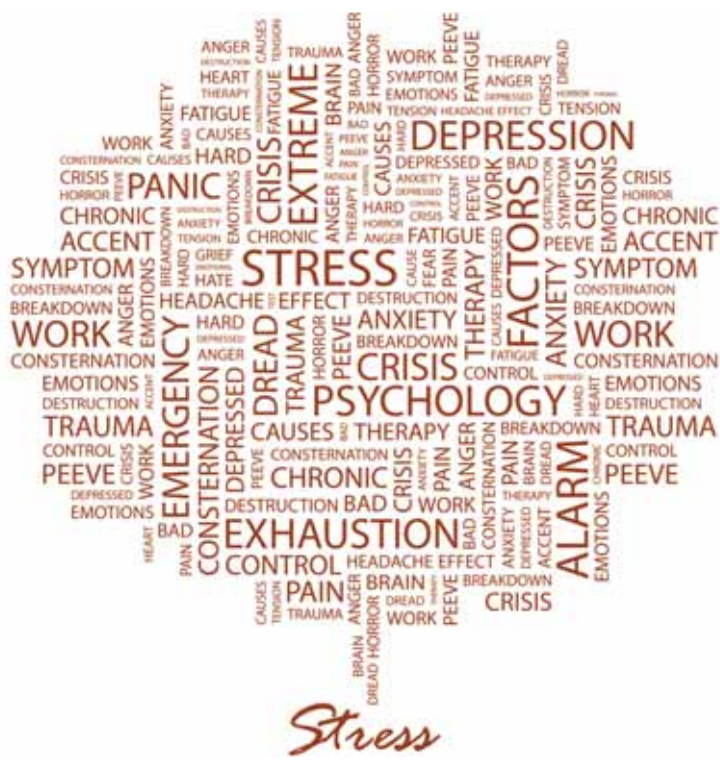


AUHSD schools take steps to combat stress and anxiety

By John T. Miller



Stress

BigStock image

Despite the fact that Americans are safer and more secure today than at any other point in human history – as reported by Taylor Clark in his book “Nerve” – anxiety and stress issues are at unprecedented highs at school campuses around the nation.

Our local public high schools are no exception.

On the 2015 Stanford Survey of Adolescent Behavior, for example, Campolindo and Miramonte high school students reported that 83 percent and 82 percent (respectively) “often” or “always” experience stress from schoolwork. Over 62 percent of Acalanes High School students agree that academic expectations are high and cause too much stress.

Anxiety has overtaken depression as the most common reason college students seek counseling services. An annual survey by the

American College Health Association found a dramatic increase of undergraduates who reported “overwhelming anxiety” in the previous year – from 50 percent in 2011 to 62 percent in 2016. This figure includes a high percentage recalling their senior year of high school.

Noted psychologist and anxiety specialist Robert Leahy says that the seeds of worry are planted early: “The average high school student today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950s.”

‘Wellness Centers’ created on campus

In response, the AUHSD formed a Mental Health Task Force, chaired by Assistant Superintendent Amy McNamara, recommending changes that the board adopted. These changes led to the creation of Wellness Centers at

each school, superseding the existing Counseling Offices.

“We wanted to put physical and mental health as a prominent part of our campuses,” said McNamara. “Sometimes it’s situational, like parents going through a divorce or a death in the family. We needed to address the health and feelings of the students and reduce the stigma about asking for help.”

Students can download a mindfulness app and are given tools for self care. In more severe cases the staff can coordinate counseling on-site for treatment or recommend appropriate interventions.

John Barakos, a Mental Health Intervention Specialist at Campolindo, says, “We allow students to have a quiet place to talk or connect them with help.” He cites mindfulness as an intervention for anxiety, along with breathing, basic meditative skills and even taking a class in yoga on campus.

One way of coping with anxiety in educational settings is the increasing use of 504 plans, an educational tool that allows accommodations for students with physical or mental conditions. For example, a student with anxiety issues could be allowed more time on tests or homework, or be allowed to leave the classroom when feeling anxious.

“A 504 plan is one response,” says Barakos, “but if the symptoms are more serious we enact an Independent Educational Plan. Most often, though, we work on it through face-to-face counseling.”

School years are more than homework, tests and grades

Allison Gans, Acalanes’ mental health intervention specialist, has noticed a steady increase in the number of anxious students, citing the stress of balancing their aca-

ademic life, athletic commitments and extracurricular responsibilities. “There is also the stress of being a normal teen and navigating peer pressure, social media and friendships,” she adds. “I have seen situations where students are so stressed out and tired that they forget to eat!”

Other pressures facing today’s teens include: social media pressure, body image (for both boys and girls), navigating friendships, pressure from parents to succeed, fitting in, drugs and alcohol, figuring out sexual identity, college applications and transitioning to college.

Challenge Success, a Stanford-affiliated nonprofit, made many recommendations for reducing anxiety and stress in high schools, including later start times, reduction in homework and project-based learning.

The AUHSD schools addressed these issues by adding later start times on Mondays and Fridays, instituting Academy periods on Wednesdays and Fridays to give students time to work on homework, and adopting project-based learning, as typified by the new Living Earth biology curriculum.

Students can come to the Counseling Center at any of the AUHSD schools to discuss mental health challenges they are facing. “We look at the consequences of their actions – good or bad – and explore what they can do differently,” says Gans. “I focus on self-care strategies and emphasize the importance of school/life balance.”

