider ahead of group activities:**

- Provide clear aims for the team building activities.
- Plan how to form your groups.
- Anticipate possible “problems”.

#### **ACTIVITY 1: What if?**

Group size: Teams of two or four students

Equipment: Pencils and paper; list with terms, ideas or things

Description: Students look at their terms and write down “what if questions”, e.g. what if flowers could speak? What if there were no birds any more? There is no “solution”. The intention here is to encourage discussion and students to support each other to come to a resolution. Students think hypothetically.

#### **ACTIVITY 2a: Communicating without words**

Group size: Teams of 2 and 4 students

Equipment: Pencils, paper, list with words, ideas or things that can be presented

Description: Students explore how to communicate without words. Students are then presented with a particular word which one member of the group must communicate to the others.

Communication techniques often include: symbolic language; hand gestures; body movements; symbols; light signals; noises; drumming.

This activity helps the students to cast off timidity and fear of presenting something in front of others. It's an important aspect for later team work.

#### **ACTIVITY 2b: Communicating with words**

Group size: teams of 2

Equipment: pencils, paper, image to explain.

Description: Students sit back to back. One student is given an image and the other a pencil and paper. The student with the image must give instructions to the other student who will attempt to recreate the drawing.

This activity helps the students to communicate and consider their vocabulary when giving instructions.

#### **ACTIVITY 3: Project: new bathtub**

Group size: Up to 30.

Equipment: Felt tip pens; large pieces of paper.

Description: Form the groups, designate a minute-taker and repeat the rules of brainstorming.

The activity takes 5 minutes and the students are asked to find and describe as many ideas for a new bathtub as they can find. Important here is fun; efficiency and comfort; the minute-taker writes down notes. After 5 minutes the minute-takers have to present their lists. The students discuss, assess and praise their ideas.

## Strategies for overcoming avoidance – Developed in Germany

**Task 1:** Students were asked to honestly identify why does avoidance exist?

Common answers often include:

1. Does not make sense to complete the task – does not give credit to their qualification
2. Not engaging/ interesting.
3. Students are not motivated.
4. Students too sociable and working hard interferes with this.
5. Students have not understood the task.
6. Tutors perceived a fear of failure

### Solution:

Teachers and students explored a range of individual and group strategies to overcome these common reasons for avoidance.

	Reward	Encourage Discipline
Group strategies	Providing choice and ownership over learning method. - Including time, method, order, and location.	Created class rules. E.g. safe environment – no wrong questions.
	Have a break, have a ....treat.	Tutor identified and addressed rational for completing tasks/activities highlighting the benefits to the students.
	Peer evaluation and praise.	Encouraging group discussion that is task related.
	Student chosen reward.	Planned activities from tutors avoided potential distractions.
	Praising students who respectfully identify errors/mistakes made by the teacher.	Communicate more with students to overcome misunderstandings.
	Participate in classroom continuum (see below) to increase involvement in decision making.	Teacher encourages a growth mindset.
	Competitive activities such as Kahoot.	Individualised targets.
Individual strategies	Have a break, have a ....treat.	Avoid distractions (Social Media, TV). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pomodoro Timer technique.</li> <li>• Forest App: <a href="https://www.forestapp.cc/">https://www.forestapp.cc/</a></li> <li>• Cold turkey apps</li> </ul>
	Completing early – more free time.	Researching end goal – E.g. university.
	Self-satisfaction and reduced anxiety.	Break large tasks down to bite sized tasks which might be easier to achieve.
	Feedback and a better understanding of progress.	Organise time.
	Recognition from peers, teachers and family.	Prioritise most difficult or most unpleasant task first.

## Setting priorities – Developed in Germany

It is recognised that prioritising is a skill that needs to be practiced. Students will encounter many choices in their life, within and beyond their learning and they must learn to make effective decisions and prioritise effectively.

This activity seeks to develop the skill of prioritising without it being overtly taught.

### Solution

Students are given several proposals to be decided between. Students then practice prioritising by voting for a proposal and being able to determine the extent to which they agree with their choice.

Students are given a method of casting their vote – i.e some sticky dots. Everyone is to be given the same number and they can distribute them however they like.

1. The teacher formulates the criterion or the key question that forms the basis for the decision.

### Examples:

- a) "Which subjects are most important to me?"
- b) "Does motivation represent an essential aspect in my life?"
- c) "Which priorities do I have for my life and for school?"

