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Back to School can Bring big Changes and big Worries: What to Watch for to Help Reduce Stress and Anxiety

Often as summer days are winding down, it's common for children, teens, and young adults to feel anxious and develop apprehensiveness about the upcoming school year.

As parents and caregivers, it's essential to recognize and address signs of stress and anxiety so that they can provide support and guidance. The approach they take to help is critical. They must show a clear path forward at a challenging time, while offering reassurance and tools to help them cope with their feelings. Introducing positive approaches to building confidence and creating an environment that allows their children to develop a better sense of well-being, can ease their worries and encourage them to be open-minded about the upcoming academic year.

In this article, we'll offer some ideas about how stress and anxiety may present themselves and address possible reasons why they have cropped up. Having an approach to help work through these feelings and learn about the importance of how to care for mental health will come about through open discussion. It's crucial to ensure your strength and resilience are healthy by modelling the need for self-care.

Recognizing signs of stress and anxiety

Sometimes, minor environmental shifts (like "back to school" signs outside retailers) can set off worry about returning to school, even if it is still weeks away. Here are some things to watch for:

- In younger children, stress and anxiety can show up as:
 - Emotional outbursts.
 - Insomnia or sleep troubles.
 - Changes in eating habits.
- In teens and young adults, stress and anxiety might look like:
 - Self-criticism and social withdrawal.
 - A rejection of everyday routines and activities.
 - Substance use.

What could be causing it?

- Younger children might be faced with anticipation around:
 - Starting at a new school.
 - Concerns around whether they will be in the same classes as their friends.
 - Worrying about bullying they may have experienced or are anticipating. For example, due to changes in their health, like being unable to see or hear clearly, can build anxious feelings because they could anticipate being treated differently by peers or targeted and made fun of if they need to wear glasses or use hearing amplification devices.

For teens and young adults, there are a lot of factors to consider. Let's look at some of the most common ones.

1. Transitioning to secondary school can be stressful.

- Up to now, things have been pretty straightforward, and they may have felt confident because they were familiar with the teachers and routines.
- Secondary schools will introduce different and new approaches, expectations and accountabilities.
- Some of these may be explained in a student code of conduct that addresses items such as dress codes, attendance and disciplinary measures.

2. Competing commitments can make someone feel that they are spread too thin and creates stress. It's essential to consider ways to support them that make the experiences "more rewarding, stimulating or pleasant," which could initially seem counterintuitive.¹ For example, they may be comfortable combining homework and social time. To some extent, we need to trust the process and be ready to listen, offering guidance to help them navigate the many things competing for their time when they begin to show that they may be overwhelmed.

- School work
 - Reinforce that learning requires dedication and focus, which comes from studying. It means that they will learn more with repeated exposure and application. Learning should be framed as continuous.
- Activities
 - Participating in activities they enjoy will help them develop confidence and good self-care practices. Sports, choirs, dancing, acting, gaming, and other groups focusing on causes are just a few examples.

- Social time
 - Spending time with friends has many benefits and can help them feel a sense of community and belonging.
- Work
 - Consider setting limits for work hours to reinforce a priority on education and an expectation around studying and completing homework and assignments on time.
 - Offer coaching to help them set appropriate boundaries with their supervisors.
- Family obligations
 - Regular household operations and maintenance should be established. That might include cleaning, cooking, laundry, or cutting the lawn.
 - There may be time spent as a family unit having fun on vacation, at the beach, or simply being together.
- Volunteering
 - Some school boards encourage volunteerism and require several dedicated volunteer hours as a condition of graduation.

3. Nearing the end of high school can be a time when there is a lot of uncertainty and nervousness about entering a new phase of life and determining what comes next. It is important to remember that some anxiety may be caused by:

- Thinking about how they could be preparing for jobs that may not even exist yet.
- Fears:
 - Of disappointing parents.
 - Of being compared to siblings.
 - Of finding they lack what they believe is a marker of being "successful."
- Parents and caregivers need to consider the influence of social media in teens' or young adults' lives. Traditional or familiar career paths may not be part of their plans, creating conflict as it can be challenging to understand a different approach to establishing income and finding personal economic security.
- They may be struggling with anticipation around the expectations of attending post-secondary schooling, which creates tremendous amounts of stress and anxiety about:
 - Needing to achieve necessary entry requirements for programs.
 - Funding post-secondary education.
 - Finding affordable, safe living arrangements.
 - Figuring out how to suddenly be responsible for all of their own tasks that they may not be sure of yet.

4. The transition to post-secondary school.

- There are increased expectations and a more rapid approach to learning that can create pressures and take away from some of the excitement of new-found independence and accountability.
- Many students report “a decline in mental health” as the study period continues because they feel increased pressures academically, socially, and financially, which can put them at increased risk of experiencing anxiety and developing depression because of intense demands and expectations.²
- Parental oversight must evolve because legally and for personal and confidential reasons, they can no longer intervene with faculty and administration on behalf of their young adults.
- The onus is on students to discover and take advantage of supports and resources provided by the educational institution. Students are informed of these, and usage is highly encouraged. Sometimes, faculty may initiate a referral if they notice a student is struggling.

How to have a conversation with your child, teen, or young adult about their mental health

Parents and caregivers must be more aware of adopting positive approaches when discussing mental health to demonstrate openness and support. Children, teens, and young adults should understand that mental health is as important as physical health. Starting small and introducing the idea that regular discussion is healthy, is an excellent place to begin.

