



Webinar On

Coping with Exam Pressure and Anxiety

Date: 17th January 2026, Saturday

Organised By

**Directorate of Higher Secondary Education (DHSE),
Bhubaneswar**

In Collaboration with

UNICEF Odisha

Technical Partner



**IDENTITY
FOUNDATION**

About the Partnership:

The **Directorate of Higher Secondary Education (DHSE)**, under the **School & Mass Education Department of the Government of Odisha**, in collaboration with **UNICEF Odisha** and the Identity Foundation Trust, conducts specialised webinars for higher secondary school students. These sessions are designed to equip students of Grades 11 and 12 with essential life skills, psychological resilience, and emotional competencies required for academic success, career advancement, and overall well-being. The initiative focuses on developing students' capacity to understand themselves, manage their emotions effectively, and build meaningful relationships.

About the Webinar Series:

The Directorate of Higher Secondary Education (DHSE), Government of Odisha, successfully organised the thirteenth (13th) session of its webinar series on the theme **“Coping with Exam Pressure and Anxiety”**. This session focused on helping students understand exam stress as a normal experience and equipping them with practical strategies to manage anxiety, overthinking, and performance pressure.

Students of Classes 11 and 12, along with teachers from higher secondary schools across the state, participated actively, sharing concerns and questions related to headaches, fear of failure, screen addiction, and parental expectations. The webinar highlighted the importance of healthy routines, reduced mobile use, supportive communication from parents and teachers, and simple techniques like breathing exercises to stay calm and focused.

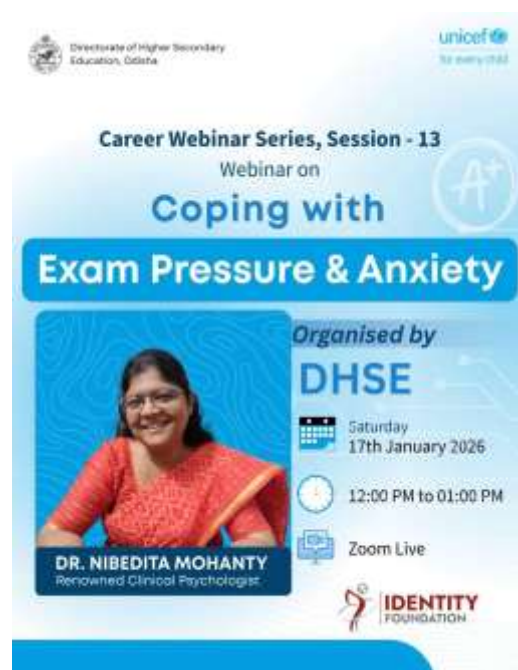
No. of higher-secondary schools / colleges attended the webinar session	119		
No. of Class XI Boys students who attended the webinar session	2,436	6,941	12,577
No. of Class XI Girls students who attended the webinar session	4,505		
No. of Class XII Boys students who attended the webinar session	2,145	5,636	
No. of Class XII Girls students who attended the webinar session	3,491		
No. of male faculties who attended the webinar session	515	1,041	
No. of female faculties who attended the webinar session	526		

About the Resource Person:

Dr. **Nibedita Mohanty** is a distinguished mental health professional with over 10 years of experience, specialising in Child and Adolescent Mental Health and Parenting. With an M.Phil. in Counselling and Clinical Psychology from SCB Medical College, Cuttack, and currently pursuing her Ph.D. She is also serving as a life member of the Indian Psychiatric Society and a state member of the Nasha Mukta Bharat Abhiyan Committee (NMBA). She has been conducting mental health awareness sessions for the government departments as well for the past few years.

Welcome Note by the Moderator:

Mr. Subham Mohapatra, Project Lead of the School-to-Work transition intervention, set the context of the webinar by

