School Practitioner Community of Practice
(A network for sharing & exchange)

August 9, 2017

Topic: **Helping students cope with academic
and social pressure**

**Comments from college students reflecting on
their high school experiences**

Invitation to Listserv Participants to Share Perspectives

Featured Center Resources on

> **>the role of school in reducing stress**

From the Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, UCLA

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Given shrinking education budgets, we have been asked to increase our
outreach to make our free resources more available (e.g., for planning,
professional development, etc.).

*So please feel free to share with anyone you think might benefit (e.g., forward our
resources to individuals and share on listservs and websites).*

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For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources
directly, send an email to **Ltaylor@ucla.edu**

For previous postings of community of practice discussions, see
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm
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Note: In keeping with the *National Initiative for Transforming Student & Learning
Supports*, this is being sent to and forwarded by over 100,000 school and community
stakeholders concerned about (1) daily matters confronting schools, (2) promoting
whole child development and positive school climate, and (3) the transformation of
student and learning supports.

Helping students cope with academic and social pressure

Here's a common request we receive: "I am a student assistance counselor and crisis counselor at a high school. ... I have been in education for 43 years and I find my caseload increasing in areas of depression and anxiety. I am finding that my students simply don't know how to cope with academic or social pressure. Any insight that your materials would give me would be wonderful. Thanks for all that you do to assist people like me."

Center Comments As this request indicates, the need for student/learning supports continues to grow and is outstripping the capacity of available student support staff to meet the need on a case-by-case basis. It is essential to shift thinking and approach such matters as a school-wide concern and the need for systemic changes. Here are some thoughts about that:

(1) *Staff Development.* With the new school year, the opportunity is to embed the focus into the staff development agenda for strengthening a positive and supportive school climate in ways that benefit students and staff. For resources, we suggest starting with our online clearinghouse Quick Find on:

>*Classroom and School Climate* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/environments.htm

A Center developed resource listed there that might help the discussion is

>*Schools as Caring, Learning Communities* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/caring.pdf

(2) *Ensure a School-wide Classroom Focus.* Another way to enhance a school-wide focus on such concerns is to develop a policy that calls for embedding them as topics for discussion and learning during the school day (e.g., in home room or a relevant class). The point is to allow all students to share their concerns (e.g., about stressors and related anxiety) and then teach them coping strategies. In addition, peer mentoring often is seen as a useful added strategy.

For resources related to this, we suggest starting with our online clearinghouse Quick Find on:

>*Resilience/protective factors* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/resilience.html

A Center developed resource on this topic listed there is

>*Protective Factors* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/sampler/resiliency/resilien.pdf

(3) *Special Assistance.* Hopefully, the above efforts will reduce the number who require more specific help. Those wo need something more are candidates for (a) special groups designed to provide in-depth exploration and mutual support in coping with academic and social pressures and (b) if necessary, individual intervention.

One brief resource that might be helpful for this is

>*Students and anxiety problems* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/anxiety.pdf

For links to more resources about anxiety, stress, and affect/mood concerns, see our online clearinghouse Quick Finds on:

>*Anxiety and stress* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/anxiety.htm

>*Affect and mood/depression* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/depression.htm

Comments from college students reflecting on their high school experiences

Too often, the views of students are not taken into consideration. Given that they are only a few years out of high school, we thought the insights of some of the students working with our Center would be relevant. Here's a sample of what they shared:

(1) *What do I think are the greatest areas of stress for high school students?* It depends: Some students are stressed because they may be behind their grade level and are encountering a scenario in which their performance in high school has significant implications for their near and far future. Others may feel overwhelmed by the amount of tasks that they need to engage in- in addition to keeping up their grades, such as exit exams for high school, the SAT, extracurricular activities, etc. In addition to these academic worries, students often have personal and social issues that they face at the family and community level.

   What do I think schools can do to reduce the stress? Include lessons on time management in the curriculum of life skills courses. Increase counseling for students so they all meet with a counselor at least once a semester. Examine school culture and investigate if there is something school specific that is increasing student stress. Reduce the emphasis on test scores and increase the emphasis on student learning.

