

## The Psychological Benefits of Mock Exams

So, as Christmas is nearly here, the Year 11 pupils and U6 students will be preparing for their mock exams in January. Whilst this is a difficult time to revise, the rationale from educational researchers shows the immense benefits from mock exams.

Here are five reasons why our youngsters should be grateful for mock exams; although they probably aren't feeling that appreciative at the moment!

### Motivating pupils to start revision early

Research suggests that 75% of pupils consider themselves to be procrastinators (pdf), with 50% doing so regularly and to a level that is considered a problem. The author of one of the biggest studies on procrastination, researcher Piers Steel, states that "the further away an event is, the less impact it has on people's decisions."

In essence, summer exams feel like a lifetime away for teenagers so some will only really start working hard for them after Easter. By having mock exams halfway through the year, pupils have the opportunity to focus their attention and effort earlier.

### Practising effective revision strategies

Some of the most commonly used techniques to aid revision are actually the least effective, including highlighting or re-reading key passages. One reason for their ineffectiveness is they do not force you to think deeply and critically about the topic, so they often end up being done on auto-pilot.

Mock exams let pupils practise revision strategies that are proven to be more helpful and discover what works best for them. There are several memory strategies that have been found to be effective. In one of the most comprehensive reviews on memory, researchers found that the following strategies are useful: spacing out revision sessions (so that there is enough time to forget and then re-learn); teaching the material to someone else (this forces you to think about the material in a clear and structured way); and switching between topics every now and then (which helps you build on previous revision sessions).

### Improving knowledge

Testing yourself is an effective way to improve your knowledge and ability to recall information. In a study on mock exams researchers found that pupils who did a practice test after a period of revision did better on the final exam than those pupils who didn't do the mock exam and had just spent the whole time revising.

Instead of seeing an exam as a potentially threatening event or as some sort of judgement on their ability, it would be great if we could help pupils to see their mock exams as a handy way of improving their knowledge and memory.

Also, if pupils have a particularly bad mock exam, better to have the shock in the mock, than the final exam. It can act as a call to action that perhaps they need to do more work, change revision strategies and develop skills needed to perform under pressure.

### **Practising under exam conditions**

Pressure can do funny things to pupils. For some, it can lead to nerves, anxiety, frustration and sloppy mistakes, culminating in a poor performance. For others, pressure allows them to concentrate more, work harder and perform better. It takes time and practice to perform well under pressure. If the final summer exams are the first time pupils experience these conditions, it is lottery as to how they react.

Mock exams are a great opportunity for pupils to figure out and practise what works best for them. Techniques to manage exam nerves could include actively slowing down, channelling any nerves into helpful behaviour or listening to some relaxing music beforehand.

### **Identifying topics that need attention**

Doing mocks early enough in the year gives you time before the real thing to target areas that need improvement. Mock exam results can identify how best to spend the coming months for pupils.

Once these areas are identified, it is then a case of putting in the hours. It is not enough to think about what you need to do better, it is the action and the doing that really makes a difference.

Being comfortable and confident enough to ask someone else for help, be it a teacher, parent or carer, is a big part of having a growth mindset. Mock exams can be used as a way of getting pupils to feel comfortable receiving feedback, which paves the way for further improvement and learning.

### **In Summary**

Mock exams, if framed right, can be incredibly beneficial for pupils. Helping them to see that is part of the challenge. They can help pupils to start revising early, to practise effective revision strategies, to improve their knowledge, to familiarise themselves with pressure, and act as a guide moving forward.