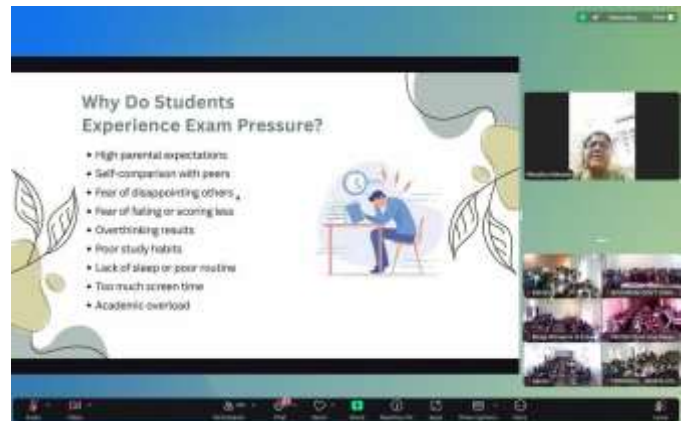


welcoming the resource person, students and teachers. He also advised the students to listen to the Resource Person more carefully, as she will address the real-life challenges faced by the students during the exams. He also emphasised that following the steps to be discussed can help the students to manage their wellbeing. Along with the welcome note, the moderator urged the students and school teachers to put forth all their queries and concerns.

Understanding Exam Pressure & Anxiety:

Stress as a Normal Response:

Dr Mohanty began by explaining that stress is a normal, natural response of the brain. Whenever it encounters pressure or a challenging situation, even if a student is thoroughly prepared for an exam. She highlighted that students, parents, and teachers commonly view stress as entirely negative, something to be eliminated rather than understood and managed. In reality, she clarified, a certain degree of stress is actually helpful, as it sharpens attention, heightens alertness, and boosts motivation to perform well.



She further pointed out that being completely free from stress in an exam context is neither realistic nor desirable, because such a state can lead to overconfidence, casual attitudes, and complacency. Instead of aiming for zero stress, she encouraged students to recognise and maintain an optimal level of stress that energises them without overwhelming them, reframing stress as a signal to prepare and focus more effectively rather than as an enemy.

When Stress Turns Harmful & Distress:

When stress is not managed well or continues over a long period without healthy coping strategies, it can intensify and turn into distress. In this state, the brain may feel “blocked” or frozen, making it very difficult for a student to think clearly or organise their thoughts. They may struggle to recall what they have studied, even if they have prepared sincerely, leading to panic or helplessness during exams. As distress deepens, it does not only affect exam performance; everyday functioning, such as completing homework, concentrating in class, or carrying out routine tasks, also becomes significantly impaired, affecting overall wellbeing and confidence.



Exam Pressure and Anxiety: Definitions and Dynamics:

Understanding Exam Pressure

Dr Mohanty described exam pressure as the external and internal “chapa” (burden or push) that students experience before and during examinations. This pressure does not come from a single source; rather, it is created by a mix of outside expectations and inner fears.

On the external side, students often feel weighed down by parental demands to achieve certain marks or to “not fail”, by teachers’ expectations, by peer competition, and by constant social comparisons with classmates or relatives.

Internally, students place heavy pressure on themselves through rigid self-expectations, such as “I must score 95% or more”, and through worries about disappointing parents and teachers. This is further intensified by self-doubt and negative self-talk, for example, repeatedly thinking “I am not good enough” or “I will forget everything in the exam”. Together, these external and internal forces combine to create a high-pressure environment that can strongly affect a student’s confidence, emotions, and performance.

Exam Anxiety and Performance Anxiety:

Dr Mohanty explained exam anxiety as an emotional state that disrupts clear thinking during examinations, calling it an “emotional task” that interferes with the intellectual task of studying, understanding, and recalling information. Students experiencing exam anxiety are often overwhelmed by repetitive “what if” thoughts, such as “What if I cannot write?” or “What if I fail?”, which increases their fear and self-doubt. Even after adequate preparation, they may worry that they will not be able to reproduce answers in the exam hall and may feel as though their brain has suddenly gone blank at the crucial moment.

Causes of Exam Pressure and Anxiety:

Dr. Mohanty highlighted that exam stress and anxiety stem from multiple, interconnected factors that reinforce one another.

- **High parental expectations:** Parents sometimes overestimate their child’s abilities and pace of learning, using comparisons such as “Everyone is getting 90–95%; why can’t you?”, which creates a persistent sense of inadequacy.
- **Teacher and school pressure:** Expectations are often framed purely around marks, not effort or individual progress, which narrows the definition of success.



