

# Anxiety and Stress in Kids: How to Recognize It, Cope With It, and Alleviate It

Longfellow Middle School

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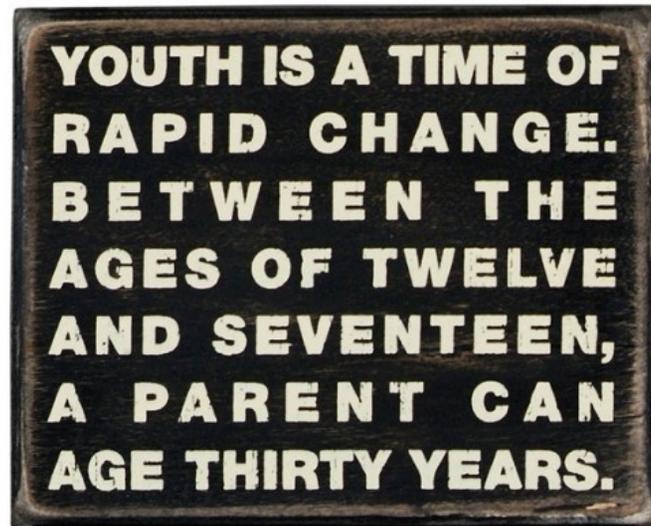
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## A few words about parenting...

- ▶ There is a lot of pressure on parents
- ▶ There are no perfect parents!
- ▶ Kids go through 7 different developmental stages from 0-18
- ▶ Conventional wisdom is often counterproductive
- ▶ Determining your goals and values makes parenting easier
- ▶ Understanding key psychological research can help parents



# A useful lens for parents

## ▶ Three Innate Psychological Needs:

1. Competence
2. Connection
3. Autonomy



## ▶ Lead to being motivated, productive, and happy

## ▶ Deci and Ryan, Self Determination Theory

# Some facts about the current state of mental health in our youth

- ▶ 49.5% of American youth are affected by at least one class of mental disorder
- ▶ 1 in 4 to 5 adolescents suffer from mental disorders resulting in severe impairment
- ▶ **Almost 1 in 3 adolescents meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder by the end of high school**
- ▶ 22% of adolescent girls in middle class homes suffer from clinical depression
- ▶ **Preteens and teens from affluent, well-educated families have the highest rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety disorders, somatic problems, and unhappiness of any group of kids in the US**

Sources: Merikangas et al., 2010; Luthar and Sexton, 2005

# Mental health statistics: why so high?

- ▶ Increased stress on youth
  - ▶ More rigorous academic expectations and course loads at younger ages
  - ▶ More time-consuming extracurricular activities
  - ▶ Emphasis on achievement versus effort
  - ▶ More pressure from increased awareness/connectivity
  - ▶ Less face-to-face social interaction and down time
  - ▶ Culture of parental overinvolvement
  - ▶ Universities becoming more selective
  - ▶ Economic and political uncertainty
- ▶ Better detection and greater awareness



# What can we do about it?

- ▶ Talk about it!
- ▶ Understand the effects of stress and teach children ways to reduce it
- ▶ Learn about anxiety
- ▶ Strengthen our connections with children
- ▶ Develop children's resilience
- ▶ Send healthy messages about failure
- ▶ Encourage the character traits strongly linked to happiness and success
- ▶ Increase independence and grant appropriate levels of autonomy
- ▶ Protect some free time and psychological space
- ▶ Examine our beliefs and priorities
- ▶ Take a long view



# Stress and anxiety - physiological effects

- ▶ Activation of the sympathetic nervous system

(Fight or Flight response):

- ▶ Racing heart
- ▶ Rapid breathing
- ▶ Dizziness
- ▶ Sweating
- ▶ Shaking
- ▶ Stomach ache
- ▶ Muscle tension
- ▶ Dilated pupils
- ▶ Tunnel vision



# Chronic stress - Messages for families

- ▶ We are not built to withstand chronic stress
- ▶ Chronic stress can actually rewire brain
- ▶ Insufficient rest makes us less able to manage stress effectively
- ▶ We need to reduce, not glorify, chronic stress
- ▶ Our anxiety and stress can be contagious



# The teen brain: What's happening and what it means

- ▶ The limbic system (emotional regulation) develops first
- ▶ Prefrontal cortex (planning, reasoning, judgment and impulse control) doesn't finish forming until mid-twenties
- ▶ Intensely creative time in life - more risk taking and novelty/thrill-seeking
- ▶ Use it or lose it - what teens are doing now is what gets hardwired into brain (academics, sports, music but also video games and unhealthy behaviors)
- ▶ The capacity to learn is at its peak in the teen years
- ▶ Teen brain is much more vulnerable to addiction and stress than adult brain so coping skills are key



