

Education's Role in Curbing Teen Anxiety

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The reports are out and they're conclusive. Teen anxiety and depression are at an all time high. There is something amiss in our children's worlds and perhaps our adult ones as well. As psychologists look to explain the trends and help people cope, educators should look within our school walls and ask: Does modern education contribute to this problem? And, if so, how can we change school culture and methodology to help our children gain a sense of well-being?

THE RESEARCH

[The National Institute of Mental Health](#) reports that, in 2016, 31.9% of adolescents had an anxiety disorder and [12.8% of them were depressed](#). That's nearly a third of all teenagers being classified as not being occasionally anxious, but as having an anxiety disorder.

In 2016, the journal [Pediatrics](#) released a [study of national trends in depression among adolescents and young adults](#) that supported these numbers and marked the upward trend. The number of teens who reported depression in 2014 was up 37% from 2005.

And these studies show these are not just “at-risk” children, but kids from all demographics — suburban, rural, urban, rich, poor, college-bound, and not.

But what about college kids? Do these teens pull themselves together as they age? Unfortunately not. [The American College Health Association](#) found that 61.9% reported feeling “overwhelming anxiety” during their school year and 39.1% felt “too depressed to function.” Of those, 19.7% with anxiety sought professional treatment and 15.6% got treatment for depression.

Sadly, the effects of these numbers extend beyond paper surveys. [The American Academy of Pediatrics reports](#) that the number of children and adolescents admitted to hospitals for suicide or self-harm has “more than doubled in the last decade.”

THE CAUSES

What has changed in the last decade that would make such a marked difference in the mental health of our young people? [Dr. Jean Twenge](#), author of [iGen](#), thinks the answer is pretty clear. She has been doing research about anxiety and depression for 25 years with a particular interest in generational differences. When 2011 – 2012 hit, she saw a trend that was marked and significant. It was the year when those having iPhones went over the 50% mark. It was also the year that clinical levels of anxiety and depression jumped and continued to climb.

While Dr. Twenge is a proponent of screen limits, she also notes that the Smartphone itself is less the issue than the larger culture of adolescence and how teens interact with one another via social media. And, she notes, it’s not all bad. After all, these same teens, on their couches and engaging one another via text, are less likely to engage in risky behavior — smoke, drink, and have multiple sex partners — than their peers from decades before.

If this issue is, as Dr. Twenge says, largely cultural, we should ask what else about our culture has shifted in the last decade, as we all have become more connected and more vulnerable to changes brought on by technology.

Adults also are susceptible to our always-on, hyper-connected media culture. We know about every act of terrorism, the moment it happens, as alerts pop up on our phones. We spend our free time in very different ways than generations before us. And our economic and job landscape shifts greatly from year to year. How does this then influence the way we teach our kids in school and parent them at home?

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

According to the 2016 Time Magazine report — [Teen Depression and Anxiety: Why the Kids Are Not Alright](#)

— school pressures also play a key role in the increasing anxiety, depression, and the stress modern adolescents face. Parents and teachers place pressure on students to do well in class, and on standardized tests, to help ensure their college and career success. This goes along with often overscheduled extracurriculars, also deemed essential to be accepted and do well in the competitive adult world.

“The competitiveness, the lack of clarity about where things are going [economically] have all created a sense of real stress,” says Victor Schwartz of the Jed Foundation, a nonprofit that works with colleges and universities on mental-health programs and services.” The article goes on to say that: “The strain on school counselors has increased since No Child Left Behind standardized testing protocols were implemented in the past decade.”

There are other stressors at school as well, like that of appearance, social media involvement, peer groups, and bullying. School anxiety often presents itself as school refusal, a problem that [affects between 2-5% of kids](#).

In the New York Times article, [Why are more American Teenagers than ever Suffering from Severe Anxiety](#), Lynn Lyons, a psychotherapist and author, believes schools can make changes to help students reduce their anxiety: things like later start times, reduction of homework, normalizing failure, and relevant learning. She believes these measures will help build the resilience students need for school and beyond.

Perhaps there are even simpler ways to reduce the culture of anxiety within schools. What if schools focused on activities proven to enhance well being? This is certainly an approach that Waldorf educators have pursued as their mission to focus on a child’s “heart” as well as “head” explicitly implies. Activities like exercise, mindfulness, good nutrition, and time outside are a part of the Waldorf curriculum for a reason. That reason is not to ease anxiety, but to establish a sense of well being through connection with learning, self, peers, and the greater community.

Exercise

When it comes to movement, Waldorf educators understand the importance of using our bodies to connect with ourselves, the world around us, and the academic material at hand. Considering that studies have shown that [as little as a 10 minute walk](#) can relieve anxiety and depression, it won’t take much to help students lift their spirits. Keeping gym class, recess, and sports in the daily curriculum should be enough to help our students’ well-being.

Mindfulness

Researchers from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD [found 47 studies showing](#) that mindful meditation can help ease psychological stresses like anxiety, depression, and pain. What does mindfulness look like in a Waldorf classroom? It looks like attention brought to a task, such as sitting and drawing a tree for 30 minutes. Or a morning stretch with breathing to begin the day. Beauty and ritual also speak to mindfulness — an opening verse with a candle, traditional festivals and ceremonies, or even journaling can all bring mindfulness to students.

Nutrition

The [Harvard Health Blog](#) recommends several nutritional strategies to ease anxiety. For example, a diet rich in whole grains, vegetables, and fruit will metabolize more slowly to “maintain a more even blood sugar level, which creates a calmer feeling.” Also food higher in magnesium, zinc and Omega-3 fatty acids have been shown to reduce anxiety.

While it is difficult to require students to maintain balanced diets, it is not difficult to create a culture of respect for wholesome, fresh food. Starting with preschool snack time, fresh vegetables and fruits and whole grains are offered to Waldorf students. Students can connect with better food through gardening programs and through direct lessons in curriculum about the importance of food for mental and physical health.

The Outdoors

[Study upon study](#) has shown that time in nature reduces stress, depression, and anxiety. One study even found that people who move to greener areas, even in urban settings, receive sustained mental health benefits. Time outdoors is essential to our children, and schools should consider making time during the school day to offer students green spaces for mindfulness, exercise, and just being.

Sleep

Lynn Lyons goes to bat for later school times because she knows that adequate sleep is a stress buster. People low on sleep are more likely to be depressed and are more prone [to negativity and anxiety](#). Helping teens and their parents to [put away their smartphones before bed](#) can also make a huge difference in sleep patterns. Schools can encourage families to keep bedrooms technology free zones.

Connection

Ultimately, what well-being comes back to is a healthy sense of connection both with self and with others. In the New York Times article — [Why Having Friends is Good for You](#) — [Emma Seppala of the Stanford Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education](#), and author of the 2016 book “The Happiness Track,” says, “[People who feel more connected to others have lower levels of anxiety and depression](#). Moreover, studies show they also have higher self-esteem, greater empathy for others, are more trusting and cooperative and, as a consequence, others are more open to trusting and cooperating with them.

“In other words,” Dr. Seppala explains, “social connectedness generates a positive feedback loop of social, emotional and physical well-being.”

We must help our children see the long term value of all these pillars of well being. More importantly, we must teach them, in school, how to connect genuinely with themselves and others. If we can do that, then they will have the skills they need to advocate for the peaceful and fulfilling lives of their future selves.

Photo credit: [Pleasant Ridge Waldorf School](#)