   How can school best help students learn to cope with stress? Create mentor programs that are intentional and effective: pair older alumni from that high school who have successfully navigated high school and college to be role models for younger students; mentor pairs with teachers as well as counselors may also be a way to strengthen student-school staff relationships in a structured way. This helps assure students that there is a person who genuinely cares about them. Enhance leadership development: Workshops on leadership development and communication could improve student confidence in themselves and positively impact how they experience their social environment. Engage in mindfulness exercises and activities during P.E. classes: Yoga and meditation circles could potentially be a way to help students deal with high stress.

(2) It's difficult to target specific areas of stress for high school students, especially when root causes differ depending on a student's financial situation, race/ethnicity, gender, etc. From my experiences in high school, a lot of the stress comes from being expected to do well, with every examination or assessment perceived as an assessment of one's value. For social pressure, it's a bit more complicated understanding the causes, but some could possibly be finding one's "group" on campus (and thus, an self-identity), idealizations of the perfect person, etc.

   To make schools less stressful have more academic resources available for post-classroom assistance and guidance. This could include more (free) tutors, workshops, etc. In terms of social pressure, it would be great to have more spaces for different types of students to coalesce based on diverse interests/passions.... Students tend to find their social groups based on classes or organizations they are in, so diversifying the availability of such groups could help students feel less stressed to conform to a specific label.

   I think most importantly, however, the conversation should focus on how to decrease crucial areas of stress. Dialogue between teachers and students is one of the biggest influences on a student's sense of self-worth, self-confidence, and trust in the school environment. Thus, encouraging educators and other staff who interact with kids to ...make themselves available could be helpful. When I was the most stressed in high school, it made a significant difference that there was an adult figure (my college counselor) who could help me navigate through my worries and my ambitions. She did this in a way that didn't make me depend on her, but empowered me and made me feel a lot more equipped to handle my stress.

(3) "I feel that expectations about life and the future can be a major cause of stress. The society, school, and family are expecting them to grow up and become an adult, but they are still in

the at stage of figuring themselves out. They may not know what they really want in the future; even if they do, they may not feel confident that they can really reach their goal. I think feeling uncertain about things in life makes students feel lost and anxious.....

If schools can provide more career-planning resources, it may help to ease the stress of the students as they can explore different options of personal development. It would be great if students can know what they like and don't like, so that they have a clearer picture of the things they can do in life. It would be great if teachers have more knowledge about mental health. From my experience, many teachers really want to help their students when they are struggling, yet the teachers don't know how and what is the appropriate way to approach this problem. So having more teacher training sessions at schools may be beneficial to both teachers and students....

(4) Several areas of great stress come to mind when it comes to high school students. First, there is social stress that is created as teens are undergoing puberty and have this incline to be socially accepted. Therefore, there is much pressure to try and "fit in" into a social circle and the consequences of being excluded can lead to bullying and self-confidence issues, both of which can lead to depression and anxiety. Another source of stress is academics. With universities getting more rigorous to get into, it can be stressful to become a competitive applicant. Not only must the student make sure that their grades are good, but they must be involved in extra-curricular activities, clubs, sports, volunteer, among others. In other words, for some students it feels as if they must spread themselves thin throughout the four high school years in order to get into college. These two sources of stress can come into conflict with one another. If a high school student is trying to socialize in order to fit in, it can be difficult to keep up with academics and vice versa, so it is always socializing or academics that is compromised making the student stressed to have to balance these two....

To target social stress, schools can create activities in which students are encouraged to meet and interact with new students. In terms of academic stress, the school can provide free tutoring to help students complete difficult assignments or even workshops that teach students study skills and time management skills, with the hope of alleviating some of that academic pressure....

(5) ...Due to the number of expectations put on high school students nowadays, students always feel like they are never "good enough." Along with trying to excel in academics, they are also devoting their time to different extracurricular activities and there are only so many hours in one day. Peer-based mentorship is a great way to help reduce stress. It helps a lot to have someone that is around your age connect with you on the stress students experience in high school and to have someone tell you that things are going to be ok. ... Teachers/counselors should spend time trying to educate students about how the "name" really doesn't matter that much when attending university.... Have a couple of class periods allowing students to research what universities they feel would fit their personality, interests, etc. the best. Questions such as what are the benefits of a public vs. private institution? How big are class sizes on average? Is there a department for the specific major I am interested in?... I know students that ended up going to smaller, less well-known universities, yet they really excelled and ended up going to great graduate schools.