- **Peer comparison:** Constantly comparing oneself with friends or toppers fuels self-doubt and feelings of inferiority.
- **Fear of disappointing others:** Students fear letting down their parents and teachers, which adds emotional burden beyond academic performance.
- **Fear of failure and past results:** Previous experiences of lower-than-expected marks may lead to deep-rooted beliefs such as “I am not good enough”.
- **Poor study habits and overload:** Irregular study routines, last-minute preparation, heavy syllabus, coaching, and frequent tests together intensify perceived pressure.
- **Lack of sleep and unhealthy routine:** Sleep deprivation weakens concentration and memory, directly aggravating anxiety.
- **Excessive screen time:** Overuse of mobile phones and social media fragments attention, reduces effective study time, and generates guilt, which further elevates stress.



Symptoms of Exam Pressure and Anxiety:

Dr. Mohanty described symptoms across four domains, encouraging students and teachers to recognise these as signals that anxiety is active.

Physical Symptoms:

Dr Mohanty highlighted that anxiety often shows up through clear physical signals, and recognising these early can help students seek support. Key physical symptoms include:

- **Headaches** that arise or worsen around exams or study time.
- **Rapid heartbeat or palpitations**, especially before tests or while thinking about results.
- **Excessive sweating**, even without heat or physical exertion.
- **Stomach discomfort**, such as pain, nausea, or a feeling of tightness.
- **Muscle tension**, particularly in the neck, shoulders, or back.
- **Persistent fatigue**, feeling drained despite not doing heavy physical work.
- **Sleep problems**, including difficulty falling asleep, frequent waking, or unrestful sleep.

She encouraged teachers and parents to treat these not as “excuses” but as real indicators that exam anxiety is active and needs compassionate attention.

Emotional Symptoms:

Emotional symptoms of exam anxiety often appear as noticeable changes in a student’s feelings and reactions. These may include increased irritability or sudden bursts of anger over small issues, as well as constant overthinking and worry about exams or the future. Students may experience feelings of hopelessness, expressed through thoughts like “Nothing will work; I can’t do it”, which reduce motivation and confidence. Frequent mood swings, shifting quickly from feeling fine to feeling upset, are also common.

Some students may have crying spells or feel emotionally overwhelmed without clearly knowing the reason behind it. Together, these emotional shifts signal that anxiety is disrupting the student’s ability to manage and regulate their emotions effectively and that they may need empathetic support, reassurance, and guidance from adults rather than criticism or dismissal.



Cognitive (Thought-related) Symptoms:

Cognitive symptoms of exam anxiety show up mainly in the way students think and process information. They may find it hard to maintain focus, get easily distracted, or feel their mind keeps wandering when they try to study. At times, the mind may suddenly go “blank” during study or in the exam hall, even for topics they revised recently. Forgetfulness becomes common, especially for material learnt just a short while earlier.

Alongside this, students may experience persistent negative thoughts such as “I will definitely fail” or “I am not capable”, which weaken confidence and motivation. These unhelpful thought patterns directly interfere with effective revision, clear thinking, and overall exam performance.

Behavioural Symptoms:

Behavioural symptoms of exam anxiety are often visible in a student’s daily actions and routines. Common signs include persistent procrastination, such as repeatedly saying “I’ll study tomorrow” and delaying work. Students may begin to avoid study sessions altogether or revise much less than planned. Many turn to increased screen time scrolling reels or social media for short-term escape, which further reduces productive study hours.

Anxiety can also lead to withdrawal from friends and family, with reduced social interaction. Eating habits may become irregular, with students either skipping meals or overeating junk food as a way to cope. These patterns show that anxiety is influencing behaviour in ways that can harm both wellbeing and academic performance.



Practical Strategies and Recommendations:

Throughout the webinar, Dr. Mohanty shared several practical strategies to help students convert stress into a constructive force rather than a hindrance.

Breathing Exercise and Mindfulness:

To help students settle into the session and introduce a simple coping tool, Dr Mohanty guided them through a brief two-minute breathing and mindfulness exercise. Students were first invited to gently close their eyes and bring their attention inward. They were then asked to focus on their breath slow, deep inhalations followed by equally slow exhalations, while noticing the natural rhythm of breathing. As they continued, students were encouraged to observe the sense of calm that arises in the body and mind, allowing scattered thoughts to settle and attention to return to the present moment.



She also recommended practising this exercise three to four times a day, particularly before and during exams, as a practical way to reduce anxiety, steady emotions, and enhance concentration and focus during study and in the examination hall.

