



Fall Speaker

Thursday, November 14, 2019

National Presbyterian School

Under Pressure: Confronting the Epidemic of Stress and Anxiety in Tweens and Teens

Lisa Damour, Ph.D.

This year's Fall Speaker Event featured esteemed psychologist and best-selling author Lisa Damour, Ph.D., who addressed an audience of approximately 400 parents, teachers and administrators at National Presbyterian School (NPS). Susan Newell, President of the Parents Council of Washington (PCW), and Malcolm Lester, Head of School at NPS, welcomed the audience. Lisa Damour was introduced and welcomed by PCW Event Co-Chair, Suzanne Dowd.

Lisa Damour, Ph.D. writes the monthly *Adolescence* column for the *New York Times* and is a regular contributor at *CBS News*. She serves as a Senior Advisor to the Schubert Center for Child Studies at Case Western Reserve University and as the Executive Director of the Laurel School's Center for Research on Girls in Ohio. Dr. Damour maintains a private psychotherapy practice, consults, and speaks nationally and internationally. She is author of two *New York Times* bestselling books, *Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions into Adulthood* and *Under Pressure: Confronting the Epidemic of Stress and Anxiety in Girls*.

Dr. Damour commenced by discussing the focus on stress and anxiety in today's society. In fact, the focus is so widespread that we actually stress about stress and are anxious about anxiety! We seem to have forgotten that healthy levels of stress and anxiety are perfectly normal and have always been a part of everyday life, and are not necessarily a bad thing. Dr. Damour spent the morning discussing:

- Correcting misunderstandings
- Fixing well-meaning errors
- Adapting parents to current conditions

How Do We Correct Misunderstandings?

Stress is a part of everyday life. It occurs when you adapt to change and move past your comfort zone (i.e., bringing home a newborn, getting married, losing a job or loved one). In the field of psychology, stress is seen as a given and a good. As the singer and songwriter, Kelly Clarkson, famously says, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger!" When you weather difficulties, you handle new challenges with greater ease; like bringing home a second child is not as daunting as the first. We, as adults, have a reduced sense of stress, because we have experiences under our belt.

How do we convince kids that stress is awesome? School is supposed to be stressful! As Dr. Damour states, it is like a weightlifting program for your mind. What parents and kids need to work on is the recovery. When you lift weights in the gym, you need to take time to allow your body to recover. You do not just continuously lift weights until you collapse. Recovery from stress is essential. Keep in mind that recovery is a wildly personal thing for every individual. For example, some might find comfort from eating a pint of Ben & Jerry's ice cream, while others might seek comfort from binge watching their favorite TV show.

Our culture talks about anxiety like it is a bad thing, but anxiety is our body's natural threat alert system. Take a step back in time and imagine a cave person seeing a saber tooth tiger. One cave person's threat alert system sees it and says run. While the other cave person may see the animal and think to go check it out. Anxiety alerts us to external as well as internal threats. Anxiety is necessary for our survival!

How do we convince kids that anxiety is a good thing when responding to internal and external threats? Explain to them that they *should* be anxious before they take a test. If they are feeling a 2 or a 3 out of 10 on an anxiety scale before a test, reassure them that is OK. However, it is not healthy when anxiety is occurring in the absence of a threat, or when it is way out of proportion to the threat, like a 13 on a scale of ten.

How Do We Fix Well-Meaning Errors?

In today's climate, kids are stressed about being stressed, and anxious about being anxious. How did we get so far away from the fact that these are normal responses? The wellness industry and the monetization of wellness are partially to blame. If you can sell the idea that anxiety and stress are bad for you, then you can pay someone to make you feel better, and to make these uncomfortable emotions go away. Whereas in reality, you are actually not supposed to feel that good that often.

Stress and anxiety happen and are a part of daily life, as are complete meltdowns! Thirteen-year-old children are the Ground Zero for meltdowns. They are the great equalizer of parents and will bring every parent to their knees. When faced with a meltdown avoid these actions:

- Asking what happened; it will only make the meltdown worse

- Saying it will be fine; again, even worse
- Suggesting that maybe you should just get more sleep; meltdown will go nuclear!

