EXAM CALM

A SUPPORT PACK FOR EXAM STRESS AND NERVES

(For Ages 10-18 and the Adults Who Support Them)

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They Are The Future

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Remember that exams are only one part of the picture – and you're more than your results.

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1 What's Going On With My Body?

You might feel it the night before the exam. Or the moment you sit down at the desk. Maybe it's in the pit of your stomach or buzzing in your chest.

Your hands might sweat. Your heart might thump. Your mind might suddenly go blank.



This is your body's stress response. It's not you being weak or silly. It's your brain doing its job – preparing you to face a challenge.

Long ago, that challenge might have been a wild animal. Today, it's an exam.

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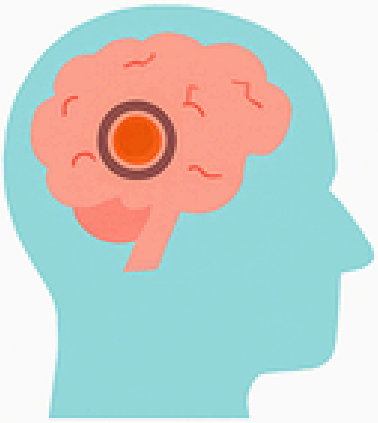
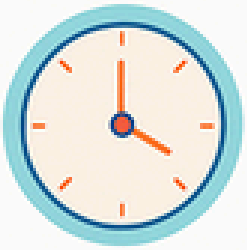
The Science Bit
(But Not Too Complicated)



At the centre of your brain is a tiny area called the **amygdala**. Its job is to scan for danger — and it's very quick.

The moment it senses something stressful (like a maths paper being handed out), it sends a message to the rest of your brain and body: **This could be a threat!**

Your brain releases stress chemicals, like:



Adrenaline, which speeds up your heart and breathing to get you ready for action.



- **Cortisol**, which keeps you alert — but too much can make you feel foggy or panicked.



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What About Thoughts?

Stress isn't just about what your body feels. It's also about what you're thinking.



Panicky thoughts like:

- *"I'm going to fail."*
- *"Everyone else is better than me."*
- *"I can't do this."*

These thoughts can trigger more stress chemicals, even if your body was starting to calm down.

If you don't catch them early, they can snowball. One worry leads to another. Suddenly your breathing speeds up, your stomach turns, and your brain freezes.

That's why we need techniques — like calm breathing and small mindset shifts — to slow those thoughts down gently. You'll learn some of these in the next few pages.

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Good News

Even though you can't stop the stress response completely, you can learn how to calm your body and your mind. That tells your brain: "This is safe. I've got this."



That's what this workbook is here to help you do.

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Try This:
"How Does Exam Stress Feel In My Body?"

Everyone experiences anxiety differently.
Let's get to know your signs.

- ☐ My heart beats fast
- ☐ My hands feel sweaty
- ☐ My stomach feels funny
- ☐ I feel dizzy or light-headed
- ☐ I can't focus
- ☐ I feel hot or shaky
- ☐ I get irritable or upset easily
- ☐ My mind goes blank
- ☐ I fidget or can't sit still
- ✎ Add your own: _____

_____

This isn't about fixing you. It's about understanding your body and mind better— so you can work with them, not against them.

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For Parents and Teachers: A Quick Note

Your child's exam stress isn't overdramatic or attention-seeking. It's a real biological response that starts in the amygdala — the brain's alarm system.

Their body floods with adrenaline and cortisol, preparing for "danger." At the same time, racing thoughts can make the stress spiral even faster.

This workbook helps your child recognise their signs of anxiety — physical and mental — and learn techniques to gently bring their nervous system back to bolance.

Your calm, non-judgemental presence makes all the difference.

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Section 2
Breathe Like a Balloon

When you're feeling anxious, your breathing often changes without you realising. You might take quick, shallow breaths You might even hold your breath completely.





The problem is, this sends a message to your brain: "Something's wrong!"



Then your brain sends more stress signals to your body. Your heart beats faster. Your stomach feels tight. You might start to feel dizzy or panicky.

But here's the good news: you can interrupt the cycle.

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Why Balloon Breathing Works

When you feel anxious, your body is in "fight or flight" mode. This is your brain's way of getting you ready to deal with something stressful — like an exam.

But your body doesn't know the difference between an exam and a real danger, like a car speeding towards you. It reacts the same way. Your heart beats faster. You breathe quickly. Your body gets tense.

