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Managing student stress in the pandemic and beyond

By Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D.



Elizabeth LaScala, PhD personally guides each student through each step of selecting and applying to well-matched schools for undergraduate and graduate school study. Over the past two decades, Elizabeth has placed hundreds of students in some of the most prestigious colleges and universities in the U.S. The number of clients taken is limited to ensure each applicant has personalized attention. Contact Elizabeth early in the process to make a difference in your outcomes. Write elizabeth@doingcollege.com; Visit www.doingcollege.com; or Call: 925.385.0562.

for students; for example, test-optional college admissions is becoming increasingly more popular. While these changes have reduced stress for some students, for others the uncertainty surrounding the value of requirements they once believed were essential has increased academic pressure as grades and rigor or coursework take on increasing importance. Thus, for two cycles of high school seniors, navigating the pressure of schoolwork and college applications in an unconventional learning environment has not made academic life easier. These issues make it ever more vital to understand how to recognize signs that students may be struggling with their mental health and respond accordingly.

What are the signs that students are under too much stress? Alterations in sleeping, eating, and exercising schedules, engaging in more negative self-talk, and expressing less optimism about the future are some of the sure signs a student is suffering. Certainly engaging in "high risk" behavior like self-isolation, substance abuse, or verbal and physical aggression is a clear sign of trouble. While some stress may help highly motivated students spend more time studying, too much negatively affects all aspects of healthy living including their academic performance - in particular, high levels of anxiety can prevent students from engaging in the critical thinking needed to perform well on exams.

What can we do to help? Students' mental health can be improved by surrounding them with a compassionate support system that recognizes the pressures of adolescence. Fostering open and thoughtful conversations about the stresses of school can ensure that teens feel comfortable talking about their mental health. Many students may feel uncomfortable discussing their mental health challenges; sparking compassionate conversations may help them express their emotions and seek out support. For example, if you notice your student sleeping less or self-isolating, let them know what you are observing and ask how you can best support them. Be sure to emphasize that their negative feelings are not permanent, and

Academics, entrepreneurs, innovators, and activists have long flocked to Northern California, creating a breeding ground for some of the best academic institutions and companies the world has to offer. Bay Area schools dominate lists of best high schools in California, according to SFGate (September 2021). For example last year Oakland's College Preparatory School and Hillsborough's Nueva School were identified by online platform Niche <https://www.niche.com/k12/rankings/> as the fourth and fifth best private high schools in the country last year. Meanwhile, Palo Alto's Henry M. Gunn High School was deemed the best public high school in California.

Attending a high-ranking high school often takes a toll on students' mental health. Many California students grow up in communities that expect extraordinary achievement both in and out of the classroom. Over the past two years a global pandemic halted student participation in extracurricular activities, delayed standardized testing, and caused school closures. While some students, at least initially, thrived with Zoom school, setting their own pace, and getting relief from extracurricular pressures, many others suffered anxiety and depression.

Adolescence already demands a stockpile of coping skills to successfully make the transition to young adulthood; unfortunately, actions to control the pandemic stripped away many of the coping mechanisms that make the stresses of adolescence and its accompanying social and academic pressures more manageable. Canceled sports practices and social distancing measures make fun forms of exercise and important interpersonal connections less accessible. Teens with various mental health challenges were often left without the tools they relied on to manage them.

While the pandemic has caused tangible shifts in everyday life for all of us, these changes magnified problems for many of our most vulnerable adolescents. The pandemic also altered many academic requirements

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assure them that they have the ability to improve their mental health with the help of supportive family and friends. For teens with test anxiety, helping them identify a clear-cut system for test preparation that reflects their learning style can help develop study habits that will set them up for success in college.

More generally, practices like journaling, mindfulness, meditation, and deep breathing can be employed to help improve mental health. Many high schools now offer yoga to fill a PE requirement, and I often hear students tell me how much they enjoy this class. Therapy or other treatment may also be helpful, especially as dedicated care providers can guide teens through specialized programs taking emotional, familial, and cultural factors into account.

In high achieving pressured environments, like we often find in our affluent California communities, it is especially important to create space for supportive conversations and as necessary take action to support adolescent mental health.

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