

Mental Health Panel: School-based Support

Wednesday, January 25, 2023, 7:00 pm
The Field School

Panelists:

- **Adam Diaz**, Lower and Middle School Counselor, Landon School
- **Dr. Holly Hinderlie**, School Psychologist and Upper School Counselor, Holton-Arms School
- **Josie Woods**, Upper School Counselor and Director of Student Support, The Potomac School
- **Dr. Heather Tedesco**, Psychologist (Moderator)

Summary of Key Points:

Stress, Anxiety and Worry

- Words like stress and anxiety are often used interchangeably and incorrectly. It is important to note the definitions of each, and how each presents in the body to determine the best course of action.
- Stress is a physical response in the body to help us resolve physical threats (fight, flight, freeze).
- When a child is in stress mode, making sense of the situation is very difficult. Focus on creating calm before reaching for next steps.
- Calm makes calm - remember this when talking with your children.
- Physical symptoms of stress:
 - Elevated heart rate
 - Tightness in chest
 - Stomachache
 - Headache
 - Buzzing in head, throat, chest
- Things one can do to help reduce stress:
 - Exercise
 - Eating something we like
 - Taking a warm or cold shower
 - Going for a walk (getting outside time) ----> Serotonin
 - Spending time with people we care about ----> Oxytocin
 - Deep Breathing (regulation)

- Strategies that can help with anxiety
 - Having set routines
 - Practice daily gratitude. A gratitude practice has been shown to:
 - Improve physical and psychological health
 - Improve sleep
 - Increases empathy
 - Reduces aggression
 - More social connection
 - Enhances self esteem
 - Improves mental strength
 - Gratitude allows us to experience more richness from all that we have. It allows us to reframe difficult situations.

Properly identifying emotions such as jealousy and envy

- Emotional granularity is the ability to get granular with what you are feeling. Accurate identification of feelings can help us to take appropriate steps.
- Help your child realize the difference between jealousy and envy in order to better understand these emotions.
 - Envy occurs when we want something someone else has.
 - Jealousy is when we fear losing a relationship or part of a relationship that we already have.

The social-emotional lives of children/teens “post-pandemic”

- There is a mental health crisis in children and teens brought on by the pandemic.
- During COVID students had reduced in-person contact and increased time on devices.
- Since the pandemic social connection has become even more important for our children’s health and well-being than ever before.
- The pandemic created lots of family time, but relative isolation from peers. Because of this, we are seeing more immature behavior in social interactions at all grade levels.
- During the pandemic there was more reliance on technology for communication.
- Technology use (e.g. having a phone, access to online games, or having a Social Media account) is important to build social clout and popularity.

Technology use and psychological fallout

- A Pew research study shows an increase in social media use since 2014 – 15. With more students reporting that they are on social media “almost constantly” throughout their day.
- Non-stop use has many consequences including hyper-connection which can cause anxiety.
- Kids can become oversaturated with social information and exhausted by the need to respond constantly.
- This has also led to constant comparison (Who has the best life?) and a hyper focus on appearance for teen girls and being funny or cool for boys.

Social Media drives social anxiety

- Social media has been linked to increased anxiety, depression and lowered self-esteem.
- Social media plays into girls’ tendency to compare themselves with others (strive for perfectionism)
 - The need to curate the perfect life with the perfect pictures encourages perfectionism and anxiety about not being perfect.

- Negative self-talk – about one’s own life vs. other people’s lives
- Teens are not learning how to take emotional risks in person, without relying on text messaging or posts.

Social Cruelty and Cancel Culture

- Cyberbullying includes public teasing or humiliation, posting unflattering pictures, or nasty comments online.
- “Canceling” is when students are ignored for one comment they made which may have been unintentional or even misinterpreted.
- The distance on social media makes it easier to be cruel.

