



Brookline PARENT EDUCATION NETWORK

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PARENT UPDATE

SPECIAL ISSUE ON

Managing Junior Year Stress – For You and Your Teen

By junior year, the pressure of SAT prep and college visits on top of regular schoolwork and social stress can really start to take a toll on students. At BHS, juniors often confess they feel overworked and overwhelmed. Those not considering college or aiming for a gap year also are bound to experience increased anxiety as they contemplate life after graduation. Financial concerns may be weighing on kids' minds as well. All this pressure can take a toll on teens as well as their families. How can parents help?

ASSESSING THE SITUATION

BHS Prevention/Intervention Team social worker Mary Minott says, "It's really important to understand what students are experiencing in their junior and senior years, when according to recent student health surveys, stress levels ramp up considerably. In recent years, more than three-quarters of BHS students said they experienced overwhelming stress and anxiety over the past year, a sobering figure that peaks in junior year. Because "it takes a village to raise a child, school, parents and students all have a role in addressing teen stress. Some of the ways BHS is addressing student stress include the freshman health curriculum, which teaches awareness of mental health concerns and stress reduction strategies, giving student a solid base of information and resources. Additional initiatives include ongoing discussions of homework issues and student stress by faculty and student groups, as well as mindfulness training to staff and mindfulness practices during advisories.

As parents, there are things we can do to help reduce our kids' inevitable stress as well:

- We need to understand that stress is a physiological response in our body -- the flight, fight or freeze mechanism that releases adrenaline. While optimal levels of stress help us function, too much stress overwhelms our system.
- Student stress will not go away, but we can try to monitor it and teach them to monitor it. Try finding a way together to gauge their stress level, perhaps a simple exercise like tuning in to your body doing a relaxation "body scan." A stress scale (1-10) can be an easy way to communicate levels of stress.
- Be aware of how we respond to our children's stress and behaviors, being careful not to overreact and feed into the agitation, but rather finding ways to respond that bring down the emotional temperature in the house. Be a good role model.
- We need to examine our own lives, our sources of stress. Are we overstretched as well? Are there ways to find more balance? (If we take on too much in our lives should we be surprised when our children want to take that extra AP class or juggle three sports, or a play?)
- Examine what is really important to us, our priorities and values – what basics will help our children develop into happy, independent, confident adults without getting caught up in the "more is better" culture?

PEER LEADERS SPEAK OUT

As parents, we can often tell when our children are stressed, but it is sometimes difficult for them to articulate to us how they are feeling, and they sometimes hesitate to share – either not wanting to concern us or not wanting us to bug them. Through letters they wrote to their parents, BHS Peer Leaders offered powerful insight into what kids are experiencing in junior year as they struggle with balancing school, college preparation, extracurricular activities, and family.

Some of their strongest points included:

- School is hard, long and very tiring. We often need time to chill before studying to be more productive, and we don't need constant reminders. We know ourselves better than you think.
- We constantly feel a time crunch, and when you ask about homework – how much, when will be do it, etc. – it stresses us out. We can get work done faster without nagging and asking questions. We have to do on our own.
- “Every day is a struggle to get out of bed. School has been killing me. Getting good grades is not something I'm good at. I'm trying to get my GPA high enough for community college. I'm not the person you hoped I'd be, and I have nothing to show for it but stress, so much that it makes me feel like disappearing. Let me be myself.”
- “I feel so much pressure to be perfect socially and academically. I feel pressured to spend all my time on school, SAT or college prep, it's hard to remember to relax. The competitive environment makes me feel I have to go to a prestigious school. I can't keep up.”
- “Please cut me some slack and not hassle me when I'm trying to get work done. I appreciate the college visits, but it stresses me out to think where I'll end up. I'm scared to not know what will happen.”
- College is not the right path for all of us, but we sometimes fear judgment from parents and peers. Give us the room to pursue our dreams.
- Every child is different, and communication is key Try to find effective ways to talk about things, and try to keep it casual, like going to get something to eat outside the house. But DON'T attempt heavy conversations in the car, where we can feel trapped.

