



FAMILY *Matters*

Youth and young adults are more distressed than ever?

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Multiple researchers have noticed increased distress among youth and young adults in the form of anxiety, stress and depression. The increase is due to a confluence of multiple factors including social, political, familial, technological, personal, athletic endeavors and academic factors. Awareness of these recent influential trends can reduce the chance of these issues occurring in your own family.

As a society, we put increasingly more pressure on children to succeed. In moderation, it can help improve achievement motivation, but in excess, can promote perfectionism, low perceived competence and the fear of failure. These high expectations and perfectionism can also lead to anxiety because it is difficult to ever be satisfied that you have done enough. In addition, many families overschedule children in a multitude of activities which reduces downtime and the important unstructured social moments critical to development. Many parents have become more involved in directing their child's activities to promote achievement (aka helicopter parents). However, an overly protective environment inhibits independence and a self-directed mindset. This pressure and over involvement can also result in escapism and avoidance of the stress through excessive use of video and electronic games.

The use of technology can also adversely affect stress levels and social anxiety. Comparing oneself to others on social media posts can lead to anxiety and stress about feeling lesser

than others in the social comparison. It is important to understand that social media posts tend to be positively inflated and glamorized versions thereby creating an unrealistic comparison. Difficulty turning off electronic access to friends can also increase anxiety and stress. In my experience, there is a stress inducing perception among youth and young adults that they must respond immediately quickly to texts and other social media communications for fear of leaving the other person feeling rejected.

Excessive emphasis on youth sport performance can increase distress especially if there's hyper focus on winning at all costs and the push for potential collegiate sport scholarships which are typically a low probability. Academic pressures to get the highest grades possible and acceptance to the best or most prestigious college can also add anxiety and pressure. When considering secondary education, it is important to consider what the best fit is for the college-bound student to a prospective university. This could mean that the best or most prestigious college may not be the best option.

What can parents do to mitigate the increase in distress?

- Place high but reasonable expectations on your children and promote independence oriented support.
- Promote a growth mindset by helping your child realize that self-improvement is more important than perfection-

ism which is unachievable.

- Help your child build perceived competence by benchmarking success based on their own improvement rather than comparing themselves to others.
- Provide a balanced schedule of activities that allows for physical activity, cognitive stimulation and free time.
- Limit access to electronic games and social media. Use the electronic limitations available through most cell phone and Internet providers if use becomes excessive or disruptive.
- Set reasonable academic goals with your child and support where possible their independent efforts which will help promote perceived competence.
- Help your children understand the importance of hard work and effort by pointing out how their efforts affect their performance.
- Encourage your children to complete as many independent tasks as they are capable of. For example, ordering their own food at a restaurant and/or doing house hold chores.
- Talk with your children about stress.
- Choose a college that is the best fit for your child not necessarily the most prestigious one.

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Dr. Zito welcomes your questions and ideas for future articles. The information provided in this article is for informational purposes and is not intended to treat any person or condition. Seek professional services if treatment is needed.