2. Students, as a group, must identify potential answers to the key question.
3. The responses are recorded and students are asked to vote on the answer or answers they feel most strongly about.
4. The votes are then collated to identify which proposal received the most votes.
5. Finally, an evaluation and discussion could follow to analyse the rationale behind choices.

### The rules:

- Every student should distribute all dots. It is not possible to share them with others.
- Even though it's not common in general, there are groups that explicitly request a field for "abstention", which can easily be inserted. "Abstention" does not mean rejection, but "I am undecided" - I do not care".
- For particularly critical decisions, a "white field" can also be inserted. Choosing "white" means: "I do not agree with any of the above mentioned suggestions." If such a field is required, a conversation should be initiated.
- This voting procedure is not anonymous as everyone can see where the dots are glued.

### Variety 1:

- For very large groups and numerous proposals, the following procedure has proven to be successful, since the "spread" is often very large or the majority sometimes is not that clear: A second "ballot" follows. From the first vote, e.g. the first six proposals are decided for again, all other proposals are dropped.

### Variety 2:

- It often happens that events are delayed. If the different proposals are arranged clearly, it is not necessary to create a table. In this case, the students directly stick the dots on the cards or on the suggestion.

## Distractions – Developed in the United Kingdom

### Overcoming distractions with 'If...Then Thinking'

Professor Peter Gollwitzer of New York University says that many people who want to put their efforts into achieving great things, but don't, are derailed by seemingly small problems like these:

- They want to finish a task to a high standard, but a phone call disrupts them.
- They want to complete a coursework piece, but the weekend is just too busy.
- They want to do some serious revision, but some friends disturb them and the work is abandoned.

Peter Gollwitzer argues that if this happens to you, it's because you have low 'implementation intention' – you sort of want to put in the effort, but you will be easily put off if one thing goes wrong.

#### The solution?

- Successful students anticipate these problems and plan how they will respond to them with maximum effort.
- You sequence actions that anticipate obstacles and build-in pre-prepared solutions – you effectively beat self-sabotage before it even happens.

Consider these examples:

1. Student 1: *'I'll get started on this first thing in the morning.'* This is a really common internal dialogue you might experience as a student – lots do it. And with one small disruption the whole plan comes to a standstill.
2. Student 2: *'I'll get started on this first thing in the morning.'* And...
  - **If** I wake up late by accident, **then** I'll use my morning break to start it instead and...'
  - **If** I feel really demotivated, **then** I'll get two coffees from the canteen and drink them quickly to give me a boost and....
  - **If** I get disturbed by friends, **then** I'll make an excuse and go to the LRC or room 104 and...
  - **If** the internet is down, **then** I'll start by using my class notes and save the research work until later.

It is easy to see which student might be the one most likely to succeed. Student 2 has listed a series of potential problems and has recognised their tendency to self-sabotage when small things go wrong. By planning a change in action when those small obstacles come along, they are much more likely to keep pushing forward.

List all the usual blockers you use to prevent high levels of effort and for each one commit a solution. Think them all through in your head and make notes. What you are doing is strengthening your implementation intention. You **will** put the effort in, *even if* small crop up to stop you.

Use the table overleaf to plan your response to self-sabotage.

**Template: 'If...Then Thinking'.**

<p><b>If...</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p><b>Then...</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p><b>If...</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p><b>Then...</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p><b>If...</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p><b>Then...</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p><b>If...</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p><b>Then...</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p><b>If...</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p><b>Then...</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p><b>If...</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p><b>Then...</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p><b>If...</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p><b>Then...</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>

## Self-criticism– Developed in the United Kingdom

A range of research over the last few years has looked at athletes and musicians, and how self-criticism affected their motivation and their ability to reach their goals. Results showed the following:

- Those who were more self-critical were less likely to be able to motivate themselves, and also less likely to reach their goals, than those who treated themselves with more compassion.
- Researchers concluded that self-criticism is a risk factor in the pursuit of personal goals, and increased risk of setbacks along the way.

Earlier research found similar results. Self-criticism made people less likely to make progress toward their goals. Researchers also found that those more prone to self-criticism were also more likely to ruminate and procrastinate—which could explain their lack of progress.

Overcoming negative self-criticism takes time and consistent practice. Once you learn how to silence the negative words of your inner conscious, you can begin to live your best life.

In a table or mind map, follow the following steps.

- Identify your inner-critic
- Be honest with yourself.
- Develop positive actions, Encourage yourself and/or Ask for help.

