



## Student Stress and Anxiety: Is the American Educational System at Fault?

by John T. Brentar, Ph.D., Executive Director

Recently, a number of stories have appeared in the local and national media about the alarming rise of anxiety in American teenagers. Every year the **National College Health Association** conducts a research survey that collects data about students' health habits and behaviors. Between the years 2011 to 2016, the results of their surveys revealed a significant increase (from 50% in 2011 to 62% in 2016) in the number of college undergraduates who experienced "overwhelming anxiety" during the



previous year. Another survey of incoming freshman at **UCLA** found that in 2016, 41% of the students responding "felt overwhelmed by all [they] had to do," as compared to 18% in 1985.

A similar trend is found among teens. A study done at **Yale University** found that 25% of teens between the ages of 13 and 17 met the criteria for an anxiety disorder as compared to 7% of Australian teens in this same age range.

Another study funded by the **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation** found that 40% of parents report that their high schooler is experiencing significant levels of stress. Similarly, a survey by the **American Psychological Association** found that 45% of the teens they surveyed felt stressed by school pressures. The *Chicago Tribune* reported earlier this year that at one high-achieving suburban Chicago high school, the number of students participating in individual or group counseling rose from 35% in 2010 to 75% in 2017.

### Unprecedented Pressures

Many experts have speculated that the American high school system is flawed and is the cause of the increasing mental health challenges in today's students. Indeed, in my work with high schoolers, it's not unusual to hear consistent complaints of juggling a heavy homework load, multiple extracurricular activities, and lack of sleep at the expense of their social life. Routinely, students tell me that they work well past their desired bedtime and often do not have time for unstructured socialization on the weekends. The pressure to perform is significant; at high-achieving high schools, students frequently report considerable pressure to perform at a high level with respect to

grades, taking multiple advanced placement classes, and college admission because these are the factors that define success.

For many students, admission to an Ivy league college defines success. At some high schools, students post their rejection letters on "walls of shame."

### Prestige vs. Practicality

These high expectations often create stigmas with less desirable schools, such as vocational schools or community colleges. However, there are many exemplary alternative colleges designed for students with specific career trajectories. These include the **American College of the Building Arts** in Charleston, SC where the curriculum focuses on carpentry, stone work, iron work, masonry, and plasterwork; the **Pittsburgh Institute of Aeronautics**, which focuses on aviation maintenance and aviation electronics; and the **Los Angeles County College of Nursing and Allied Health**, which focuses on nursing careers.

Some community college have established innovative joint programs with local companies. For example, apprentices at the **Siemens** plant in Charlotte, NC simultaneously attend **Central Piedmont Community College** (paid by Siemens) and split their time between the classroom and the Siemens factory that builds steam and natural gas-fired turbines for power plants around the world.

### Cries for Mercy

At Morrissey-Compton, we regularly work with students who learn differently due to learning disabilities, ADHD, mental health conditions, and related concerns. However, it is not unusual to see historically talented students reach high school and start to experience significant test anxiety. Students with anxiety can be accommodated with



additional time on exams if there is a clear diagnosis and they demonstrate functional limitations (i.e., a substantial impairment in learning), but we also see a cohort of bright students who do not have a diagnosable condition and may not be eligible for accommodations. Many times, students make the difficult decision to simplify their life by moving to a lower lane class or reducing the number of extracurriculars.

At **Naperville North High School** in the Chicago area, students presented a petition to the school's administrators requesting that they "**start defining success as any path that leads to a happy and healthy life. Start teaching [us] to make our own paths and start guiding us along the way.**" In response, some high schools have added less-academic classes such as wood working, furniture

design, and jewelry making to their curriculum in an attempt to foster broader interests. Often, these are the most popular classes at the schools.

It is well-established that anxiety in moderation can be helpful in motivating a student to work harder. Unfortunately, unrealistic expectations and rigid ideas of what defines success trigger students' anxiety. And it is important to note that stressed students are not isolated to high school; clinicians and educators are observing increased stress reactions extending down to middle and elementary school students. Academic-related stress has real consequences by fueling anxiety, depression, and physical ailments and reducing students' executive function and effectiveness.

### Sources of Stress

Blaming high schools for all their students' stress-related conditions is overly simplistic. All schools are committed to promoting the health and well-being of students, and some schools have responded by starting later in the morning or reducing homework load. Sometimes, attempts to reduce homework or add a free period are met with resistance from some parents.



Colleges also share the blame in promoting their admission process as highly competitive. For example, in 2017 **Harvard University** proudly announced that only 5.2% of applicant were accepted. In his book, *Are You Smart Enough? How Colleges' Obsession with Smartness Shortchanges Students*, **Dr. Alexander Astin** contends that high selectivity by colleges does not automatically equal receiving an excellent education; rather, it creates an image that the excellence of a college or university is based on who enrolls.

Other pressures are also at play in the upsurge of anxiety in high school students, who frequently report that both explicit and implicit family pressures contribute to high expectations. Explicit pressures include messages of high expectations by family members (e.g., being a legacy at a certain college) or teachers (e.g., comparing a student to an older academically successful sibling). Implicit pressures may be self-imposed standards to match parental or sibling success, or a strong desire to make one's parents proud.

There is additional evidence that **technology** contributes to students' stress in that they are never (or very rarely) disconnected, and thus constantly reminded of their peers' success through **Facebook**, **Instagram**, **Twitter**, and **Snapchat**, to name a few. An over-reliance on social media or video games has caused students to forget how to relax in the traditional sense (i.e., "just be in the moment").

Indeed, heavy video game use in teens has been associated with challenges in sustaining attention, managing emotions, suppressing impulses, following directions, tolerating frustration, accessing creativity, and executing tasks. Several studies have reported that heavy game users are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and social phobia compared to their peers who play less. This does not mean that all technology use is bad; most experts believe that technology should be used in moderation and as only one part of a well-rounded lifestyle.

## **A Strategic Approach**

What can parents do to help moderate students' stress levels? **It is important for students to develop good coping strategies through a variety of techniques including positive self-talk, physical exercise, saving time for recreation or relaxation, and humor. As the growth mindset research suggests, students also need to reframe mistakes as opportunities to learn rather than failures.**

**Dr. Lynn Margolies**, a psychologist in Newton, MA suggests that parents should not repeat advice their teen has already heard; rather, reframe the advice as "Let's talk to figure out how to make things easier." Further, she recommends that parents should maintain a low emotional intensity during stressful periods and avoid threats and escalation. Time conversations with your teen strategically, and avoid discussions when the teen is angry. Dr. Margolies encourages parents to avoid jumping to conclusions by attributing their teens' challenges to low motivation or lack of effort. Parents should also eschew performance-driven parenting, and instead focus on variables such as effort, taking responsibility, and emotional well-being.