



Brookline PARENT EDUCATION NETWORK

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PARENT NETWORK UPDATE

JANUARY 2015

SPECIAL ISSUE ON

Managing Junior Year Stress – For You and Your Teen

On Jan. 8, B-PEN and the Junior Class PTO sponsored a program for parents on managing the stress of junior year, when the pressure of SAT/ACT prep and college visits on top of typical school and social stress can really start to take a toll on students. At BHS, juniors often confess they feel overworked and overwhelmed. That stress can take a toll on family life as well. What are parents concerns, and what do parents need to understand about their kids' concerns? How can parents and teens get on the same wavelength and strengthen communication and support? And what are some effective strategies to maintain perspective and keep calm and collected amidst the pressure – for parents as well as their kids? The panel presentation and discussion involved BHS Peer Leaders, dean's team, parents, and Dr. Stephanie Corrado. Some takeaways from the presentation...

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THOUGHTS FROM THE DEANS

Though Deans Anthony Meyer and Melanee Alexander were not present due to family conflicts, they wanted to share some thoughts about the event as an extension of the September PTO meeting:

For those of you who attended our September meeting, you will recall that we discussed the importance of balance, a message we crafted in our opening assembly for juniors on September 5th. We acknowledged that junior year can be stressful for a number of reasons (increased workload, more challenging courses, shrinking proximity to post-BHS life, etc.). Beyond emphasizing balance, we wanted students to believe that they will find the right next step after BHS. We know that there is the right school, the right job, the right program, the right experience for all of our students - for all of your children.

In thinking about this evening with many people, we recognized that our program should not just be about junior stress. There is also a parental stress component. This presentation tries to address both.

Lastly, we want to acknowledge that there aren't easy solutions or plans that will fit all of our students. You know this, of course, but it makes everyone's job harder. Just as every student/kid needs a different type and level of parent support for schoolwork, so too will each kid need a different type and level of parental support for the college process. We think and hope hearing from several students tonight will help confirm this need for individualization. We also hope that hearing from three parents who have gone through this process at BHS - Karen, June, and our wonderful chemistry teacher and China Exchange Coordinator Steve Lantos - will help make this clear.

As always, do not hesitate to follow up with your kids' guidance counselor and dean if you want to process this evening further.

For the Deans' helpful sheet of **E-Resources at Brookline High School**, go to http://www.b-pen.org/uploads/2/9/2/9/2929884/e-resources_at_bhs_.pdf

ASSESSING THE SITUATION

BHS Prevention/Intervention Team social worker Mary Minott explained the importance of understanding what students are experiencing in their junior and senior years, when according to the most recent student health survey, stress levels ramp up considerably. She noted that 75% of BHS students said they experienced overwhelming stress and anxiety over the past year, a sobering figure that peaks in junior year. Because “it takes a village to raise a child, she noted that school, parents and students all have a role in addressing teen stress. She highlighted some of the ways BHS is addressing student stress, starting with the freshman health curriculum. It teaches awareness of mental health concerns and stress reduction strategies, giving student a solid base of information and resources. Additional initiatives include ongoing discussions of homework issues and student stress by faculty and student groups, and mindfulness training to staff. Minott also stressed the need for understanding how we as parents can help maintain balance for ourselves as well as for our students.

To help parents have a better understanding of teen stress and what they can do to help, Minott worked with Peer Leaders to create a presentation for parents.

PEER LEADER PRESENTATION

As parents, we can often tell when our children are stressed, but it is sometimes difficult for them to articulate to us how they are feeling, and they sometimes hesitate to share – either not wanting to concern us or not wanting us to bug them. Six BHS Peer Leaders shared letters they wrote to their parents that offered powerful insight into what kids are experiencing in junior year as they struggle with balancing school, college preparation, extracurricular activities, and family.

Some of their strongest points included:

- School is hard, long and very tiring. We often need time to chill before studying to be more productive, and we don't need constant reminders. We know ourselves better than you think.
- We constantly feel a time crunch, and when you ask about homework – how much, when will be do it, etc. – it stresses us out. We can get work done faster without nagging and asking questions. We have to do on our own.
- “Every day is a struggle to get out of bed. School has been killing me. Getting good grades is not something I'm good at. I'm trying to get my GPA high enough for community college. I'm not the person you hoped I'd be, and I have nothing to show for it but stress, so much that it makes me feel like disappearing. Let me be myself.”
- “I feel so much pressure to be perfect socially and academically. I feel pressured to spend all my time on school, SAT or college prep, it's hard to remember to relax. The competitive environment makes me feel I have to go to a prestigious school. I can't keep up.”
- “Please cut me some slack and not hassle me when I'm trying to get work done. I appreciate the college visits, but it stresses me out to think where I'll end up. I'm scared to not know what will happen.”
- College is not the right path for all of us, but we sometimes fear judgment from parents and peers. Give us the room to pursue our dreams.
- Every child is different, and communication is key Try to find effective ways to talk about things, and try to keep it casual, like going to get something to eat outside the house. But DON'T attempt heavy conversations in the car, where we can feel trapped.