<i>Identify inner-critic</i>	<i>Be honest with yourself</i>	<i>Develop positive actions</i>
<i>Critical thought.....and where it comes from.</i>	<i>Are your goals realistic? Is your approach effective?</i>	<i>Breathing deeply, find the positive or seek support.</i>





## Work/life balance – Developed in Finland

Throughout this project discussions with students has inspired new approaches and in particular this task.

The main point that came up was the feeling of life being too busy. Hobbies and homework took a lot of time although some suffered from that because they felt they aren't able to start whatever they are supposed to do e.g. Homework. Most students were looking for more structure in their daily lives, for example being able to do homework during (long) breaks between lessons. They also wanted to sleep more and have some time to calm down after school or a hobby. Free time with friends and family was also on people's wish list.

### Solution

1. Using a timeline, identify and plot your current average daily routine. Be honest, realistic and accurate include the times you relax as well as the times you are working hard.



2. On a second timeline, identify and plot your daily wish list routine. This will identify elements you crave in your daily routine.



3. Next, work within your constraints, for example class timetables, identify a realistic routine which incorporates some elements of your wish list.



4. Finally, consider how this improved routine can be applied to your average week.



## Support Networks – Developed in Finland

A variety of research suggest that students need support. Students cannot be expected to cope with the pressures associated with exam based qualifications alone.

Our experienced teaching team also recognise that students need regular reassurance, advice, guidance and support and understanding their support network is important.

### Task 1:

Students are asked to identify their existing support system.

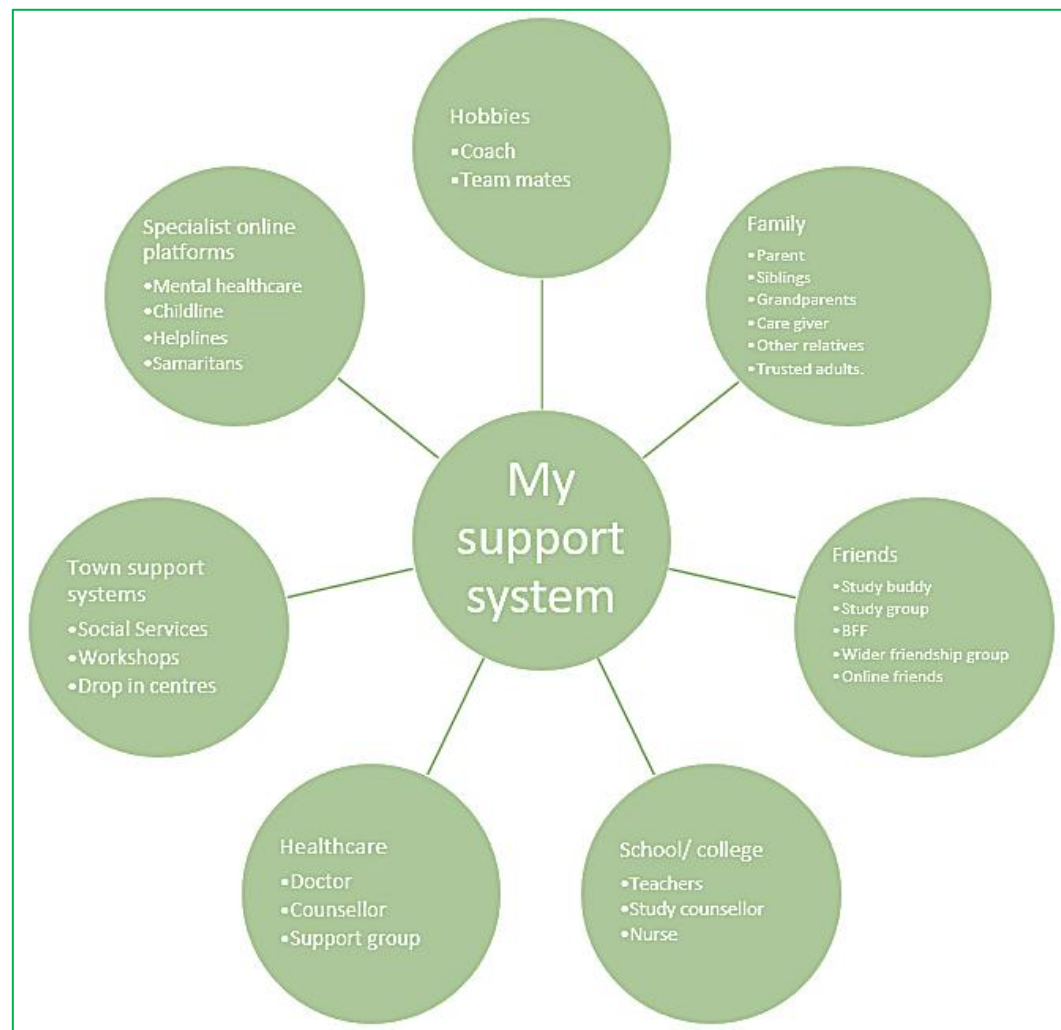
Students should draw support system using a mind map similar to the example on the right. This activity encourages students to reflect on their existing support strategy but also identify where their support system can be strengthened.