Balloon breathing helps your body switch modes.

It tells your brain:



**"I'm safe.
You don't need to keep me on high alert."**



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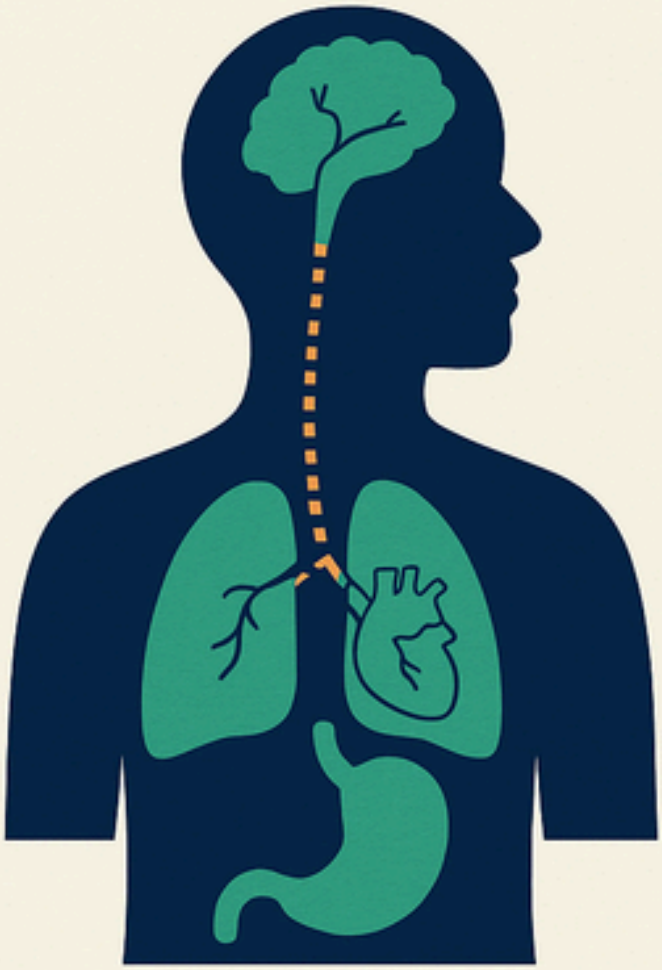
How?

There's a special nerve in your body called the vagus nerve. It connects your brain to your heart, lungs, and stomach.



When you take slow, deep breaths – especially into your belly – this nerve gets gently activated. And when the **vagus nerve is calm,** you start to feel calm too.

- Your heart rate slows down.
- Your body softens
- Your mind clears just a little

And here's the best part:

You don't have to do it perfectly.

Even three or four slow breaths can help your brain start to settle.

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How to Do Balloon Breathing

Here's how to try it. You can do it sitting, standing, or lying down. Eyes open or closed – whatever feels right for you.



1. Put your hands on your belly.
   This helps you feel the movement of your breath.

2. Imagine there's a balloon inside your tummy.
   When you breathe in through your nose, the balloon slowly fills up.
   When you breathe out through your mouth, the balloon gently deflates.

3. Breathe in slowly for 4 seconds.
   Feel your belly rise as the balloon fills.

4. Breathe out slowly for 6 seconds.
   Feel the balloon shrink back down.

5. Repeat 3-5 times.
   Let your shoulders drop. Relax your jaw.
   Go at your own pace.

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Try This:
Breathe and Reflect

Before you start balloon breathing,
rate your stress level out of 10:



Before I started balloon breathing,
I felt:

Circle a number.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 9 10

Now take 5 slow balloon breaths.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 9 10

Where did you notice the change in your body or mind?

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FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS



This simple breathing technique can be practised any time, not just during anxiety spikes. In fact, it works even better when used regularly — before school, in the car, or as part of a calming evening routine.

Children and teens may need modelling prompts, or reminders at first. Try using your own breathing to guide theirs, rather than telling them to "*calm down*."

"I'm here with you. We can get through this together."

