Student Anxiety: An Ounce of Prevention (Extended Resource)

Recently, I had the pleasure of visiting with a principal from a small town in Wisconsin, not far from where I grew up. During our wide-ranging conversation, he shared about the high levels of anxiety his high school students are exhibiting. You'd have to see their tranquil location to fully appreciate just how out of character this is. But, then again, research is abounding that today's students, whether in college or high school, are showing unprecedented levels of anxiety. Something, lots of things, must be done and done quickly.

Let's be honest. This is a direct consequence of how our children are being trained, and it's up to us as parents, educators, youth leaders, and other caring adults to accept responsibility and reverse this course. Their very futures and socio-emotional health are at stake.

Parents, here are nine key trouble spots that are aggravating teen anxiety where we should take ownership (and educators, you'll find five tips at the end for you):

1. ***Parenting style.*** In our desire to see our children succeed and be happy, we often adopt parenting methods that run counter to our objectives. Among the most common are performance parenting and helicoptering. Performance-driven parents are so focused on their children's achievements that their kids feel undervalued for WHO they are. These children are under intense pressure to perform, in part because of demanding parents who place their own identity in the hands of their children and who often succumb to their own peer pressure—from other parents! In contrast, helicoptering creates insecurity when parents interfere, control, overprotect, and coddle, stunting their children's ability to make decisions, cope, and mature. Both styles add to the already-high stress levels during the teen years. Is your parenting style unintentionally creating anxiety? It's worth a look. #equipnotcontrol

2. ***Frenetic pace.*** Sometimes our lives are so busy that it seems we're on a treadmill set at warp speed. Parents, *we* are putting our children on *that* treadmill, and it's depriving them of balance and the time they need to enjoy nature, reflect, chill, pray, play, nap, read a book, or just hang out without the overhang of homework and endless activities. For introverts, and kids who operate at a slower pace, this is draining or worse. How is your pace? Are you consciously building margin into their schedules to maintain balance and keep their tanks full? You'd better be. #breathe

3. ***Resume building obsession/perfectionist tendencies.*** Lexus's tagline is the "relentless pursuit of perfection" and how well this describes many teens today! Whether the pressure is coming from parents or schools or is self-inflicted, teens are stressing out over their *assumed* need for the perfect resume to succeed and access their dream college. An urgent priority is to disabuse them of this notion. Nowadays, pressure previously felt in the adult

years are robbing many teens of a childhood. Whether it's all AP courses, GPA fixation, or participation (better yet, leadership) in clubs or organizations, resume building now dominates the high school years. Encouraging them to do their best and valuing their person will pay longer-lasting dividends. What "success messages" are you sending? #noperfectionrequired

4. ***Deficient self-awareness and self-care.*** Compared with yesteryear, today's teens face greater pressures and a more competitive world. For example, with "college for all" messaging and growing pressures to know what careers they should pursue or which college to attend, high schoolers are naturally anxious. At a time when students are still discovering WHO they are, this is placing the cart before the horse. Parents can do their teens a great service by promoting *self-awareness* of their children's skills, talents, interests, nature, and passions. This also includes helping their teen understand, prevent, and manage their stressors. Related, parents can support the self care of their children by fostering healthy living (e.g., diet, physical activity, and adequate rest) and demonstrating unconditional love. How well do your children know themselves and their stressors? These are vitally important conversations. #knowthyself

5. ***Lacking affirmation of worth and value.*** If there is one generality we observe in today's teens and young adults, it's that they feel undervalued for WHO they are. When parents don't take the time to affirm their children's uniqueness and value or share their belief in them and their future, kids become dispirited, disillusioned, insecure, and anxious. And, who can blame them? Parents, we need to step up our game in this department. Call out what you appreciate and admire about them on a regular basis... *especially* their character traits. Tell them how much they matter. It'll add security and a spring to their step. #valuethewho

6. ***Social drama and unhealthy relationships.*** Although the anxiety-laden social lives of teens probably date back to the days of Fred Flintstone, the advent of social media takes it to an entirely new level. Much has been written on the subject, so we simply want to emphasize a few things. One is for your teen to be self aware of the impact social media has on his/her life in terms of stressors, privacy, and relationships. Two is for them to be highly selective in making friends with people who share their interests and values. Three is for them to avoid social drama and gossip like the plague. Four is for them to only surround themselves with positive influences. Finally, if they're experiencing pain or anxiety from a breakup or no invitation to/acceptance for Prom, reassure them that only **2%** of marriages originate from being high school sweethearts! Now, that's perspective! #choosewisely