This activity forms the basis of a conversation to determine whether students have a comprehensive support network and/or where gaps in a student's support network exist. Where gaps in a student's support network do exist, staff members could identify an appropriate support network to fill this gap.

This could also identify where parents, for example, are particularly important support mechanisms and therefore underline where contacting parents might be an appropriate strategy to improve student motivation, compliance or achievement.

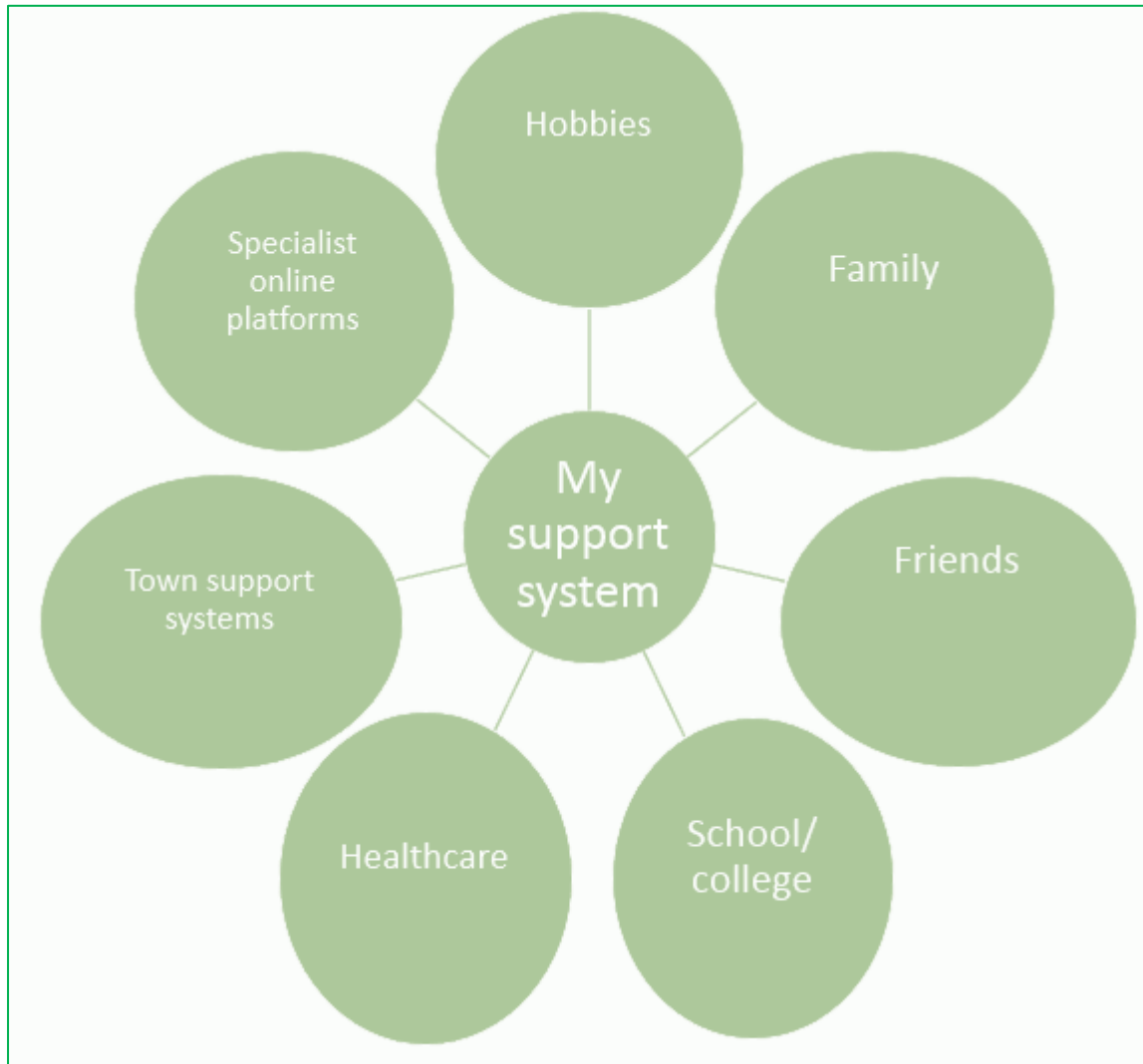
### Task 2:

Students can then pre-plan which members of their support network they might approach for different needs. An example is also provided on the right.