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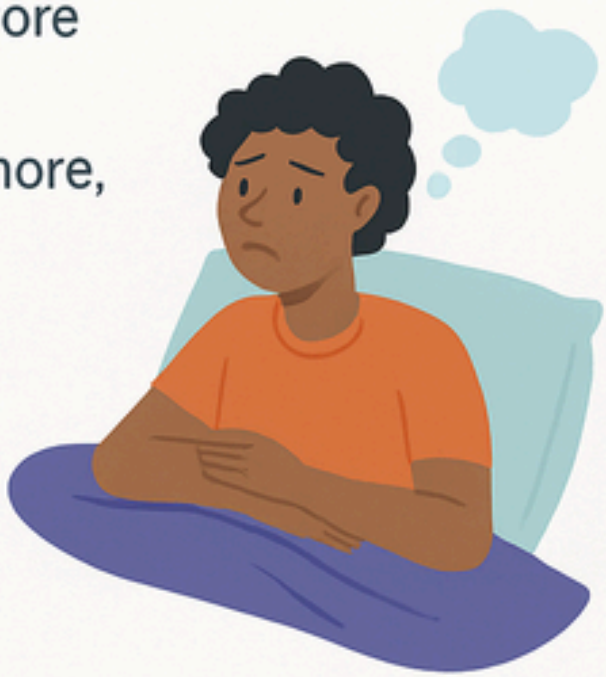
SECTION 3

Sleep the Night Before (But What If You Don't?)

Getting enough sleep before an exam helps your brain think clearly, remember more, and stay calm.



But let's be honest. When you're worried about the next day, sleep doesn't always come easily.

- ✔ What if I mess up?
- ✔ What if I forget everything?
- ✔ What if I can't sleep and I'm tired for the exam?

It's a frustrating cycle. You feel stressed... which stops you sleeping... which makes you more stressed.

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Why Sleep Helps With Anxiety



Sleep isn't just rest, it's your brain's way of filing, clearing and repairing.

- Your brain stores new memories
- Your emotions settle
- Your body calms its stress response

One of the best ways to reduce anxiety is to improve your sleep routine, especially in the days leading up to an exam.

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Three Things That Help You Sleep Better

1. Stick to roughly the same wake-up time every day.

Even at weekends. This helps your brain's internal clock stay steady.



2. Get natural light in the morning.

Open your curtains as soon as you wake up. Go outside if you can.

3. Have a calm-down routine before bed.

This tells your brain: "It's time to switch off now."

That might mean; low lighting, no screens, reading, warm shower, quiet music, or balloon breathing.

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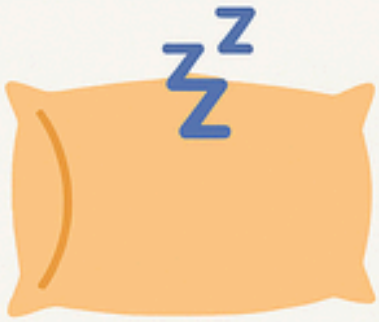
What If I Can't Sleep the Night Before?



It happens. And it doesn't mean your exam will go badly.

Here's the truth: your body is amazing at coping short-term. Even if your sleep is poor the night before, you'll likely have enough adrenaline to keep going through the exam.

The worst part of a bad night is often the worry about not sleeping — not the lack of sleep itself.

So if you're lying in bed wide awake:

- Don't keep checking the time
- Try balloon breathing:
- Gently remind yourself:



> "I might be tired, but I'll manage. This doesn't have to ruin everything."

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Try This: Your Wind-Down Plan

Here are some habits that can help sleep:

- ✓ Getting up at the same time each day
- ✓ Seeing natural light in the morning
- ✓ Having a calm wind-down routine
- ✓ Limiting screens 1 hour (minimum) before bed
- ✓ Using balloon breathing
- ✓ Keeping your room cool, quiet and dark

And some habits that can get in your way.

- ✗ Scrolling on your phone or gaming late at night
- ✗ Sleeping in too long on weekends
- ✗ Doing intense schoolwork right before bed
- ✗ Having caffeine in the afternoon or evening (even hot chocolate, but coffee, cola drinks and energy drinks are worse)

My Calm-Down Plan (Night Before an Exam):

What time will I start winding down? _____

What helps me switch off? _____

What will I avoid? _____

_____

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FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS

This section draws from well-established sleep science and child development research. Support youngsters by:

- Encouraging natural light and same-time wake-ups
- Helping them stop screen use in the hour before bed
- Avoiding conversations about the exam too close to bedtime
- Focusing on routine, not perfection



If they sleep badly the night before, avoid saying **"You'll be exhausted."** Instead, reassure them:

You might be tired, but your body will get through today. One rough night won't ruin everything.

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Section 4

Calm Morning, Calmer Brain



Your morning sets the tone for your whole day.

If the morning feels rushed, chaotic or stressful, your body carries that feeling right into the exam room.

