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psychiatry in history

'A Week Before Examination' by Lucretia Maria Davidson (1808–1825)

Oyedeji Ayonrinde

The poem, written nearly 200 years ago by a New York teenager, has lost none of its currency today. 'Exam stress', fear of failure, burden of expectation and exam-related somatic and emotional complaints are also features of modern education. Lucretia's distress was genuine: 'Oh, how I dread it! But there is no retreat [. . .] We must study morning, noon and night. I shall rise between two and four now every morning, till the dreaded day is past . . . '. To relieve her 'examination fever', her doctor carried out bloodletting and induced vomiting. This sort of treatment, at least, is a thing of the past.

One has a headache, one a cold,
One has her neck in flannel rolled;
Ask the complaint, and you are told
'Next week's examination.'

One frets and scolds, and laughs and cries,
Another hopes, despairs, and sighs;
Ask but the cause, and each replies,
'Next week's examination.'

One bans her books, then grasps them tight,
And studies morning, noon, and night,
As though she took some strange delight
'In these examinations.'

The books are marked, defaced, and thumbed,
The brains with midnight tasks benumbed,
Still all in that account is summed,
'Next week's examination.'

From *Poems* by Lucretia Maria Davidson (edited by Oliver Davidson, 1871).