If you need help approaching the conversation around mental health, focus on keeping things simple and being supportive and open to listening to understand rather than to respond. You might even ask early in the conversation if the person wants to hear anything from you. If not, respect that may only need your time and full attention. When listening, be sure that you are non-judgemental and compassionate.³

- Don't fall into the trap of stigmatizing them by making assumptions about how easy/difficult things are for young people today. It's a sure way to disengage and shut down the conversation.
- Recognize that there may be a reluctance to be fully transparent with and bring up concerns “because they aren't sure how parents and caregivers will react.”⁴
- Consider sharing your feelings to encourage them to open up but don't overshare.
 - You need to gauge what is age and situationally appropriate. Avoid extremes that can be overwhelming.
- Talk about mental health using people they admire or are inspired by.

- Encourage discussion even when it's difficult or feels uncomfortable. It's normal and healthy to do so.
- Understand that dynamics between siblings or friends significantly influence mental health.
 - Always remember to see them as an individual and avoid comparisons.
- Respect their boundaries if they don't want to share or discuss experiences or worries. Offer reassurance and reinforce trust. They need to know that they can bring things up with you when they are ready to and that your support is unconditional.

What can parents or caregivers do to be helpful, especially when this is a stressful time for everyone?

Returning to school is stressful for everyone. As parents and caregivers, it's helpful to work through these situations, introducing healthy ways to cope and reducing some of the stress and anxiety. Be present and open to listening and learning. Above all, recognize everyone as individuals because working in generalizations and focusing on comparisons won't be helpful.

Routines offer predictability and familiarity

- Establishing or reintroducing routines a few weeks before school starts provides consistency and certainty. It is going to be beneficial to counteract uncertainty and confusion.
 - Everyone needs to get sufficient rest to have the best chance of starting a day fresh and with optimism.
 - Start with adjusting sleep schedules so bedtime and wake-up times will be closer to school schedules.
- Plan regular mealtimes to create more structure and reinforce the connection between being nourished and physical and mental health.
 - Include breakfast, lunch and dinners that are healthy and nutritious.
- Book medical checkups before school starts if possible.
 - Meet with a doctor to ensure your child is physically well, vaccinations are up-to-date, and you get copies of any medical records that the school may require.
 - Visit an optometrist to ensure your child's vision is optimal and, if needed, that glasses prescriptions are up-to-date.
 - Schedule a dental appointment to ensure your child's dental health is good.
- Consider preparing supplies in advance to avoid rushing and increased stress.

- For children:
 - Sometimes, supply lists are available before classes start; other times, this information is shared during the early weeks of classes.
 - Reduce stress by pre-planning and allowing some of your budget to go towards saving for these expenses early on.
 - If funding is challenging, local resources or organizations can usually offer support.
 - You can involve your child in the preparations by having them:
 - Clean and organize school bags/backpacks.
 - Label notebooks, pencils, pens, and lunch boxes.
- For teens and young adults:
 - Some secondary schools provide loans for digital equipment for students to use. These may be issued before orientation or during the first weeks of classes. Encourage them to call the school to find out.
 - For post-secondary education, students generally provide their equipment. Still, there are usually open-access computer labs on campus and emergency loaner equipment in case of a technical malfunction.
 - School network accounts may also be something students need to become familiar with to access and complete assignments.

Create a safe space for sharing feelings

Talk to your child about what they may expect for the upcoming school year. You may be surprised to hear where their focus lies. Let them lead the conversation. Work on setting a few small and easy-to-attain goals to help them realize their growth potential and how it can be achieved through their efforts. Emphasize school's positives.

Find ways to help to reduce stress and anxiety

If there are orientations or open houses that happen in the weeks before classes start, take advantage of them. You can meet teachers and administration staff and find new or familiar faces at these events.

Introduce and model tools that can help them cope with feelings of anxiety.

This can be as simple as introducing easy-to-remember breathing and grounding techniques.

- Box breathing
 - It helps some people to remember this technique if they imagine a box with four corners.
 1. Breathe in, counting to four slowly.

2. Next, hold your breath, thinking about the air filling each of the box's four corners.
3. Then, slowly breathe out. Exhale through your nose or mouth, counting to four again.
4. Finally, hold your breath for another four counts before restarting.

- Threes

- This helps calm some people by encouraging focus on their environment and where they are. The key is subtlety, quiet, and calmness.
 1. Look around for 3 objects. Notice them and name them quietly to yourself.
 2. Next, listen for 3 sounds around you. Notice them and name what they are quietly to yourself.
 3. Finally, notice 3 body parts that you can move. Work on gently moving each of them, slowly and carefully. It could be blinking your eyes, wiggling a finger or toes, feeling your ribs and lungs move as you breathe, or moving your head and neck slowly from side to side or in a circle.

Exercises like these reinforce resilience and are a way to remind everyone of the potential for growth, strength and what can be overcome. Practice together to reassure them and help instill confidence that they can tackle future challenges by remembering these tools.

Practice your self-care as parents and caregivers.

Ultimately, for you to be able to be intuitive, responsive, and adaptive, you need to ensure your stress levels are under control. Here are a few additional techniques and suggestions you might explore to practice better self-care.

- Make time for exercise – even ten minutes at a time. The benefits to your physical and mental health cascade and increase your capacity to find resilience and strength. Go for a short walk, get up and stretch, or dance to your favourite song.
- Get everyone involved in preparations. You don't have to take care of everything on your own. Introduce more collaborative approaches to living and daily routines so one person doesn't feel weighed down with responsibilities.

These approaches are beneficial because they:

- share knowledge and life skills,
- boost confidence, and
- introduces or increases independence, responsibility, and accountability.

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