But if you give yourself a calm, steady start, your brain is much more likely to feel focused and settled.

That doesn't mean everything has to go perfectly. It just means giving yourself *space* to feel steady before the test begins.

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Why Your Morning Routine Matters



In the morning, your brain is waking up and starting to decide:

"Are we safe today?"
"Should I be alert? Should I panic?

If you give your brain a few calming signals — enough time, gentle movement, a decent breakfast — it can settle much more quickly.

If everything is last-minute or intense, your brain stays in fight-or-flight mode. That makes thinking clearly much harder.

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Three Small Habits That Make a Big Difference



1. Wake up a little earlier.

Even 15 extra minutes can reduce the rush and help your nervous system feel calmer.

2. Eat something that gives your brain energy



Try to eat breakfast with some protein (like overnight oats with added seeds, or peanut butter on toast). It helps keep your blood sugar steady, which helps your mood and focus stay steady too.



3. Do something calming, even for 2 minutes

That might be balloon breathing, listening to music, or doing something slow and familiar (like taking your time brushing your teeth or petting your dog).

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Try This:
My Calm Morning Plan

This doesn't have to be fancy. Just choose 2–3 calming things you want to include before the exam – and try to leave enough time to do them without rushing. You can tick them off when you're done.



What time will I wake up? _____

- ☐ I will get up as soon as I wake
- ☐ I will open the curtains for natural light
- ☐ I will eat something with protein
- ☐ I will pack my bag calmly the night before
- ☐ I will do balloon breathing for 1-2 minutes
- ☐ I will take my time getting ready
- ☐ I will listen to calming music / stay off my phone
- ☐ I will say something kind to myself



Other ideas: _____

_____

_____

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For Parents and Teachers

Mornings are often when anxiety shows up most strongly, especially if there's been poor sleep the night before. Your calm presence can make a big difference here.

Help your child by:

- Avoiding rushing or time pressure
- Making decisions the night before (clothes, bag packed, transport)
- Modelling steadiness. Even if they're snappy or flustered, try to speak gently and avoid criticism

A great thing to say is:



"You've done what you can. I'm proud of you."

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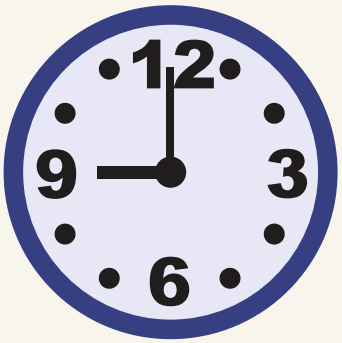
Section 5

JUST BEFORE AND DURING THE EXAM



STAYING STEADY WHEN IT COUNTS





The moment before the exam starts can be the hardest.

You're standing in the corridor, sitting in the hall, waiting.

Your heart's racing. You feel sick or shaky. Your thoughts might be spiralling.

This is when anxiety loves to sneak in and take over.

But there are things you can do — even in those short, high-pressure moments — to bring yourself back down and stop the panic from building.

You don't need to feel amazing. You just need to feel steady enough to begin.

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In the Moments Before the Exam

Try one or more of these strategies to keep anxiety from taking over:



- Balloon breathing (quietly, even just one or two breaths)
- Tense and release your hands under the table
- Repeat a quiet phrase in your mind, like:

  "One step at a time."

  "Start with the first thing I do know."

- Focus on your senses:

  Name five things you can see, or notice how your feet feel on the floor



If your thoughts say "I *can't do this*," gently answer back:

"Let's just begin. One question at a time."

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If You're in the Exam and Panic Hits



You might suddenly feel your mind go blank. Or notice that your heart is racing or your hands are shaking. These are classic signs of a mini panic response.

1. **Pause for 10 seconds.**
   Put your pen down. Place your hand on your tummy if you can.

2. **Take one balloon breath.**
   Breathe in slowly... then out... just once.

3. **Look at the question again.**
   Read it like it's the first time.

4. **Start anywhere.**
   You don't have to answer the questions in order. If you feel stuck, move to one you feel more confident with.

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Try This: What I'll Do If I Panic

It helps to have a plan. Even a short one.

If I start to panic before the exam…

(e.g. take 3 balloon breaths, look at my feet, stretch my hands)



If panic during the exam…

(e.g. pause for 10 seconds, reread the question, move to an easier one)

I want to remind myself…

(e.g. *"I've done my best to prepare"*, *"I can only do one thing at a time"*)

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For Parents and Teachers

These strategies help children stay steady by using small, physical actions to calm the nervous system.
This is much more effective than trying to control thoughts through logic alone.





