Teenage Stress
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Addressing the pressures teens face in today’s fast-paced world.

Teens are under more stress today than ever before. Sound like an exaggeration? Despite the fact that I am often prone to hyperbole, consider this: being a teenager is not easy. Adolescence has always been a tricky developmental period defined by fundamental, yet somewhat difficult changes (physical, cognitive, and social) experienced by teens as they make their way from childhood toward adulthood. These transitions trigger changes in the way the teen sees him/herself, and the way that others see and treat him or her. They are no longer children, but not yet adults, and this series of transitions not only has an impact on the individual experiencing the transitions, but also on parents, peers, and society as a whole.

Adolescence has always been an awkward stage where teens struggle to build their own identity, seek autonomy, and learn about intimacy and sexuality in relationships. These things all cause a certain level of angst, but they are not really new.

What is new is the environment that we live in, and it is this fast-paced, perpetually plugged-in society that sets the tone for the messages and expectations that teens receive every day. Due to varying pressures around school, work, families, relationships, social media, and the seemingly endless series of transitions involved in simply being an adolescent, teens today are indeed under more stress than ever before. There are certain contexts that inevitably make being a teen even more difficult. Living in poverty, or being in an abusive home, for example. Other, more recent issues, such as society’s pressures on young people to grow up fast, have their lives completely figured out by the time they start middle school, and today’s technological and social innovations that have transformed family life, make the experience of teen transitions exponentially more difficult.

So, why are teens so “angsty” today?

**School:** Today, kids are expected to know what they want to do — where they want to go to school and in which field they’d like to work — earlier than ever before. They are also expected to do well, and are put on “success” tracks even in elementary school. They have to do well, because it is assumed that all kids will/must go to college, and not just that, but they must get into the best college if they want to “succeed” and be competitive in today’s job market. This is a lot of pressure on teens.
Work: Most teens work to earn money, which they like, but it takes time away from other things like academics, extra-curricular activities, volunteering, spending time with family and friends, having fun, and simply enjoying life.

Expectations: Whether it is real or not, teenagers’ perceptions are that they are expected to be successful or good at everything. Teens today feel a lot of pressure from parents, teachers, coaches, other family/friends to not fail. Failure has somehow gone from being viewed as a learning opportunity to being clearly unacceptable. This puts even more pressure on teens.

Social Connections: Given the fact that the overwhelming majority of teens today are tethered to a smart phone or other device that keeps them linked on social networking sites, teens justifiably feel “on” all the time. Their every move is judged by their peers, whether their peers are their true, real live friends, or the 1,254 “friends” on Facebook or followers on Twitter. So, the pressure is always on to be cute, clever, sexy, smart, popular, etc., and because social networking sites are the modern day hang out spot, where teens spend a huge chunk of each day, it can be exhausting!

What can Parents do?

- We, as parents of teens, must communicate. A recent study from the Pew Research Center asked a national sample of adults which skills are most important for children to have to succeed in the world today. The answer: Communication. As parents, we should take our own advice and talk to our teens about expectations, goals, and ask teens about that they think, what they want, and how they feel.

- This, of course, means that we should also be prepared to listen. Really listen. Teens need to know that although we clearly want what is best for them in their future lives, what’s best doesn’t necessarily have to equate to what we want. We should hear what they have to say and consider how they envision their future.

- Our teens also need unconditional love, acceptance, and support, and we should be explicit in communicating this to them. We often assume that they know this (and they probably do), but they really need to hear it.

- Parents should also help their teens to set realistic expectations and keep things in perspective. No, it’s not the end of the world, as we know it if our teen, for example, has not decided what she is majoring in during her freshman year of college. Nor does it make you a horrible parent to think that it is OK for our teens to fail at something… after all, failure presents an opportunity for growth! If we allow our children to fail, they can learn from their mistakes (called natural consequences) and pick themselves back up.