Reason I may seek support	Member(s) of support network to approach
If I am a little bit worried about the exam this afternoon	Friends from class.
I can't sleep I am so worried about failing my exams.	Parents and teachers.

**Template:** Support Networks






Reason I may seek support	Member(s) of support network to approach

## Ability to overcoming obstacles – Developed in the United Kingdom

This activity looks to help students improve their reaction to feedback. It identifies that people (and therefore students) fall into one of three zones when they hear constructive feedback and often it can affect whether students respond positively.

The three zones are typified as:

<p>Red Zone</p> 	<p>Shock, anger and denial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wow – didn't expect that</li><li>• How dare they</li><li>• That's totally wrong</li></ul>
<p>Blue Zone</p> 	<p>Rationalisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Maybe that's right, but they don't know the kind of pressure I am under.</li><li>• I always do that, its just who I am.</li></ul>
<p>Green Zone</p> 	<p>Acceptance and action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Right I need to do something about that</li><li>• What do I need to do?</li></ul>

The preference is to move through the Red and Blue zone as quickly as possible.

### Solution:

1. Students are encouraged to reflect on a previous challenge or feedback they have experienced and how they have responded in each zone. This should support students in future to move through the zones quicker and make a plan.
2. Students are then asked to consider what is one thing you will do differently or one action that you will take to respond to feedback or challenges differently.

**Template: Ability to overcoming obstacles.**

Reflect on a previous challenge or feedback you have experienced and how you have responded in each zone. This should support you in future to move through the zones quicker and make a plan.

What previous challenge or feedback are you going to use in the example below? \_\_\_\_\_

<p>Red Zone</p> 	<p><u>What do you think when you are in the red zone?</u></p>
<p>Blue Zone</p> 	<p><u>What do you think when you are in the blue zone?</u></p>
<p>Green Zone</p> 	<p><u>What do you think when you are in the green zone?</u></p>

3. Using your “green zone” thinking, what is one thing you will do differently or one action that you will take?

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## When does positive stress turn negative? – Developed in the Finland

According to the Yerkes-Dodson law, optimal performance occurs at an immediate level of arousal. Too little or too much pressure and performance declines.

It is common to identify where you go beyond your overload point and high levels of stress can impact on performance. Where too little arousal occurs, your attention and interest levels are not sufficient to keep you engaged in your work.