Focusing on What You Can Control:

Dr Mohanty highlighted that managing exam anxiety begins with choosing where to place one's attention. She explained that students have two main options: they can either "attend to anxiety" or "attend to

studies”. When students dwell on anxious thoughts, such as fear of failure or “what if” scenarios, the anxiety intensifies, often resulting in panic, a blank mind, and uncomfortable physical symptoms.

In contrast, when they gently shift their focus back to studying and revision, the brain starts receiving clear signals of effort and progress. Over time, this reduces anxiety and builds confidence, because the mind feels more in control and prepared. Her core message to students was simple yet powerful: “Where we focus, that grows,” so it is important to consciously nurture helpful, study-orientated focus rather than feeding anxious thoughts.

Effective Use of Stress:

Dr. Mohanty encouraged students to view moderate stress not as an enemy but as a useful signal that it is time to organise themselves better and revise more effectively. Instead of panicking, students can treat this stress as a reminder to create a realistic timetable, prioritise key topics, and systematically revise what they have already learnt.

She emphasised that, close to the exam, the focus should shift from covering new chapters to consolidating existing knowledge through revision, practice papers, and quick reviews. She also shared that if someone tries to load the brain with large amounts of new information at the last minute confuses memory, increases anxiety, and prevents students from using their preparation optimally in the exam hall. By channelling stress into structured planning and revision, students can feel more in control and confident.

Regulating Mobile and Screen Use:

The speaker placed strong emphasis on limiting mobile and screen use in the weeks and days leading up to examinations. She advised students to effectively “lock away” their phones from the time when the exam period begins until all papers are completed so that their attention remains fully on studies rather than on constant notifications and distractions.



She further appealed to teachers and parents not to hand over mobile phones casually during this time and to clearly explain to students why this restriction is necessary for their benefit. In her view, continuous

scrolling on social media and watching reels severely disrupts concentration, breaks the flow of learning, and can undermine even strong preparation if not kept under control.

By reducing screen time, students can protect their focus, retain what they have studied, and approach exams with a calmer and more organised mind.

Healthy Routine: Sleep, Food and Study Habits:

The Resource Person also stressed that a healthy daily routine is just as important as syllabus completion for doing well in exams.

- First, students must get adequate sleep every night, because sleep helps the brain consolidate what has been studied and keeps emotions more stable and manageable.
- Second, she advised following a consistent study timetable instead of last-minute cramming so that the brain can revise, retain, and recall information more effectively.
- Third, she highlighted the need for balanced, regular meals to prevent tiredness, weakness, and loss of concentration during study hours and in the examination hall.

Taken together, good sleep, structured study habits, and nutritious food create a strong foundation for mental well-being and cognitive performance, enabling students to stay focused, calm, and alert throughout the exam period.



Role of Parents and Teachers:

The Resource Person repeatedly emphasised that parents and teachers play a decisive role in either intensifying or easing exam pressure for students. She urged parents to set realistic expectations that match the child's current learning level and pace, instead of constantly comparing them with school

toppers or high-scoring peers. Recognising and appreciating genuine improvement; for instance, praising a child who has moved from 40% to 50% is crucial for building self-confidence and a sense of progress.

She also highlighted that schools and teachers should actively collaborate with parents through meetings and orientations to discuss practical measures such as limiting mobile phone use during exam periods, creating a quiet and supportive study environment at home, and using encouraging language. The focus, she stressed, should shift from purely mark-oriented pressure to emotional support, constructive feedback, and motivation so that students feel guided rather than judged.



Key Takeaways:

From the webinar, the following key messages emerge:

- **Stress is normal; anxiety is manageable:** A certain level of stress is natural and can sharpen performance. The challenge is not to remove stress entirely but to manage it so that it does not become distress or performance anxiety.
- **Exam pressure has many sources:** Parental and teacher expectations, peer comparison, fear of disappointing others, poor study routines, lack of sleep and high screen time all contribute to exam pressure. Recognising these helps in addressing them more effectively.
- **Anxiety manifests in multiple ways:** Physical (headache, fast heart rate), emotional (irritability, overthinking), cognitive (blank mind, negative thoughts) and behavioural (procrastination, increased screen time) symptoms are all signals that anxiety needs attention.
- **Focus, routine and support are the antidotes:** Simple practices like breathing exercises, regular revision of known material, strict control of mobile usage, healthy sleep and food, and supportive

communication from parents and teachers can significantly reduce exam anxiety and improve performance.



