

Stress Amongst Secondary School Students — Does It Matter?

By Mireya Buhagiar 9.1

What is stress and why should it be of major importance?

Stress determines how we act, react and deal with everyday problems and situations, especially when under pressure. It's normal for one to have stress; in fact, it's fundamental for one to have a relatively small amount of stress as a motivation.

Despite this, drastic increase of stress may lead to mental health conditions like depression and anxiety disorders. Not to mention the risk of having a high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, panic attacks, sleep apnea and many others.

In 2016, the World Health Organisation reportedly discovered that Maltese students in their Secondary School years were the most stressed.¹ It can also be noted how students preparing for their O Levels are also marked with high levels of stress. Studies back in 2022 determined that 587 students in Malta suffer from mental health issues, with 26% of students

¹ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/academic-work-leaving-teenagers-with-high-levels-of-stress.609808>

aged from 11 to 16 in the risk of having anxiety problems, the main causes were most likely stress, bullying and the environment at home.² Meanwhile, a series of polls were conducted last November by Malta Daily, asking the public if they suffer from stress. It was revealed that 90% stated that they do, with 40% blaming it on school.³

What are the main causes of stress in school?

“From the students that I work with, I think the things that stress them the most are the expectations from the school in terms of concentrating for hours, exams and the pressure emerging if they are doing well or not,’ explained Noelle Camilleri, a psychotherapist who has had several cases of students dealing with stress. “Family issues are also main contributors of stress, not to mention, social media, which increases pressure on the students as it urges them to make them look perfect at all times.”

A year 9 student pointed out how they sometimes get many tests in a single week and it stresses them out due to having to cope with all of the sudden tests. ‘Sometimes I even have to study late at night,’ they said.

²https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/119550/teachers_flag_600_cases_of_students_with_possible_mental_health_problems#.ZAMEXXbMK3A

³<https://maltadaily.mt/90-of-poll-respondents-suffer-from-stress-with-school-being-main-contributor/>

According to a questionnaire I carried out amongst students in St Benedict College, Secondary School, most of them blame their stress on school work, tests and exams.

What problems might students with high levels of stress face?

“When students have a lot of stress it can come out in different ways. It can affect them emotionally; for instance, they might become moodier and more vulnerable,” Noelle Camilleri explained. “It can also affect physically, for example they can get more headaches or find it more difficult to sleep.”

“I usually isolate myself from others,” a student said. “There were times when I was really stressed where I began to get lower marks in tests and special homeworks. I even found it harder than usual to focus during lessons. These issues definitely increased my stress more.”

Is there anything schools and students can do to help reduce stress?

According to Noelle Camilleri, it is essential for students to have a considerable amount of free time and to leave room for hobbies. “It is important for a student to have hobbies so that they can have a space where they can forget their problems. Going out with their friends can also really help as it puts the student more at ease.”

“I think that other students have to plan their time well and to not procrastinate. At the end of the day, they’ll still have a huge pile of homework that they have to do. If they do a portion of their homework everyday they’ll later on have more free time,” explained a 9.1 student.

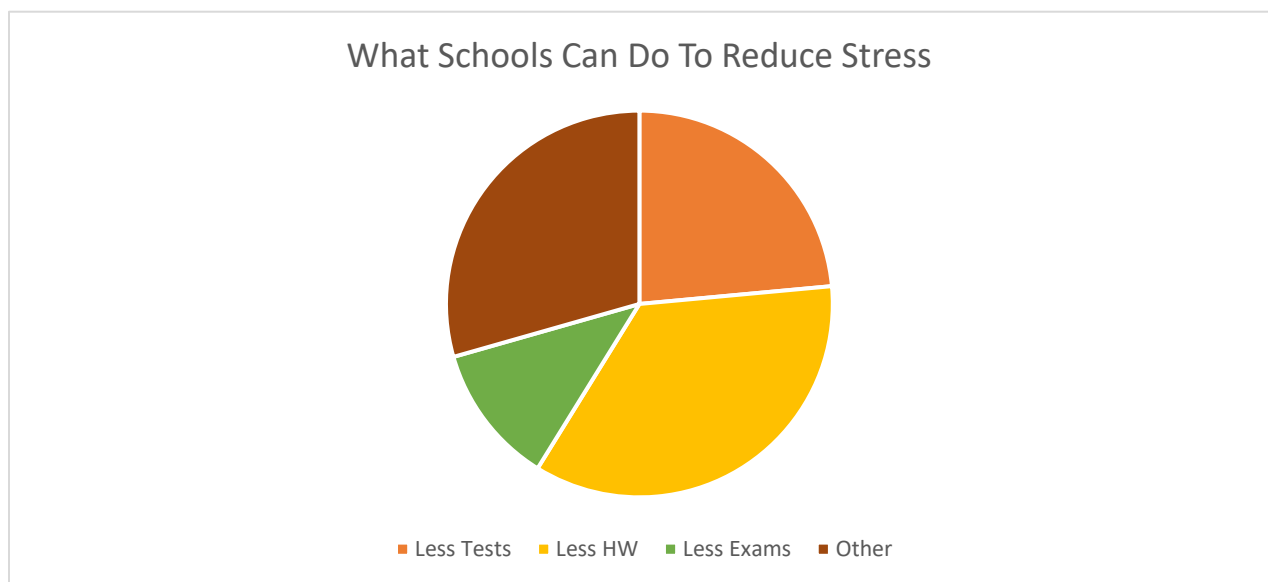
“I usually listen to some music and speak to my friends,” said a 9.2 student when questioned about what they do to reduce their stress. “Sometimes, spending some time alone can be of big help, too, it helps me calm down and reflect.”

Noelle Camilleri and some students were also questioned whether, according to them, the education department and schools can do anything to reduce stress in secondary schools.

“Secondary schools could give an opportunity to students to let them do their hobbies at school, like by adding more clubs,” the psychologist answered. They can learn more things about the things they like, without the pressure of an exam. It can also help their social life and they’ll be able to make new friends.”

“School counsellors already help, but I think teachers can assign less homework,” a student said. “Of course, homework is still important, but there’s no need to give us homework in exaggerated amounts.”

Another student also put forth the issue of how the syllabus changes frequently and how they don't have a concrete idea of what to expect in the exam paper. "The education department should provide us with all the sample papers needed, and not just change the syllabus out of the blue. Teachers and students should be given more information regarding the changes made. That way, we'll also know what to expect in the exam and not be stressed about what might and might not come out."



This pie chart shows what the questioned students think schools can do to help them reduce stress. Most of them recommended the idea of having less homework.

"On the bright side, schools are already aware of this issue and are coming up with solutions to help it," Noelle Camilleri stated. "For instance, school counsellors in schools can give an opportunity to a student to have somebody to speak to about their problems. At times, schools even invite specialised people to speak to students regarding how they can manage

their time and things they can do to ease their stress. During PSCD lessons students are also taught how to deal with stress. If schools keep on doing stuff at this rate, it might decrease the levels of stress students experience from school!”



One of the rooms where students can freely speak to a school counsellor in Kirkop Secondary School (Taken by reporter)

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