Stress vs. Anxiety: How to Support our Youth

The words "stress" and "anxiety" are often used interchangeably. Differentiating between stress and anxiety can be difficult because they share many of the same emotional and physical symptoms. Both stress and anxiety can lead to uneasiness, loss of sleep, headaches, stomachaches and inability to focus or concentrate. Despite the similarities, there are key differences between stress and anxiety. In order to help children and adolescents cope with stress and anxiety, we must understand these differences in an effort to provide appropriate supports.

Stress and anxiety are affecting our students at a growing rate. A study from the American Psychological Association found that U.S. teens are even more stressed than adults. Likewise, the Anxiety and Depression Association of America cites that 25.1% of children between 13 and 18 years old suffer from anxiety disorders. It is normal to feel stress and anxiety throughout each stage of life. In fact, some stress and anxiety can be positive. For example, stress can provide the energy to tackle a big test or to complete a presentation. Similarly, anxiety can ignite our flight or fight response and help us survive in dangerous situations. But, if stress and anxiety are not well managed, it can start to interfere in normal day to day activities and impair an individual's ability to function.

According to the American Psychological Association, stress can be described as a feeling of being overwhelmed, worried or run down. Stress is the bodies' response to any demand. It should be noted that how we interpret life's demands plays a role in the level of stress we experience. Stress almost always comes with an identifiable cause. If a student is feeling overwhelmed by the pressures of school workloads, over scheduling or a conflict with a peer, they are most likely experiencing stress. Generally, stress is a reaction to an external cause and subsides once the situation has been resolved. Compared to anxiety, stress is an experience that is more common and manageable as we tend to react to stress by diving into what is causing the stress and dealing with it. A key to managing stress is to find ways to cope that are positive versus self-destructive. Some positive strategies and skills we can help build with our youth include:

- Time management
- Goal setting
- Avoid procrastination
- Problem solving
- Set realistic expectations- recognize we all have limits
- Practice self-care (good nutrition, exercise and plenty of sleep)
- Make time to relax
- Seek support from friends and family

Anxiety can manifest as a normal reaction to stress and can be described as a feeling of unease, worry or fear, often about something with an uncertain outcome. Some fear and anxiety are a normal part of development. It is not uncommon for a child or teenager to feel anxious about starting a new school, going on a first date or preparing for a major exam. Normal anxiety only lasts for a short time, does not specifically interfere in a person's wellbeing and does not prevent a person from engaging in day to day activities. As anxiety intensifies, it may lead to a sense of helplessness. Abnormal anxiety is more
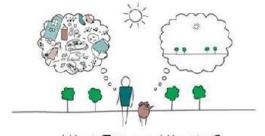
persistent, it is excessive and may be out of proportion to the concern. In other words, the worry is greater than that experienced by most people. For example, a child who is nervous about going to a birthday party may exhibit normal levels of anxiety with a few tears and some reluctance of leaving the familiarity of their parent, but they eventually recover and are able to enjoy themselves. In contrast, a child who exhibits abnormal levels of anxiety may hysterically cry in terror at the thought of entering the party, become physically and emotionally distressed and refuse to go. As illustrated by this example, anxiety becomes a concern not based on what a child is worrying about, but rather how that worry is impacting a child's functioning. Anxiety can become problematic for a child or adolescent when worry and avoidance become automatic responses, preventing them from participating in daily school activities, friendships and academic performance. Some signs of concern that may trigger a red flag that a youth may be suffering from high levels of anxiety include:

- Demonstrating excessive distress out of proportion to the situation
- Demonstrating excessive avoidance (refusal to participate in activities or attend school)
- Disruptions in sleep (difficulty falling asleep, difficulty sleeping alone, frequent nightmares)
- Headaches, stomachaches, regular complaints of feeling sick
- Seeking excessive reassurance that things will be "okay"
- Easily frustrated, agitated or distressed in a stressful situation
- Worrying more days of the week than not (uncontrollable worry and fear)
- Requires excessive time coaxing to do normal activities (homework, hygiene, meals)

Understanding why anxiety feels the way it does is one of the greatest tools in managing it. When you can identify why you feel the way you do, it is easier to navigate your way around those feelings. One of the first steps in treating anxiety is seeking help from a trained mental health professional. A trained mental health provider can properly diagnose and provide treatment recommendations. Learning constructive strategies to cope with anxiety can help youth gain better control over thoughts and emotions. While treatment may include a combination of therapy and medication, there are things adults can do to support youth who may be struggling with excessive levels of anxiety:

- Listen and acknowledge feelings- this sends a message that you care.
- Be sensitive to the fact that he/she has genuine worries and fears but try to not enable his or her avoidance behavior.
- Be patient—coping with anxiety isn't as easy as just "snapping out of it".
- Educate yourself about anxiety disorders
- Teach mindfulness- found to reduce symptoms of anxiety
    - Anxiety is driven by a brain that has been cast into the future, mindfulness helps train the brain to stay in the present.

Mind Full, or Mindful?