### Solution:

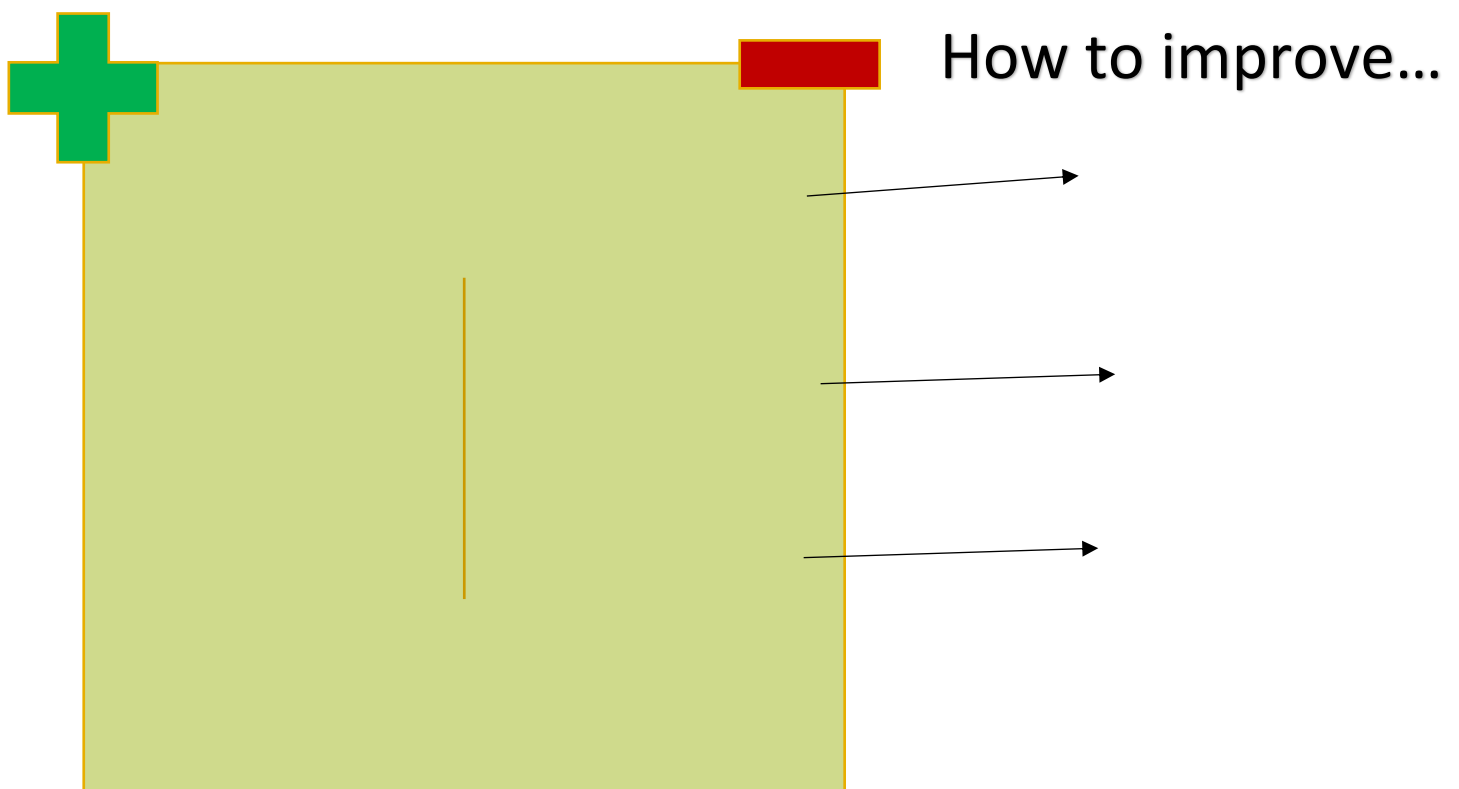
Step 1: Identify situations when they feel stressed (any kind).

Step 2: Students divide their stresses into negative and positive and consider the overload point at which stress can turn negative and the reasons why it can happen.

Step 3: In collaboration with teachers or support services, students should identify different solutions to reducing stress or to ensure it doesn't turn negative.

Step 4: Students identify which strategies might be most appropriate for their particular stresses.

This activity identifies individual stresses and solutions.



### Reflection:

Reflect on a time in which you passed your overload point, what symptoms did you experience and how was your performance affected, what strategies did you implement or should you have implemented?

In the future what strategies would you use?