Check out the Peer Leaders' list of “**Students' Top 10 Tips to Parents**” -- http://www.b-pen.org/uploads/2/9/2/9/2929884/seniors_tips_to_parents.pdf

EXPERT ADVICE – DR. STEPHANIE CORRADO

Dr. Stephanie Corrado, an internist and adolescent medicine physician practicing mind body medicine, offers some basics on the physiology of stress and the power of relaxation techniques:

Stress

- Some stress is normal, but the brain doesn't always know how to differentiate between appropriate survival stress (fight or flight, emergency, etc.) and the stress of having too many things on one's plate.
- Stress can impact the entire body.
- Techniques to counteract stress have promoted positive effects in children as well as adults, from higher GPA's to greater social cooperation and self-esteem and are especially effective when combined with other good habits: sleep, proper nutrition, exercise, healthy social support.

Relaxation Response

- Antithesis of stress response is relaxation response, and we can use this to regulate the body (lower blood pressure, etc.)
- Evoking the relaxation response just 10-20 minutes a day can reduce stress hormones, help you sleep better, promote elasticity of brain, strengthen immune response, etc.
- Even a simple two-step process can promote feelings of calm and control:
 - Focus on a word, sound phrase, prayer, image or physical activity
 - Maintain a passive attitude towards incoming thoughts

Breathing Exercises

One of the easiest ways to invoke a relaxation response is through breathing exercises. Even focusing

on and counting the breath for 10 intakes interrupts the cascade of emotion and allows us to be able to focus better.

- Inhale and exhale counting 10 breaths
- Inhale a word: “peace”; exhale “stress”
- Inhale a phrase: “ I feel calm” Exhale a phrase” not stressed”
- Use a mantra/ prayer that is familiar
- 1-2 minutes at a time
- Aim for 10-20 times a day
- Practice in stressful situations such as traffic, being late or waiting in line.

What Can Parents Do?

- Parents can have a big impact on their teens’ stress by helping modulate their perception of what they are experiencing – perspective is key.
- Practice “top down” positive thinking, training the brain to use less emotion, more reasoning, which is more effective in evaluating and executing a plan.
- Be present in the moment.
- Model stress reduction to introduce kids to the idea (like deep breathing before taking a test).

Breathing and being present promote appropriate evaluation of stressful situations. Clarity, focus, attention, and planning help regulate emotional responses and improve communication, ultimately helping our teens to have decreased stress, improved coping ability, and better health.

For further information, Dr. Corrado’s website is www.stephaniecorrado.com.

PARENT-TESTED STRATEGIES

- Keep in mind -- all kids are different. What works for one doesn’t always work for another!
- Kids need a forum to talk—their issues and concerns change week to week
- Keep track of important deadlines
- They may need help structuring their planning, e.g., set a deadline for college applications (such as before basketball season around Thanksgiving) and a weekly discussion can be really helpful
- Kids need their space and independence but...
- Help review college applications, but don’t nag or do it for them
- Act as a sounding board
- Take cues on when to talk about what
- Don’t feed into their drama and “big feelings,” which are overwhelming enough without parental escalation. Try to absorb some of their anxiety.
- There are different definitions of success—what worked for you doesn’t work for your kids
- Alternative paths- they will find their way (trust, believe in them)
- Not just one path/college/career
- They all have their own time table
- All kids need to find something in which they can excel
- Focus on the process not the results
- Consistency – what they did before [keep doing it]
- Expectations are high, but dreams need to be reconciled with reality -- gently
- Fear of failure can create lowered expectations (a “why bother trying” attitude)
- Peer pressure can be overwhelming. Kids need to disconnect a little. One strategy -- encourage kids not to talk to others about plans, which removes some of the pressure
- Social media can help or hinder – some kids use it to escape, others find it adds to pressure
- Important to connect with one adult in the school
- Some stress is normal, but true, prolonged anxiety may need assessment and intervention

NEED SOME HELP?

Brookline is blessed with a wealth of resources, starting with BHS deans, guidance counselors and social workers.

BHS's **E-Resources** are laid out here: http://www.b-pen.org/uploads/2/9/2/9/2929884/e-resources_at_bhs_.pdf

For additional helpful information on navigating common social, emotional and developmental challenges, including tips and resources, visit

www.B-PEN.org

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