It can be helpful to practise the techniques in advance so they become familiar.

Let children know that it's okay to feel anxious. What matters is that they have tools to stop anxiety from running the show. Even if they use just one technique in the exam room, **that's a win**.

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SECTION 6

One Exam, Not the Whole Story

It can feel like this exam is the biggest thing in the world.

Like everything depends on it.

But here's the truth: no exam can measure who you are, or what you're capable of in the long run.

Some people get the results they want, first time. Others take longer. Some take a different route entirely.

Everyone is on their own path.

You still have options.

You still have time.

You still matter.

It will be okay.

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Real Talk:
The Road Isn't Always Straight

Lots of successful people didn't get straight A's.

Lots of people take unexpected turns—different subjects, different colleges, different career paths–and still find the right fit.

Sometimes exams feel huge because you care. That's a good thing. But it doesn't mean one day, or one score, gets to decide your future.

There's more than one way forward.

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Try This:
Looking Beyond the Exam



Think about life after this test. Not just results — but what you care about.

What you're excited about. What kind of life you want to build.

What do I want life to feel like after exams?

.....

.....

What do I enjoy learning or doing, even outside school?

.....

.....

What's one thing I'm proud of, that has nothing to do with exams?

.....

If this exam doesn't go how I hope, I want to remember...

.....

.....

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You are not your grades. You're not this exam.

You're a whole person — and there's more than one way to succeed.

Good luck! You've got this!

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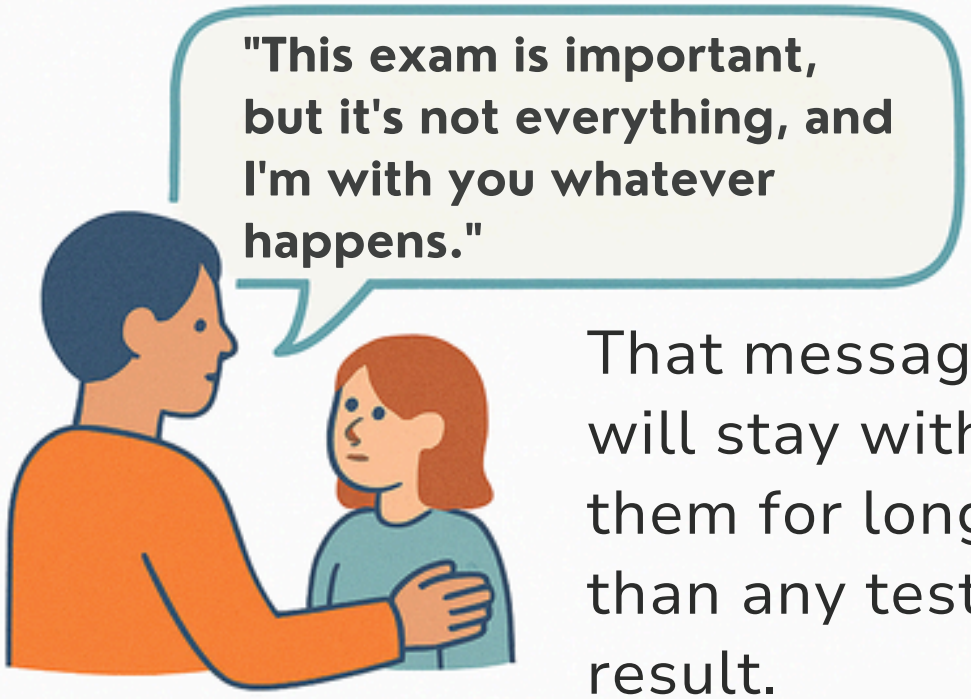
For Parents and Teachers

It's natural to want to ease our children's anxiety. To tell them *"You'll be fine"* or "Try not to worry."

But when a child or teen feels under pressure, it's more powerful to acknowledge their feelings and widen the lens.

You don't need to say exams don't matter. Instead, help them see the bigger picture.

Let them hear from you:



That message will stay with them for longer than any test result.

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They Are The Future is a website run by me, clinical child psychologist Dr Lucy Russell, and my fantastic team of mental health professionals.

We help families with 5-17 year-olds to have the best possible wellbeing and mental health.



Have a look at our support articles, courses and other resources at TheyAreTheFuture.Co.Uk!

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