## Student techniques

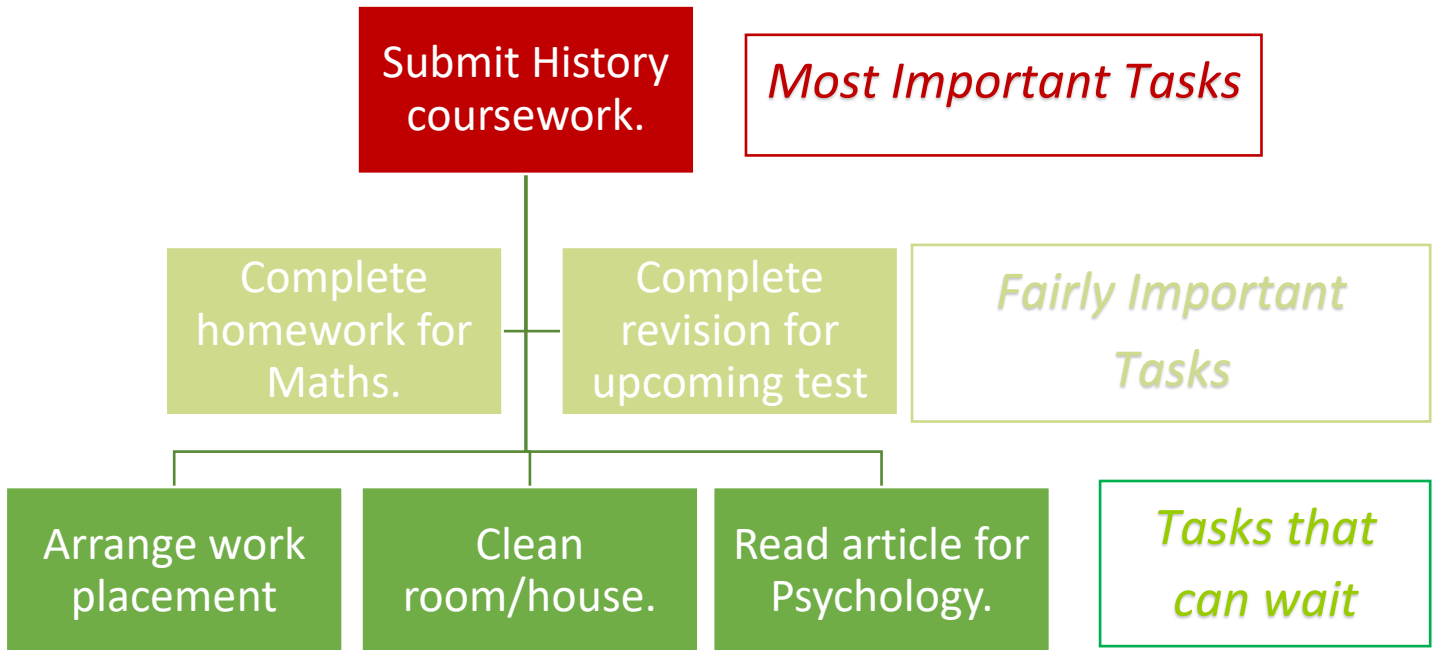
### The Hierarchy of Urgency

This activity supports students to improve their organisation and ability to prioritise.

The group of students recognised that it is very common for students to produce 'to do' lists however this traditional method does not help students prioritise their time.

#### Solution:

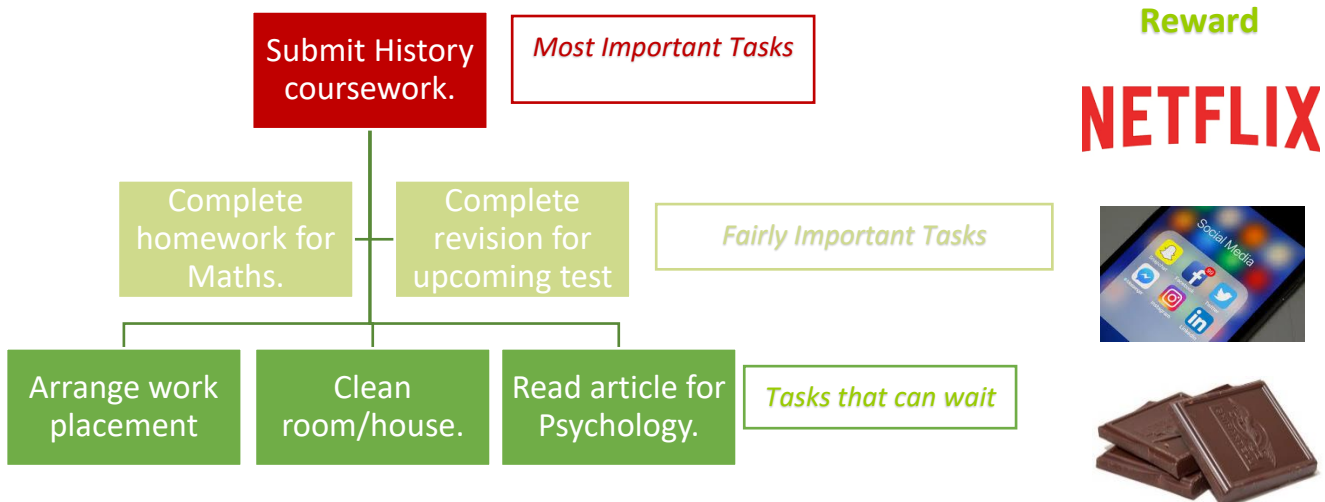
4. Create a traditional to do list.
5. Rank the most important to the least important task and place in the *Hierarchy of Urgency* template
6. Identify appropriate deadlines for each level of hierarchy. E.g. 1 day, 3 days, 7 days.



### Self-Set Rewards.

Another group of students also looked to improve on the traditional 'to do' list. The group suggested that students should set themselves rewards whilst planning to encourage them to complete elements on their to do list.

The group applied their ideas to the Hierarchy of Urgency to suggest that students could set different rewards for each level of the hierarchy, of increasing importance to them.



## Study timetable

Another group identified that time management and demonstrating effort over time is the most important element in managing stress levels and that students need a clear plan which they can stick to routinely.

