

## Teens' Stress Is Higher Than Ever by Valerie Long, Ph.D., HSPP

Stress in American teens is on the rise. In a recent [survey](#) reported by the American Psychological Association, teens reported their stress level to be higher than what they believe is healthy. These teens also reported levels of stress that were higher than what adults report for themselves. However, the majority of teens tend to underestimate the effects of stress on their physical and mental health. The APA survey found that individuals experiencing high levels of stress are less likely to sleep well, exercise or eat healthy foods, all of which can lead to physical and mental health problems.

One of the main sources of stress for many teenagers is the pressure to achieve academically. Many students and parents alike believe that teens' future happiness is dependent upon their academic success and involvement in numerous extracurricular activities such as sports and fine arts. By high school, it is not uncommon for students to have seven hours of school, two or more hours of school-sponsored sports or activities, and three to five hours of homework *every night of the week*. Many parents and students believe this type of schedule is necessary to achieve the ultimate goal of admission to a top college, which in turn is believed to ensure students' success as healthy, independent adults. This kind of thinking, unfortunately, can give rise to a culture of perfectionism. Teens may begin to believe that even one missed test question decreases their chances of securing a bright future.

The message teens receive about overachieving is contributing to the rise in unhappy, overstressed, anxious and depressed adolescents and young adults. This issue is addressed in a recent documentary, "[Race to Nowhere](#)." The film is directed by Vicki Abeles, whose daughter became physically ill in response to the pressures of school, homework and extracurricular activities. "Race to Nowhere" examines and challenges current thinking about how we prepare children for success. While this is a complex issue with no easy answers, there are ways parents and educators can begin to help. In response to the aforementioned survey, APA CEO and Executive Vice President Norman B. Anderson, Ph.D. stated, "In order to break this cycle of stress and unhealthy behaviors as a nation, we need to provide teens with better support and health education at school and home, at the community level and in their interactions with health care professionals."

It is important to teach kids from a young age how to live a balanced life. This includes academics, of course, but also time to learn about themselves and the world around them, to pursue their interests, to relax and to get enough sleep. Kids need to hear from adults that nothing, not even good grades, is more important than their mental and physical health. We can also help students think more realistically about their future happiness depending upon acceptance into an elite college. According to a recent [Gallup poll](#), thousands of college graduates were asked whether they were engaged in their work and thriving in all aspects of their lives. No significant differences were found based upon whether individuals graduated from a prestigious college or not. In other words, while earning a college degree can make a significant difference in someone's earning power over a lifetime, a college graduate's success and happiness is not tied to *which* school awarded that degree.

What else can parents and teachers do? It is important to be aware of the signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety in teens (see Elise Montoya's article in this newsletter). If parents have concerns about a child, an evaluation by a mental health professional is strongly recommended. Parents may want to inform their child's school counselor that he or she is experiencing mental health issues so that the school can provide appropriate support for that child. Further, if teachers or school counselors have concerns, it is important to inform parents and make referrals to a mental health professional. Working together, parents, teachers, school counselors and therapists can help teens learn how to balance the pursuit of realistically challenging academic/career goals with the time needed to relax, develop relationships and pursue various interests in order to live a happy, less stressful life.