Connections do matter with teenagers

- It is natural for teenagers to spend more time alone or with friends to separate from their parents and seek autonomy. However, teenagers still need and want strong relationships with their parents.
- Research shows that teenagers who have trusting, loving, and open relationships with their parents are more equipped to manage independence and persevere through difficult moments.
- Listen to your teenagers without judgment and show you are interested in their thoughts.
- Words and actions matter. It is important to connect with your child daily beyond academics. They need to feel unconditional love and acceptance that is not based on achievement.

Be mindful of the messaging around perfection

- As parents, we are working hard to help our children reach their potential and meet their goals. How do we know what’s the right level of pressure? It’s important to listen to your child.
- Understand that there is inherent pressure that comes with being a student in a highly competitive private school and applying to colleges.
- Be mindful of the direct and indirect messages you share associated with grades and getting all A’s. Teenagers are listening and watching everything we do.
- Expectations to be perfect are internalized and can lead to low self-esteem, shame, and a feeling of worthlessness.
- If there are roughly 3000 colleges in the US, consider focusing on the top 10% instead of the top 10.

Healthy stress versus unhealthy

- Stress is a normal and necessary human reaction. Research shows that the human body is designed to experience and manage appropriate amounts of stress.
- In small amounts, stress is healthy, and helps motivate teenagers. Healthy stress helps teenagers focus, grow, avoid danger, and push toward goals that lead to inner strength and resiliency.
- When stress becomes too intense, goes on for extended periods of time, and continues without relief, this can lead to physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms that affect overall health.
- For parents, it’s difficult to determine the difference between healthy and unhealthy stress and anxiety. Keep an eye out for new behaviors that are concerning to you. Engage in conversations with your child about what you are noticing and your concerns. Ask open-ended questions and listen without being critical or trying to solve the problem for them. Ask your child, do you want me to just listen or provide guidance and help you create a plan?
- Remind your child you are always available to support them and provide affection and encouragement.

- Parents can help their children by adopting and modeling healthy habits to manage their own stress by engaging in self-care, such as exercising, meditation, breathing exercises, getting enough sleep, reading a book, or taking a small walk.
- Model for your child to focus on what you can control, ask for support when you need it, set small and reachable goals, engage in a practice of gratitude, and stay connected to people who make you happy. Children often mimic what they see and hear from their parents.
- Finally, you can always reach out to a healthcare practitioner or school counselor if the signs of stress do not decrease for your child and start to interfere with their ability to engage in their day-to-day life.

Work with your school counselor

- Through collaboration with your school counselor, we can work together to develop a plan that will support your child.
- School counselors are advocates and can coordinate support with faculty and coaches when needed.
- Sharing information with the school models for students that asking for help is not a sign of weakness and helps break down stigmas associated with mental health.
- Sharing information can reduce your child's stress and anxiety around perceived judgment from their teachers and coaches, provide a sense of relief that they no longer have to hide something, and increase open lines of communication.

We are adults, we go first (@lori.desautels)

- We regulate first. Emotional regulation is essential to everyday life. It affects our understanding of a situation and how we should respond. Managing emotions can be difficult. As parents, modeling for our children gives them a roadmap and will help them develop life skills and enhance their well-being.
- We apologize first. Empathy and understanding how someone else is feeling are essential to connections and relationships. Apologizing isn't always easy. Acknowledging that we made a mistake models vulnerability, courage, and that it's OK to not be perfect.
- We take responsibility first. Accepting responsibility can be difficult, especially for teens who do not have fully formed brains. It helps us work through mistakes we've made and manage emotions such as regret or guilt. As your teen watches you, it models taking responsibility so someone can grow, learn and mend relationships. It's crucial to build core values, character, and accountability.
- We connect and repair first. Conflicts will happen on a regular basis. Ask yourself, what are you willing to lose to be right? Rebuilding after the conflict is essential to the relationship and at times, you will need to actively work on it. This helps them to feel unconditional love and acceptance, that you will listen when they express feelings, they have the right to disagree in the right manner, that you can learn from different perspectives, and at the core is an adult who will always believe in them and put their relationship above everything else.