How can school best help students learn to cope with stress? Schools should employ peer-based mentorships between juniors and seniors, especially since the juniors will be in the process of preparing to apply. Establish an alumni network with students that are already enrolled in college and allowing them to give tips to currently enrolled high school students.... Provide time for support groups to come together and talk about how they feel under all the stress. It really did help me to talk to my friends and encourage one another when we were in the process....

(6) The academic bar is a lot higher nowadays, so it's not just pressure to do well, but to be the best. With this comes competitiveness amongst peers, and sometimes distrust. Sometimes friends are viewed as the enemy, and then you lose out on someone who could support you

when you're struggling in a class. It becomes an issue of being forced to internalize a lot of things, which isn't helpful, especially with anxiety, where you heighten events more and more rather than hearing someone ground you in much more likely events, or with depression, where you don't feel motivated to go out with friends because you believe they don't care/are better off without you.

Stress piles up in terms of feeling lost, inferior, and left out. No one communicates their struggles with one another and everyone believes they are the only ones who are suffering; everyone else is coasting by in life. Stress also comes from fearing failure or shame. If word does get out that one isn't doing well, they might be ostracized, bullied, or ridiculed. Going back to the high bar of expectation set nowadays, the definition of success becomes narrower as the net of failure widens... It becomes an all or nothing mentality, with no recognition of the knowledge that comes from making mistakes or not succeeding the first time around, no admiration for those who pick themselves up after falling, and no room for anything other than the initial goal....

Not to be neglected are the other forms of stress felt from adjusting to puberty, making/losing friends, parental pressures and expectations, reputations/popularity, and discovering one's identity. Promoting mental health awareness would help. Offering alternative support systems (through the counselors, teachers, faculty) for students and emphasizing that there is no stigma associated from seeking help is good.... Help students realize that there are many paths to success.... Emphasize musical talent, athleticism, hard work, or determination or other values of success. Emphasize the freedom and acceptability to make a mistake, but to learn from it would be helpful. ... Give students greater independence at school to think about their careers for the sake of themselves, rather than what their parents or peers might expect from them.

In terms of the classroom, consistently having curved tests pit students against each other and raise the level of competitiveness and distrust amongst peers. Activities or assignments that ask students to work with each other to altogether earn a good grade promote not only more physical time for students to get to know one another as fellow humans undergoing the same tumultuous time period, but also encourage and foster friendships and relationships to grow. It asks for teamwork rather than competitiveness. Discussions are also very important to have in classrooms or sharing activities....

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Invitation to Listserv Participants to Share Perspectives

What strategies can you share for school-wide and classroom strategies to reduce stress/anxiety and strengthen coping?

Send your responses to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Featured Center Resources on
>the role of school in reducing stress

In addition to the resources cited above, here are a few other Center resources that may be helpful:

>*Designing School Improvement to Enhance Classroom Climate for All Students* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolclimate.pdf

>*About Resilience and Schools* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/resili.pdf

>*Students and Anxiety Problems* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/anxiety.pdf

>*About Supporting Those Who Seem Depressed* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/dep.pdf

If you missed the quarterly ejournal for summer 2017 or the monthly ENEWS or haven't browsed our new free book entitled *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide,* you can access them and more from the Center's homepage http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/

THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND INTERESTING THIS RESOURCE BECOMES!

For new sign-ups – email Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Also send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences for sharing.
We post a broad range of issues and responses to the *Net Exchange*
on our website at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newnetexchange.htm
and on *Facebook* (access from the Center's home page http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/)
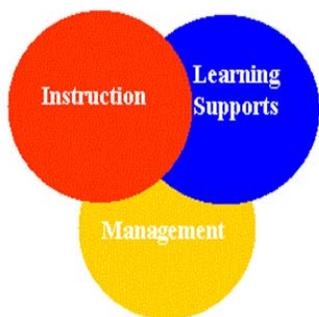
*Information is online about the

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html

And see the new book:

>*Transforming Student and Learning Supports:*
Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System
https://titles.cognella.com/transforming-student-and-learning-supports-9781516512782.html