7. ***Too much tech, too little relational engagement.*** With the addictive nature of our smartphones and screens, teens, parents, and entire families are losing something besides their attention spans: relational intimacy and

engagement. Initially, it affected teens most, but increasingly it has become an issue for parents as well. Parents, this is where tough love and good modeling will pay dividends. Value face-to-face time over tech time and be sure your teens don't take their phones to bed at night! #facetofaceisbest

8. ***Family dysfunction and inadequate support systems.*** From a child's standpoint, one of the greatest sources of emotional stability and security is being part of a loving, well-functioning family. However, one of the greatest societal changes over the last several decades has been a deterioration in this system. Today, just 69% of children are living in two-parent families, due in large part, to births from unmarried parents and to divorce. While every situation is unique and many, many healthy children grow up in loving, single-parent families, we parents must understand the impact our family situation is having on our children, and take steps to ensure that they have other caring men and women actively involved in their lives. We owe it to them. #caringadults

9. ***Insufficient preparation for independence.*** We have a systemic problem in that parents and educators often assume *the other* is building the leadership and life skills students need to succeed. So, predictably, many important skills are falling through the cracks. In addition to practical skills like cooking and budgeting, important "soft skills" like dependability, work ethic, resilience, decision-making, and integrity are often deemphasized in favor of traditional subjects. This, along with parenting styles like helicoptering, is creating a lack of preparedness in handling the responsibilities and stresses of adulthood. Parents, we must take the leadership role and not assume "they're learning it in school." Often, they're not. #adulting

   And, for school leaders:

10. ***Promote a positive and empowering school culture. The school*** environment plays a major role in the health and well being of students. How would you describe your school's brand and core values? What three words best describe the character and learning environment for your students? If your school hasn't adopted a set of values that administrators, teachers, and students abide by, consider this an urgent priority. Qualities like kindness, compassion, and integrity are foremost on our minds at LifeSmart, and we always encourage schools to take what we call, "the Integrity Challenge." (This is where students are empowered to only say neutral to positive things about others who are not present.) Another suggestion is to have each class create a brand and core values statement and commit to holding each other accountable. Let's do this! #positiveculture

11. ***Expand leadership/life skills offerings.*** Evidence is pervasive that high school graduates are not adequately prepared for their next steps. Arguably, one reason is that schools are so focused on their immediate step that

insufficient time is devoted to the transition to the next (e.g., high school to college/workforce). We urge administrators to expand leadership and life skills-oriented courses that holistically prepare students for independent living and their next stage. These would include leadership, soft skills, college/career readiness, personal finance, and home management. Such courses build essential skills, instill self-confidence, and help students cope with the pressures of their present and future situations. The better prepared they are, the less anxious they will be. #lifesmart

12. *End the "college for all" messaging.* Based on deteriorating college graduation trends and high student demand for mental health services in college, it is clear that many are not college ready and would be better off pursuing other paths. Whether overt or subliminal, messages promoting the college path are commonplace. How does this affect anxiety? Droves of unprepared and dispirited students drop out of college and into uncertainty. Others struggle mightily in college when another path (e.g., trade school, workforce) was a more compatible choice. Still other high schoolers feel inadequate if they don't pursue the broadly recommended college path. How is your messaging? #whateverisbest

13. *Review homework levels.* Given how early students rise before school and require above-average levels of sleep, homework should be reasonable. Yet, we've often heard of schools assigning up to four hours of homework on weeknights, creating a workday that is more demanding than their parents! This, together with a lack of coordination among teachers in terms of exams and major projects, is an obvious source of student anxiety. How reasonable is their workload? #theyneedalife

14. *Career selection pressure.* Many high schools are ramping up their career readiness programs, and we applaud that. However, some are taking this to a degree that students are feeling pressure to *know* what career (and potentially, college major) they should be pursuing. We think that's taking things too far. In the high school years, students are still discovering themselves and aren't in a position to weigh all the career alternatives, fully assess their skills and interests, possess all the necessary knowledge to make an informed judgment, and speak with/job shadow practitioners in those fields. We strongly support efforts to build career *awareness*, but when students feel pressure (as many do!) to know exactly which field they should enter, that's an overreach. And, remember, many college students change their majors multiple times, and a large measure of college graduates regret the major they chose! Focus on the *process*, but not the *selection* in the high school years. Finally, let's not push STEM as their only ticket to success. It's not.

Whether you're a parent, educator, or other interested party, we hope you found value it this resource focused on preventing and reducing student anxiety. We all

have a stake in improving these trends, and we wish you the best in your efforts with the adolescents under your guidance.