Dr. Damour believes the use of a glitter jar is genius, and is effective in calming one's stress and anxiety. To make one, you simply take a jar filled with water and add two tablespoons of glitter. When a child is having a meltdown, you shake the glitter jar and have the child calmly watch as the glitter settles back down to the bottom. The brain will slowly remodel in the order in which it originally formed, and the intense emotions housed in the frontal lobe of the brain will eventually settle down. If the emotions do not calm down, they will take over the brain and cause a meltdown. When kids are emotional they are irrational. So, when a meltdown happens say:

- Do you want some water?
- Do you want me to stay with you, or do you want space to be upset?

And, the grown up should just sit calmly and wait. You can almost watch the frontal lobe calm down, so just be patient and understand that sometimes kids just need to fall part.

What does this mean for us in our well-meaning errors? Our reaction will drive their response to their experience. For example, when a young child falls and skins a knee, the response will oftentimes mirror ours. If we go nuts, then they will too. If we can learn to be patient, then we can give them the space they need to see that it will be ok.

Another well-meaning error, is letting kids avoid things that make them anxious. You simply cannot do this. Avoidance only feeds anxiety and contributes to full-blown phobias. It also just provides short-term relief, but creates long-term problems.

How do we talk to kids about conflicts? We are shocked that kids have conflicts. We tell them to try to be respectful, but what does that exactly mean? We actually need to teach them how to handle conflict. There are three forms of unhealthy conflict:

- Bulldozer – e.g., getting in someone's face or confronting them directly
- Doormat – e.g., going to your room to cry alone
- Doormat with spikes – e.g., using guilt as a weapon; playing the victim and involving third parties

Keep in mind that every human needs a place to vent. And, that venting and involving a third party are not the same.

Healthy forms of conflict - being a pillar and standing up for yourself. We, as parents, may have urged kids into conflicts they do not want to have. We, as adults, do not engage in every annoyance or slight that we experience every day. When a child brings a conflict to you, ask them, "Do you want to take this up with her or him? Is this relationship important to you? If you pillar this, will they pillar it back?" Conflict is exhausting. So, that is why we need to give options. One option is to be a pillar. The other option is emotional aikido. Emotional aikido is when you tell them to let go, because sometimes it's just not worth it.

There is a big difference between being a doormat and emotional aikido.

How To Parent In Current Conditions?

School is not what it was when we were kids. We did not take 13 AP classes while playing on a travel team and solving all the world's problems on the side. Kids have become more overwhelmed. What we need to do is help kids work the problem. We need to help kids get the great grade they want by doing the minimal amount of work. More is not more. Do what is asked, not more.

The best way to prepare for a test is by taking a sample test. Take a sample test and then study what you do not know after you take it. That way you study what you do not know instead of what you do.

We do not have causal evidence to know that smart phones are destroying a generation. Instead of focusing on what we do not know, let's focus on the things we do know are essential to growth - sleep and social interaction. Sleep is crucial to one's emotional, mental, and physical well-being. Sleep and technology are mortal enemies. Don't ever allow technology in bedrooms - even parents! If you have to, use technology as a carrot to get them to accomplish other tasks. Social interaction is incredibly important. And, as parents, we must abide by the very same rules we expect our kids to follow!

Do not be against technology. Be for things! Be for sleep! Be for outdoors!

Key Points from the Question and Answer

- Strongly consider setting up a universal charging station in your home, and ask your child to hand in their devices at a set time at the end of the day, so they can focus on their homework without interruption and get quality sleep. Elementary and middle school aged children require 9 to 11 hours of sleep and high schoolers need 8 to 9 hours. There is no reason for a child to have their cell phone in their bedrooms, while doing homework or sleeping. If needed, buy them a traditional alarm clock. Also, without proper sleep, children cannot remember or recall what they learned the day before.
- If your child's mind goes blank when taking a test or studying for an exam, have them try these two strategies - practice tests and square breathing - 3 seconds inhale and 6 seconds exhale. There are nerve endings in the lining of the lungs that send an immediate signal to the brain to calm down.
- Extracurricular sports may serve as a recovery mechanism for one child, but not necessarily for another. Be mindful of each child's personality.

Go to www.drlisadamour.com for more resources, including Lisa's occasional newsletter.