If students are in serious distress, Gans makes an effort to ensure they have additional support systems, contacting the parent if a student appears to be suicidal. “When the student returns from hospitalization for treatment of

anxiety or depression, it’s necessary for an effective plan to be in place for a healthy transition back to school,” says Gans.

The school shootings add another layer to some anxious students, according to Gans: “It can be difficult to concentrate when worried about your safety.”

Parental influence is essential

Parents can help alleviate stress and anxieties, or they can contribute to their effects.

“It’s important for parents to know about the challenges these students face and support them to lead healthier lives,” says Gans. She mentioned skills such as listening without judgment, being aware of mood swings, and hearing about their frustrations without trying to fix them. “A student is often particularly grateful when a parent shares a similar past experience.”

Gans warns that if parents are concerned, they should consider whether there has been a major shift in personality and/or changes in eating or sleeping habits. “If so,” she says, “I suggest going to their pediatrician for a check-in and exploring outside therapy as further assistance and support.”

As a sign of the times, Barakos recalls working with an elementary student recently who wanted to tell a scary story. “I thought it was going to be a ghost story, like around the campfire, but instead he used his best scary voice and told about a boy who is in lockdown in his class and hears the attacker approaching. At the end, the attacker is found sleeping in the janitor’s room.”

Barakos worries that instead of a monster in the closet, it is now part of a young person’s mythology that real monsters can show up at school.

College Advisor

Thinking premed? What you should be thinking about now

By Elizabeth LaScala, PhD

One of my specialty areas is graduate and professional school admissions and I work with many high school and college students who are hoping to one day attend medical, dental or vet school. For this short article, let’s look more closely at medical school admissions.

When advising students, I want them to first consider that a medical school application is strongest when it has a foundation in four separate areas: core academics, MCAT (Medical College Aptitude Test) scores, research and clinical experiences. Their academics should result in a strong undergraduate GPA, especially in required premed coursework (biology, physics, chemistry and some calculus); the student’s MCAT scores should support and validate that high undergraduate GPA; substantive research and clinical medicine experiences are critical as well. Each of these four components needs to be strong – there is no balancing a lower GPA with a higher MCAT or with extra research experience. Letters of recommendation from professors, researchers and clinicians who know you well are also

very important as is an engaging personal statement, effective supplemental writing and, ultimately, good interviewing skills.

In addition, students must show evidence of passion and competence in each of three roles: scientist, healer and educator. The opportunity to test each of these roles should begin in high school and continue as well as expand through the college years.

High school students need to consider this information as they decide on colleges to apply to and, after results are in, consider their options in light of it. A student must think “Will this school make it possible for me to get the premed courses I need? Can I earn A’s in the required classes? Will the classes be rigorous enough for me to do well on the MCAT? Are there a rich variety of research experiences offered? Will I be able to attend conferences? Get published? Will I have the chance to have some significant clinical and shadowing experiences? What is the track record for undergraduate students to access these opportunities at the college? Are there enough opportunities on campus (or can I create them) for me to develop the skill-sets I need to clearly demonstrate that I am a strong scientist, an empathetic healer and a competent teacher?”

Taking a hard look at these questions as you consider your options puts college/program choice into perspective.

I tend to steer clear of looking too seriously into the stats regarding a college’s rate of medical school admits because it is very hard for schools to track how many students started off as premeds and how many remained and applied successfully. In addition, schools typically do not track the students who apply well after graduation, those who supplement with a post

baccalaureate program, and those who apply more than once prior to getting admitted.

Premed is a word that is easy to say and hard to actually play out over time – the overall plan as well as prerequisites that make for a successful medical school admissions experience require unwavering commitment and regular, systematic revisions; serious students need to select their undergraduate school with the utmost care so as to provide themselves with the foundation necessary to be successful.



Elizabeth LaScala, PhD personally guides each student through each step of selecting and applying to well-matched schools for undergraduate, graduate and professional school admissions. For over two decades, Elizabeth has placed hundreds of students in some of the most prestigious colleges and universities in the U.S. By attending professional conferences, visiting college campuses and making personal contacts with admissions networks, Elizabeth stays current on the latest trends and the evolving nature of admissions and passes that know-how on to her clients. Both college and graduate school advising is available and the number of clients taken is limited to ensure each applicant has personalized attention. Contact Elizabeth early in the process to make a difference in your outcomes. Write elizabeth@doingcollege.com or visit www.doingcollege.com or call (925) 385-0562.

BAD INC. Bay Area Drainage, Inc.

Have You Checked Your Crawlspace Lately?

- French Drains
- Underfloor Drains
- Downspout Systems
- Subdrain Systems
- Sump Pumps
- Retaining Walls
- Pavestone Driveway & Walkways

A General Engineering Contractor Locally owned and Operated Contractor LIC # 762208

925•377•9209

visit our website www.bayareadrainage.com

DIAMOND CERTIFIED

GET AHEAD IN MATH THIS YEAR

GRADES K-12
Pre-Algebra • Algebra 1 & 2 • Geometry
Pre-Calculus & Calculus
SAT/ACT Preparatory
Individualized Instruction

HOMEWORK HELP FOR ALL LEVELS
Flat Monthly Fee
Drop-in any time, no scheduling needed!

1 WEEK FREE TUTORING & HOMEWORK HELP
Must present coupon. New students only.

3435 Mt. Diablo Boulevard, Lafayette
(Golden Gate Way at Mt. Diablo Blvd.)
(925) 283-4200 www.mathnasium.com

MATHNASIUM
The Math Learning Center