

**GOOD ON PAPER:
UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT STRESS &
ANXIETY**

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TONIGHT'S TOPICS

- Understanding anxiety and stress, and the risks and benefits of each
- Signs of anxiety and stress in teenagers
- Anxiety particular to high-performing schools
- What gets lost when the focus is on achievement
- How parents can step in, in a healthy and helpful way...and how to step back
- Some resources

STRESS V. ANXIETY: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

STRESS

- Feeling of emotional or mental strain or tension
- Usually a response to an external stressor
- Usually diminishes after stressor resolves
- Can be healthy if enough resources to manage it
- Chronic stress can result when basic life circumstances are persistently difficult

ANXIETY

- Feeling of fear, dread, or panic, often about a nonthreatening situation
- Persists after stressor is resolved
- Also can be healthy to a degree
- Often an inexplicable fear or preoccupation that does not respond to or diminish after logical explanations

HEALTHY VS UNHEALTHY STRESS

- Some level of stress allows us to be able to take on new challenges and push past the familiar
- Stress inoculation: gradual exposure to stress allows resources, resilience, and adaptive measures to build at the same time
- Like lifting weights
- Stress becomes unhealthy when it surpasses the threshold of coping skills
- Individualized- depends on the nature of the problems and the person's internal and external resources
- Unhealthy when it interferes with well-being, and when there is limited recovery time

HEALTHY VS UNHEALTHY ANXIETY

- Anxiety can act as an internal radar that something is awry
- Can be helpful in helping to course correct
- Helps us pay attention to our choices
- Vital to learn “why is my alarm going off, and how can I help it to turn down?”
- When we are unable to distinguish between real and perceived threat, OR when the “threat” does not diminish, we become unable to regulate and turn off the alarm
- Can lead to an overdrive or underdrive
- Impairs other areas of daily life
- Often anxiety about having anxiety or stress can present, which diminishes the ability to see it as a sometimes helpful/manageable thing

SIGNS OF STRESS & ANXIETY IN TEENS

- Moodiness, irritability, tearfulness
- Feeling “sick” (headaches, stomach issues, fatigue)
- Repetitive intrusive thoughts, perseverating on the same topics, questions, “what ifs”
- Inability to see the larger picture or get perspective
- Procrastination, perceived low motivation
- Black-or-white, rigid thinking
- Feeling nervous, on edge, dread
- Racing heart, sweating, panic attacks
- Unfounded or unrealistic fears
- Sleep or appetite disturbance
- Obsessive thoughts and/or compulsive behaviors
- Disconnection from or conflict with friends
- Perceived loss of interest in formerly enjoyable activities
- Problematic when occurring more often than not, and impairs functioning in areas of life (academic, social, parental, physical, etc)
- Incredibly common and not a sign of weakness.

THE NEW “BRAND” OF ANXIETY

- Emerging research is finding that students in “high-achieving schools” — public and private schools with high standardized test scores, varied extracurricular and academic offerings, and graduates who head off to top colleges — are experiencing higher rates of behavioral and mental health problems compared with national norms.
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine added youths in “high achieving schools” to their list of “at-risk” groups, along with kids living in poverty and foster care, recent immigrants and those with incarcerated parents.

THE NEW “BRAND” OF ANXIETY

- More students going to college plus lower rates of acceptance, even at former “safety schools,” drive high schools to create more and more difficult curricula, push Honors and AP classes to younger grades, and influence competition between peers.
- Parents are worried that their kids won’t be “successful” or be accepted to “good schools,” and so they fall into the trap of emphasizing grades, achievements, resumes over what truly drives their children.
- As a result, adolescents have very little downtime, sleep is impaired, and there is little opportunity to allow “stress inoculation” and let nervous system recalibrate.
- More insidiously, an identity built entirely on external achievements is not sustainable or ideal.

WHAT GETS LOST

- Exploring facets of their “true selves” (identities, values, priorities, morals, relationships, strengths, personality traits, and skills).
- Failure, fumbling, adversity, and, by extension, problem-solving, resilience
- Rest,, recovery, play, sleep, cultivating true interests, connecting with friends and family, learning life skills.

NOT A SUSTAINABLE MODEL

- Many teens report feelings of emptiness, what's the point, is it worth it?
- There is an inability to cope when things don't turn out or when they experience rejection. If their entire identity is based on an external achievement, and it is not achieved, what does it say about them? (I failed, therefore I am a failure versus I didn't get the outcome I hoped for, so I will have to reroute).
- A hyperfocus on achievement, trajectory, and end result/output leads to creation of a "false self" which is incredibly damaging to their emotional and psychological development and wellbeing.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

- Acknowledge and validate the level of strain your child is under.
- Allow that your values and priorities may not be theirs, and their strengths and primary personality traits may differ from yours. This is normal and healthy. Trust that you have equipped them with a solid foundation, and let them explore their identities.
- Help them to be strategic about where they put their energy, and how they recover. They will not care equally about all things, and may get more value out of putting more focus in one area than another. Good enough, versus perfect.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

- Emphasize internal strengths and qualities just as much, if not more than external achievements.
- Allow them to fumble, fail, and solve appropriate problems on their own.
- Look within- are you modeling rest and play and development of other parts of your identity, or has this been sacrificed to parenting them?
- Encourage them to befriend and learn from their anxiety- get curious about what it could be telling them.
- Expand how you identify success. Is it always college and career-based? Are there other ways this could look?

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

- Leaning in versus stepping back: lean into authentic connection and presence, step back from achievement pressure, tunnel vision, and solving problems for them.
- Set boundaries, structure and consequences- it is okay to mandate family time, it is okay to take away screens and devices, and it is okay to expect that they give back to the household in some way.
- Be really present. No phones and an active interest in HOW they are moving through life, not just WHERE they are going.
- Prioritize rest and recovery time, and encourage them to do one thing at a time.

FINAL THOUGHTS: WHAT IS THE END GAME?

- As parents, we want our children to “succeed,” but by whose measure of success? Is your child living by their values or yours?
- Remember that creativity, innovation, abstract thinking, and problem-solving are highly valued in today’s work force.
- While college can often (but not always) be a path to a career, financial success and stability, prominence, are those things necessarily a path to internal stability and happiness?
- It is necessary to emphasize the path, not the end point- because is there really an end point?
- Understanding of a “true self” is necessary for growth, development, personal satisfaction, and overall wellbeing.
- Every child has a superpower.

QUESTIONS?

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