Check out the Peer Leaders' list of “**Students' Tips to Parents**” -- http://www.b-pen.org/uploads/2/9/2/9/2929884/seniors_tips_to_parents.pdf

PEER LEADERS ADDRESS PARENT QUESTIONS

Q: How do parents know when shifting from stress relief to goofing off?

A: That line is very blurred. Parents have to know how able a kid is to manage his/her own down time. Put trust in your kid.

Q: What does good stress management look like to you?

A: I see my Mom meditate, and when I see her handling stress well, it helps me.

When my Mom told me she doesn't care what grades I get, it really helped me, cause I'm perfectionist and it helped keep things in perspective

My mom is super serious and adds stress on me, but when she takes a break from work and watches TV with me or hangs out, it makes a big difference.

Don't tell kids you're stressed. During dinner, talk about random things, funny things. Kids want reassurance that you believe in their abilities.

DR. STEPHANIE CORRADO – STRESS AND RELAXATION

Dr. Stephanie Corrado, an internist and adolescent medicine physician practicing mind body medicine, gave a brief PowerPoint presentation on the physiology of stress and the power of relaxation techniques. Her key points included:

Stress

- Some stress is normal, but the brain doesn't always know how to differentiate between appropriate survival stress (fight or flight, emergency, etc.) and the stress of having too many things on one's plate.
- Stress can impact the entire body.
- Techniques to counteract stress have promoted positive effects in children as well as adults, from higher GPA's to greater social cooperation and self-esteem and are especially effective when combined with other good habits: sleep, proper nutrition, exercise, healthy social support.

Relaxation Response

- Antithesis of stress response is relaxation response, and we can use this to regulate the body (lower blood pressure, etc.)
- Evoking the relaxation response just 10-20 minutes a day can reduce stress hormones, help you sleep better, promote elasticity of brain, strengthen immune response, etc.
- Even a simple two-step process can promote feelings of calm and control:
Focus on a word, sound phrase, prayer, image or physical activity
Maintain a passive attitude towards incoming thoughts

Breathing Exercises

One of the easiest ways to invoke a relaxation response is through breathing exercises. Even focusing on and counting the breath for 10 intakes interrupts the cascade of emotion and allows us to be able to focus better.

- Inhale and exhale counting 10 breaths
- Inhale a word: "peace"; exhale "stress"
- Inhale a phrase: "I feel calm" Exhale a phrase "not stressed"
- Use a mantra/ prayer that is familiar
- 1-2 minutes at a time
- Aim for 10-20 times a day
- Practice in stressful situations such as traffic, being late or waiting in line.

What Can Parents Do?

- Parents can have a big impact on their teens' stress by helping modulate their perception of what they are experiencing – perspective is key.
- Practice "top down" positive thinking, training the brain to use less emotion, more reasoning, which is more effective in evaluating and executing a plan.
- Be present in the moment.
- Model stress reduction to introduce kids to the idea (like deep breathing before taking a test).

Breathing and being present promote appropriate evaluation of stressful situations. Clarity, focus, attention, and planning help regulate emotional responses and improve communication, ultimately helping our teens to have decreased stress, improved coping ability, and better health.

For further information, Dr. Corrado's website is www.stephaniecorrado.com.

PARENT PANEL DISCUSSION

Mary Minott, teacher/parent Steve Lantos, B-PEN co-coordinators June Harris and Karen Campbell, and guidance counselor Rich Gorman discussed some of their best strategies for coping with junior year stress.

Key Points:

- Keep in mind -- all kids are different. What works for one doesn't always work for another!
- Kids need a forum to talk—their issues and concerns change week to week
- Keep track of important deadlines
- They may need help structuring their planning, e.g., set a deadline for college applications (such as before basketball season around Thanksgiving) and a weekly discussion can be really helpful
- Kids need their space and independence but...
- Help review college applications, but don't nag or do it for them
- Act as a sounding board
- Take cues on when to talk about what
- Don't feed into their drama and "big feelings," which are overwhelming enough without parental escalation. Try to absorb some of their anxiety.
- There are different definitions of success—what worked for you doesn't work for your kids
- Alternative paths- they will find their way (trust, believe in them)
- Not just one path/college/career
- They all have their own time table
- All kids need to find something in which they can excel
- Focus on the process not the results
- Consistency – what they did before [keep doing it]
- Expectations are high, but dreams need to be reconciled with reality -- gently
- Fear of failure can create lowered expectations (a "why bother trying" attitude)
- Peer pressure can be overwhelming. Kids need to disconnect a little. One strategy -- encourage kids not to talk to others about plans, which removes some of the pressure
- Social media can help or hinder – some kids use it to escape, others find it adds to pressure
- Important to connect with one adult in the school
- Some stress is normal, but true, prolonged anxiety may need assessment and intervention

NEED SOME HELP?

Brookline is blessed with a wealth of resources, starting with BHS deans, guidance counselors and social workers. For additional helpful information on navigating common social, emotional and developmental challenges, including tips and resources, visit

www.B-PEN.org

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