Students identified that many students will identify when they will study a particular subject but do not plan what topics they will study, how they will study or for how long. They also acknowledged that students do not plan the additional activities students have to complete which makes their original plan unmanageable.

	Subject 1 (i.e. History)	Subject 2	Subject 3 etc.	Extra-Curricular	Other responsibilities
<b>Monday</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Topic (Monarchy)</li> <li>- Method (Revision Cards)</li> <li>- Time (30 minutes)</li> </ul>				
<b>Tuesday</b>					
<b>Wednesday</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Topic (Monarchy)</li> <li>- Method (Practice Questions)</li> <li>- Time (45 minutes)</li> </ul>				
<b>Thursday</b>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Football Practice</li> <li>- 60 minutes</li> </ul>	
<b>Friday</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Topic (Monarchy)</li> <li>- Method (Create summarised notes)</li> <li>- Time (60 minutes)</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Employment</li> <li>- 6 hours</li> </ul>
<b>Saturday</b>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Football Game</li> <li>- 120 minutes</li> </ul>	-
<b>Sunday</b>					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Employment</li> <li>- 6 hours</li> </ul>





Erasmus+

## TOP TIPS FOR REVISION

# BEFORE YOU DO ANY REVISION



### MAKE A PLAN

Create a timetable. Using a blank timetable fill in the times when you have college classes, work, and hobbies and build in some time for social activities but not too much! Once you have done this fill in the times when you'll revise.



### FIND A QUIET SPACE TO REVISE

Make sure you find a place where you will not be interrupted whilst you are revising, such as your bedroom or the library. Avoid social places such as coffee shops which are noisy and may cause a distraction, also, avoid listening to music. Evidence suggests students who study in a quiet environment recall more than those who revise while listening to music.



### EAT BREAKFAST

It's not called the most important meal of the day for nothing. Simply having a bowl of cereal will give you the concentration and memory boost you need.



### SLEEP AND REST

Make sure you have plenty of sleep during your revision times and also the night before an exam so that you stay alert and don't get overtired.



## EXERCISE

Aim to do 30 minutes after or before revision. Exercise will increase blood circulation and therefore more oxygen to your brain which increases your level of productivity and reduces tiredness and stress.



## PUT YOUR PHONE AWAY

Phones can be distracting so put it away out of sight. Evidence shows that students who spend more time texting and using social media get lower grades.

# DURING YOUR REVISION

**TOP TIPS  
FOR REVISING**



## START EARLY AND SPREAD IT OUT

Spreading out your revision sessions on a particular topic (e.g. one-hour sessions over 10 days) is more effective than spending the same amount of time in one go (i.e. 10 hours in one day). Plan to do 20 – 30 minute spells of work with short breaks of 5 minutes in each hour, your concentration will be much higher. Plan ahead the topics you will revise in each of the slots.



## REVISION ACTIVITIES

Read through notes and essays from lessons, make summary notes or create memory aids, or mnemonics and then test yourself. The best way to memorise information is by making notes over and over again. Think twice about using highlighters as they do not work as well as making notes.



## TEST YOURSELF

Do past paper questions on the topic you have been revising, complete a whole paper in timed conditions. It is good to time how long you take to answer the question so you know how much time you have in the exam.



## TEACH SOMEONE

After you have tested yourself, teach the material to someone else. Teaching someone else requires you to learn and organise your knowledge in a clear and structured manner and is proven to help memory and recall. Why not get them to test you too.



## BREATHING TECHNIQUES

Stress can make you start breathing with quick, shallow breaths and make your heart beat faster than usual. If this happens, sit down somewhere comfortable with both feet firmly on the ground if possible. Place one hand on your stomach and check how quickly you are breathing. If it's one breathe every couple of seconds, take a deep breath and start counting steadily. Breathe out slowly and try to get the last of the breath out on about five seconds. Carry on doing this until you are doing it naturally.



## ANIMAL THERAPY

Studies show that interactions with therapy animals can decrease stress levels. Playing or petting animals is shown to increase the stress-reducing hormone oxytocin and decreases the production of the stress hormone cortisol.



## RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

- Close your eyes and breathe slowly and deeply.
- Locate any areas of tension and try to relax those muscles; imagine the tension disappearing.
- Relax each part of the body, from your feet to the top of your head.
- As you focus on each part of your body, think of warmth, heaviness and relaxation.
- After 20 minutes, take some deep breaths and stretch.



## DIET

Healthy eating, especially breakfast can really help you to concentrate and feel better. Try to avoid sugary cereals and have a slow release alternative such as porridge. More information around this can be found on the Change4life website and app.