Conclusion

The 13th session of the Career Webinar Series, “Coping with Exam Pressure and Anxiety”, provided higher secondary students in Odisha with a clear, practical and empathetic roadmap to manage exam-related stress. Through Dr. Nibedita Mohanty’s explanations and exercises, students were encouraged to view stress not as an enemy but as a signal that can be channelled positively with the right strategies.

By integrating mental health insights with the broader career guidance framework of DHSE, UNICEF and Identity Foundation, the webinar strengthened the state’s approach to holistic student development, recognising that academic success and emotional well-being are deeply interconnected. This session sets a strong foundation for continued work on student mental health, resilience building, and supportive involvement of families and schools in the examination journey.

Queries from Ground:

Student’s Name	Queries	Response
Boys Govt. Higher Secondary School, Mahichala, Junagarh, Kalahandi	How to prepare for the exam one day before the exam?	Revise only key concepts and formulas, not entire chapters. Do two or three timed practice questions, then stop. Avoid mobile and social media. Eat light, stay hydrated, prepare your exam kit, and sleep 6–8 hours so your mind is calm and alert.
Siddharth Higher Secondary School, Binka, Sonapur	Why do I get a headache one day prior to the exam even though I’m well prepared? How to overcome this situation.	Even if you are well prepared, your brain still feels pressure about performing well, meeting expectations, and “what if I forget?” This stress tightens muscles, disturbs sleep, and triggers tension headaches. It is a common physical sign of anxiety, not a sign of weakness or poor preparation. To ease it, hydrate, eat light, avoid screens, revise only briefly, practise deep

		breathing, and sleep early so your brain can relax and recover.
Simran Samantaray	How to overcome overthinking?	Overthinking usually comes from anxiety and fear of failure, not from lack of ability. To reduce it, limit mobile use, set a fixed study plan, and focus only on one small task at a time. Practise deep breathing, write worries on paper, challenge “what if” thoughts, and take regular sleep and food breaks.

Attendance Details:

District Name	Schools Count	Class XI		Class XII		Faculty Count		Total Students Count
		Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Male	Female	
Angul	7	138	261	123	190	19	18	712
Balasore	7	67	225	53	151	22	24	496
Bargarh	3	77	132	92	112	12	5	413
Bhadrak	7	114	229	86	184	33	20	613
Bolangir	9	363	537	339	474	46	31	1713
Boudh	2	104	168	34	38	22	14	344
Cuttack	7	55	369	50	224	21	23	698
Deogarh	3	52	103	40	92	6	11	287
Dhenkanal	5	115	133	77	127	33	36	452
Gajapati	1	0	30	0	60	4	2	90
Ganjam	8	166	271	116	147	31	34	700
Jagatsinghpur	4	0	158	0	115	11	25	273
Jajpur	3	72	125	35	75	19	11	307
Kalahandi	5	142	175	146	165	19	8	628
Kandhamal	2	37	103	24	39	7	9	203
Kendrapara	4	64	117	61	94	13	11	336
Keonjhar	3	38	91	30	84	8	4	243
Khurda	6	105	186	78	131	20	44	500
Koraput	1	109	78	116	101	8	12	404
Malkangiri	2	42	101	36	58	57	74	237
Mayurbhanj	5	84	127	78	77	15	9	366
Nabarangpur	2	39	53	49	78	5	11	219
Nayagarh	2	21	70	37	61	3	12	189
Nuapada	3	110	123	73	70	6	18	376
Puri	2	92	102	150	144	24	12	488
Rayagada	1	32	21	34	45	3	1	132
Sambalpur	6	55	225	55	156	18	20	491
Sonepur	1	40	80	60	90	18	2	270
Sundargarh	8	103	112	73	109	12	25	397
Total		2,436	4,505	2,145	3,491	515	526	
Class-wise Total	119	6,941 (Class XI)		5,636 (Class XII)		1,041		12,577

Gender-wise Total		4,581 (Boys)	7,996 (Girls)		
Grand Total		12,577			

Photos from the Ground:



