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LIFE ON THE EDGE:

TEENAGERS, STRESS AND DEPRESSION By: **Melanie Nimmo**

As summer comes to an end, we all become increasingly aware of the upcoming school year. On the one hand, this means that teens can reunite with friends that they may not have seen over the summer, and they feel excited. Yet on the other hand, the beginning of a new school year is a very stressful time for parents, teachers and guidance counsellors, but particularly for teens. In fact, research suggests that over seventy per cent of teens report intense stress upon entering high school. They now face significant challenges and decisions and intense pressure in many ways.

» Teen Stress

We all experience stress. There is good stress, a motivator, "fight or flight," but there is also very bad stress. Negative stress leads to depression and anxiety disorders, including aggression and irritability, and many physical effects, such as insomnia, illness, and weight changes, headaches and more. These symptoms of stress can lead to serious and life altering choices. Many stressed out teens turn to substance abuse, gangs, crime, prostitution and running away from home. Other teens isolate and become suicidal.

Sources of stress for teens vary from school difficulties, problems at home, low self-esteem, problems with friends, body image issues, the neighborhood that they live in, concerns about the future; the list is virtually endless. There are particular signs that a guidance counsellor can look for to spot a teen that is having difficulty with stress. Some of these signs include notable changes in behavior, changes in their choice of friends, drops in their grades and/or attendance at school. Guidance counsellors help by paying

attention to changes in behavior and lending an empathetic ear.

In preparation for this article, I questioned a number of teens and young adults about what they think stresses teens out. I also asked them what advice they would give guidance counsellors. Some common themes emerged. First and foremost, all of them spoke of the stress of relationships, be it with males or females. They spoke of the stress and pain of failed relationships, and even just the pressure of trying to maintain a relationship.

The second most common issue that teens noted as a point of stress was schoolwork, and feeling like they didn't measure up. Managing their grades, keeping up with the other kids, family pressure for success, and the need for identity and status and a sense of purpose and acceptance create a toxic state of mind for some teens, making them extremely prone to stress and unhealthy behaviors. From my previous research on gangs, it is also true that marginalized teens feel extremely isolated from mainstream society, and face the judgmental stigma of being 'stupid.' Keeping these children in school and reaching out to them remains a significant challenge, but it is possible.

Peer pressure has been recognized for a long time. The pressure to 'fit in' can make kids do a lot of things that they otherwise wouldn't do. Recall the Reena Virk case. One girl started the fight with Reena and the rest of the girls joined in, inevitably killing Reena. Pack mentality had set in, and teens are especially vulnerable to this as they're trying to figure out their identity and desperate to fit in with the others.

The people I interviewed also spoke about family. They wanted high school guidance counsellors to know the negative impact that parents can have. We're not just talking about physical and sexual abuse, but emotional abuse as well. Many spoke of the negative effects that parents can have on their children, and how their parents' habits troubled them. Many identified their parents' substance abuse as something that really influenced them. They also identified "inter-household drama" as creating their chronic anxiety attacks.

The young adults especially spoke about how stressful Grade 12 was, the fear of the future. How would they make a livelihood? The stress of university and future debts was


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very high on their list of triggers for stress. They pointed out that there would be so much more to lose if they chose university. And after, they might only be left with a hefty debt. Would they even find a decent job?

When I asked the young adults about teen stress, a curious term repeatedly emerged from a few of them; they spoke of "psychological impairment and the stress of internal and external interactions." Unpack this as you will, but clearly adolescence is a challenging time, and can be very depressing. Fights and turmoil cause psychological instability. Counselling is especially important at this time in life.

Social media has exposed teens to the global world, and "adult" concerns and conflicts. This relatively new influence of social media can exacerbate racism, demeaning comments and bullying, targeting youth about their looks, their sexual preference – you name it. And, adults are often unaware of this. The individuals that I spoke with said that the on-line bullying made them very depressed and made them feel useless, useless to the point of suicidal thoughts. Nothing put on-line is truly "safe." Anonymity and vulnerability increase. In addition, much of the on-line generation does not get proper nutrition and exercise, which are key factors in decreasing stress.

In the last year before he killed himself my sixteen-year-old nephew had become gaunt and pale, reclusive, antisocial and glued to Facebook. The new generation has become addicted to social media; constant contact on Facebook, Twitter and text messaging have practically become mandatory, 24/7; but, in reality, this new social media is not truly social. It fosters anonymity and lends itself to a new form of abuse. Many teen suicides have been traced to on-line bullying.

And, contrary to popular myths, it's not just neglectful and abusive parents that cause stress. Some of the young adults I questioned stressed the negative effects of parents that were too "heavy and hard," having unreasonable expectations and standards of achievement. These same individuals that I interviewed also wanted to draw attention to the fact that dogmatic religions caused internal and external problems for them.


One of the keys to helping stressed teens is to offer them resources and information on stress management techniques, such as healthy coping skills. The Internet contains

a number of sites that offer help, advice and more information on teens and stress. Some starters include the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), ask.healthline.com, and the Canada Counselling Center. Google search the web with the key words 'teens and depression' and you will find many resources. Many of the teens that I spoke with also mentioned that they prefer counsellors who have walked the walk and, therefore, know where they're coming from.

At the end of the day, teen years are a frightening time. All human beings want to be loved and respected. Guidance counsellors play a critical role in a teens development. Caring and really listening can truly save lives.

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