



DEVELOPING MINDS

Helping kids & teens feel calm, confident,
cooperative and cope with challenges

Dear Parent/caregiver

As part of the Brain Training for Teens program, one of our clinical psychologists visited your young person's school recently to present a session to the students on "The Science of Learning and Memory". This session was designed to help students think about how to learn and use active revision skills to remember and understand information.

A summary of the information presented is in the box below in case you would like to discuss this with your student.

Briefly going over information soon (**within 24-48 hours**) after first learning it, is an effective way of remembering and understanding this information in the long term. If possible, look at new information you've learnt each day for a minute or two at the end of the lesson (or at the end of the day).

Short time periods of revision **more often** are usually more effective than **longer** periods of revision **less frequently**. It's more helpful to look more briefly at material we want to learn *regularly* rather than waiting until something like exam week or the night before an interview to "cram".

Our brains constantly try to conserve energy and effort ("the lazy brain/fast brain effect"). This means we will often over-estimate how well we know something (for example we confuse recognition for understanding, and understanding for ability to remember). In order to effectively understand and remember information we need to force our brains to pay attention and slow down. There are a variety of strategies we can use to do this. These include:

- **Put information into a visual form.** This might mean: Using diagrams, colour, making things big, making models, drawing pictures, putting information on notes to stick on the wall, using mind maps, doing visual note taking and using visual stories.
- **Connect information to other information.** We might think about how facts and ideas in one subject are related to other school subjects or to other topics within that subject. We might think about how information is connected to things in your real life. Connect the first letters of facts to words (acronyms).
- **Make the information provoke emotion.** Use humour, connect concepts to interesting, (or shocking and scary) things. Think about how ideas affect us personally. Make up poems & jokes about ideas. Imagine emotional impact of concepts.
- **Constantly test yourself as you revise.** Make up cards or revision books, (you can download apps to do this too) that consist of sample questions/answers and use spare minutes in the day to test yourself. Do practice tests and exams – and not just the night before the test. Read, cover, write check. Look at one paragraph at a time and check your understanding by looking away and trying to do a question/repeat the information.

In sum: think and process information as you revise. If you just passively read over or write out notes without making yourself think about what you are doing, you are less likely to remember it.

Here are some other quick strategies for the 24 hours before exam, interview/high pressure situation:

1. Get enough sleep (cramming till 2am might help you learn information you haven't seen before but it may stop you from having the ability the next day to effectively express what you do know).
2. Eat nutritiously (possibly especially protein) a few hours before the test situation.
3. Write out your worries about the test situation in dot point form (it will help take them off your mind).
4. Remember to breathe slowly and relax your muscles in the test situation.

But whatever happens, remember: You are not a mark out of 100. No examiner or test measures your worth as a person.

There are many ways parents/caregivers can support students in their quest to learn and remember information effectively. It depends largely on the family, but a few options which might be useful are below:

If they are willing and you have time available it can be helpful to spend time asking the student about what they are learning. If they tell us about it, they are more likely to remember it. Try to be genuinely interested in what they are doing. We might just ask our own questions about the subject matter. Alternatively we might use questions from a text book/their notes.

Be careful that this is not a “grilling” for the student. This exercise needs to be something that helps them rather than increases their stress. Be wary - if we find ourselves getting frustrated, then it might mean it is time to cease the exercise!

Another option is to help students with study planning – helping them think about their organizational methods and tools – how they remember to do lists, how they would like to revise and to brainstorm with them the best way of coping with their work load and finding time to revise and learn. We can share the way we manage our own work/life to do items and how we remember information. Of course, they might choose to not want to discuss this with us but it is often worth at least offering.

It is also important to continue to help students look after their health whilst they have higher stress periods. Sleep, exercise and nutrition are vitally important for the brain to function. We might support students in eating breakfast, having healthy snacks available, getting to the gym/sport/doing some exercise, having some social interactions and not staying up all hours of the night.

This is not easy, but we should do as much as we can.

Finally, keep showing love and encouragement to students. This “steady base” at home makes a big difference for many young people.

All the best for supporting your teen with their learning and tests/exams.

If you have any questions about the seminar, please feel free to email us at admin@developingminds.net.au or go to www.developingminds.net.au for articles and resources about supporting young people.

Best wishes

Kirrilie, Penny and Jacinda (Clinical psychologists, working with children and adolescents)

