Students and Stress: Challenges and Solutions

By Eric Endlich, PhD, IECA (MA)

Kate was a thriving high school junior before COVID hit, active in the French club and the tennis team. After the switch to remote instruction, she missed socializing and exercising with her friends. When the SAT was repeatedly canceled and in-person university tours ended, Kate began worrying about college selection and applications. She isolated herself in her bedroom, and started developing anxiety and depression.

While Kate is a fictional compilation of students, her plight is very real. As Jenna Knauss, MS, LMFT, program director at CIP Berkshire explains:

> The pandemic magnified or intensified mental health challenges that had not yet fully surfaced for many young people. Take, for example, the adolescent who...may have relied on coping mechanisms such as exercise, meaningful peer relationships, and the distraction that comes with extracurricular activities...Then comes the pandemic. She cannot connect in the same way to her peers, and struggles to initiate exercise in the usual ways. These healthier coping mechanisms, now removed, illuminated or intensified her struggle to manage stress.

Keep in mind that various students may respond differently to the same events, such as the pandemic shift to remote learning. Ilan Goldberg, MD, president and founder of Semester Off, observes, "Some students have made out just fine, academically, this past year. Students with a high degree of intrinsic motivation...have been unaffected or may have even benefited from the new paradigm."

On the other hand, a student's initially positive response to change can evolve over time. Jed Applerouth, PhD, founder and president of Applerouth Tutoring, reports:

> In the very beginning, I noticed quite a few of our students showed a decrease in stress as they pivoted to at-home learning and pressures

continued on page 32

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Students and Stress, from page 31

decreased. But as the pandemic wore on, stress increased for many of our students. We began to see students, typically strong students, begin to wear down under the monotony of remote learning...Suddenly we were supporting bright kids who were collapsing academically.

Dan Levine, MBA, president and founder of Engaging Minds, points out that "During COVID, we've asked students to essentially uproot and adapt to an entirely different approach to school. That's stressful!" Knauss says:

Combine many of the environmental changes we have all experienced in this pandemic with the already heightened emotions and developmental shifts that come with being a young person and it is no wonder we are seeing an uptick in serious mental health diagnoses, suicidal ideation, or self-harm behavior in the adolescent and young adult population.

Stress also develops when the demand of a situation—say, deciding which colleges to apply to—exceeds our perceived ability to manage it. Our "fight, flight, or freeze" response evolved to help us make split-second decisions about emergency situations. When it comes to facing challenges such as the uncertainty of college admissions—especially during a pandemic—we may be less well-equipped.

How can we determine if our students are under too much stress and, more importantly, what can we do about it?

Applerouth outlines the following signs to watch for: "Students may begin to show changes in sleep habits, in eating and exercise habits, and ultimately in academic performance...When students have excessive stress, their self-talk changes, they begin to imagine negative outcomes in the future, and that will slip into their language with you."

In addition, Knauss explains:

Some individuals act out their stress or distress through high-risk behavior, substance use, or aggression. While acting out or externalizing behavior may look harmful on the surface, it may also reflect a sense of hope and a willingness to seek out help. Other individuals isolate, turn inward, and appear as if they have become invisible. Those who isolate are often at higher risk for self-harm behavior because they may have lost the drive or energy needed to signal distress and/or fight to be noticed and helped.

Test anxiety is a particular student concern worth highlighting. Despite the elimination of SAT subject tests and the rise of test-optional college admissions, students are still faced with numerous tests in high school—and again in college. While a modest amount of anxiety can sometimes improve performance on simple tasks, higher anxiety undermines the complex thinking required on exams. Dr. Gwennyth Palafox, clinical psychologist with Meaningful Growth, recommends "helping students develop a system of studying before the test that they can rely on. I find that well-intentioned parents take on a bulk of the responsibility

of test preparation. Not being directly involved in test preparation leaves students anxious and without the experience of test preparation. The more a student is involved in their own test preparation the better."

Applerouth, who has written and presented extensively on test anxiety, offers several suggestions:

> We can teach them to identify areas they've managed anxiety in other domains of life...and bring those skills to bear on the academic domain. We can help normalize test anxiety... teach them that some stress is actually quite beneficial for performance on testing and help them reappraise stress and arousal in a more positive light. We can encourage students to become more reflective and self-aware...potentially writing about their experience. We can teach students simple centering techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing, mindfulness, meditation, or tapping.

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As independent educational consultants, it's not our role to treat the anxiety or other symptoms we may observe in our students, even if we have a mental health background. However, there are many other ways we can assist students, including:

- **Listen.** It's tempting to jump in immediately and offer advice. But as Stephen Covey says in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, "Seek first to understand." Being truly heard and understood can be deeply reassuring to students. It can start with a comment as simple as, "I understand that you've really been missing your friends at school."

- **Express concern.** Let a student know in a compassionate way what you're observing: "It seems like you're having a hard time making deadlines lately. How are you managing?" Knauss advises, "Don't wait for the student to come to you. Many students assume that they are the only one struggling and that asking for help will not be well received...If you see a student struggling, say something. Offer to meet and problem-solve together and never assume that students know what they need."

- **Encourage a growth mindset.** When students describe their challenges in fixed, immutable ways ("I'm just no good at math"), try introducing a more flexible view ("I know it's been hard for you, but these are skills that you can improve if you're willing to work at it").

- **Consider cultural factors.** "Certain students have families that pay more attention to and apply more pressure to academic performance," according to Applerouth. Moreover, Knauss observes:

> Cultural factors may impact how a person views their behavior or symptoms, whether or not they seek help, who they might turn to for help, and what kind of support a person has around them. Words like stress, anxiety, depression, or learning difference are not necessarily acceptable vocabulary within certain cultural circles. In some cultures, mental health challenges are viewed as weaknesses...For these individuals, the stigma...is the first barrier to treatment...In this time of telemedicine and remote therapy, it is certainly becoming easier to find a treatment provider who is more sensitive to the needs of particular cultural groups and I encourage young people to seek out counselors who are culturally competent and sensitive to the ways that culture plays a role.

- **Provide tools.** Levine notes, "Providing direct coaching around strengthening executive function skills is one way to help students feel more in control of their academics and, in turn, help reduce academic stress. Focusing on explicitly teaching executive function skills isn't a cure-all for stress, but it is undoubtedly a key piece of the puzzle for many students."

- **Remind them they're not alone.** Knauss advises, "Normalize the experience. Many individuals are struggling right now. While each of our experiences is unique to our own situation and may vary in intensity, knowing that one is not alone can be comforting... Encourage the young person to seek out and identify a trusted support team. This may include a psychiatrist, therapist, mentor, coach, teachers, family members or friends. Many of our best resources are right in front of us on a daily basis."