

Teenage stress: When is it anxiety?

Every day I meet with young people overwhelmed by anxiety.

Unfortunately, many teenagers and young adults arrive in my office long after difficult feelings of anxiety have begun.

"I didn't think it was that big of a deal," I hear.

Parents will tell me, "I think he's just stressed out."

Despite stress being a common experience in today's society, anxiety needn't be. In fact, what many people judge to be stress is, in fact, actually anxiety. Frequent occurrences of feeling tense, worrying and experiencing dread should not be seen as something one must live with as a result of a heavy schedule, high demands or many obligations. Panic over outcomes, failure or the unknown is a sign that anxiety has taken hold.

Right or wrong, adolescence is often treated like "training for adulthood." Teenagers are encouraged to load up their schedule and push themselves academically. Indeed, immersion in life experiences does support healthy development. We hope teens develop good time management, critical thinking skills and build a strong college application.

Meanwhile, in my office, these teenagers admit with grave embarrassment their panic and sleepless nights. They share their deep uncertainties about who they are and their fear of inadequacy over not "knowing" what they want to do with the rest of their life. These teenagers are straight-A students, athletes and musicians. They look like normal teenagers. They live every day with anxiety, thinking these experiences are part of growing up, thinking they are weak because they struggle.

That is not the case. Research on brain development shows that the cerebellum — the part of the brain responsible for governing more complex func-



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tions such as philosophical thinking and socializing — is still developing well into adolescence. This shows that while teenagers' intellectual capabilities may be functioning well, their ability to think holistically about their life, derive meaning

and make long-term goals for their well-being still needs time to catch up. With all this focus on training for adulthood, it is no wonder anxiety is becoming increasingly commonplace among adolescents.

Therapy helps mitigate the imbalance. Over time, the teenagers I work with begin to understand first and foremost that their fears and worries do not make them abnormal or weak. They begin to learn how to think differently about the demands placed on them. They learn how to think about their place in the world. They learn how to sift through priorities in a way that is empowering instead of overwhelming. Through much reflection and discussion, these teenagers learn how to find meaning in conflict and to be strengthened by difficulties.

The demands of everyday life, unfortunately, often set the stage for anxiety to flourish. So much is expected of us. We have so much we want to do well. And for teenagers who are still developing, these demands, even if they are met, can have devastating effects on their mental health. Life ought to not only be successful, but meaningful and enjoyable. Every day I help teenagers and adults find the path out of anxiety and into productive, joyful, meaningful lives. This is possible.

May your life be productive, joyful and meaningful, too.

— Jennifer Geiter is the clinical supervisor of The Community House Counseling Center.