# What can stress and anxiety look like in children?

- ▶ Frequent stomach aches or headaches
- ▶ Procrastination, lack of motivation or disinterest
- ▶ Irritability, anger, and emotional outbursts
- ▶ Impaired memory and focus
- ▶ Restlessness or sleeping issues
- ▶ Social withdrawal
- ▶ Anxiety and depression
- ▶ Overeating or undereating
- ▶ Self-harming
- ▶ Drug or alcohol abuse
- ▶ Technology overuse



# Anxiety: The “parent traps”

- ▶ Parenting an anxious child is counterintuitive
- ▶ Anxiety is an aversive state that is hugely motivating
- ▶ Anxiety ignored or accommodated grows!
- ▶ An anxious child typically seeks predictable parent responses:
  - ▶ Reassurance
  - ▶ Accommodation
  - ▶ Enable avoidance
  - ▶ Rescue when distressed
- ▶ Better to respond with observation, empathy, and problem solving



# Anxiety wants two things: COMFORT and CERTAINTY

- ▶ Key is to tolerate the discomfort and uncertainty
- ▶ Anxiety makes us feel passive and weak; remedy is to increase efficacy
  - ▶ The “parent traps” reduce a child’s efficacy!
- ▶ Surviving an anxiety-provoking situation provides evidence of competence, which gives confidence
- ▶ Remember anxiety is future-focused on what *could* happen
  - ▶ You can’t reason with emotion



# Tips for parenting an anxious child

- ▶ Separate the anxiety from the child
  - ▶ Allows a child the choice whether to listen
  - ▶ It's not the anxiety, it's the *reaction* to the anxiety that is problematic
- ▶ Normalize and anticipate anxiety
  - ▶ Share examples of being anxious but successful
  - ▶ Plan for it - don't let your child be caught off guard
- ▶ Help your child tune into his emotions and his body
- ▶ Focus on competence, connection and autonomy
- ▶ Provide freedom within limits
- ▶ Build child's arsenal of positive coping methods



# Stress management: Coping methods

## ▶ Positive coping methods:

- ▶ Breathing
- ▶ Mindfulness
- ▶ Exercise
- ▶ Yoga
- ▶ Meditation
- ▶ Nature
- ▶ Pets
- ▶ Listening to music
- ▶ Creative expression
- ▶ Internal coping skills

## ▶ Negative coping methods:

- ▶ Avoidance
- ▶ Attention-seeking behaviors
- ▶ External coping mechanisms
- ▶ Substance use and abuse
- ▶ Self-harming behaviors
- ▶ Mental health issues



## ▶ The more positive coping methods the fewer risky behaviors

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# Strengthen connections

- ▶ Children need an unconditionally loving bond
- ▶ Important to notice and appreciate who child actually is
- ▶ Ask open-ended questions and listen carefully to answers
- ▶ Use effective communication techniques



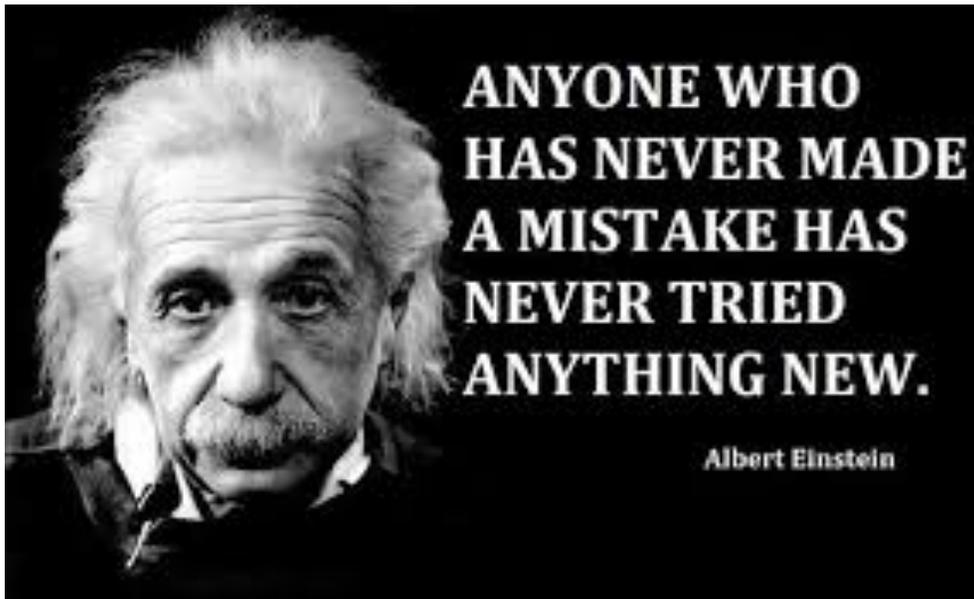
# Build resilience

- ▶ Resilience increases our capacity to handle stress
- ▶ To thrive, we must be able to cope with challenges
- ▶ Overparenting weakens resilience!



# Send healthy messages about failure

- ▶ Teach children to view failure as an opportunity for growth
- ▶ Fear of failure is very stressful
- ▶ Parents need to let their kids fail when they are around



If I let my child fail, s/he might fall behind!

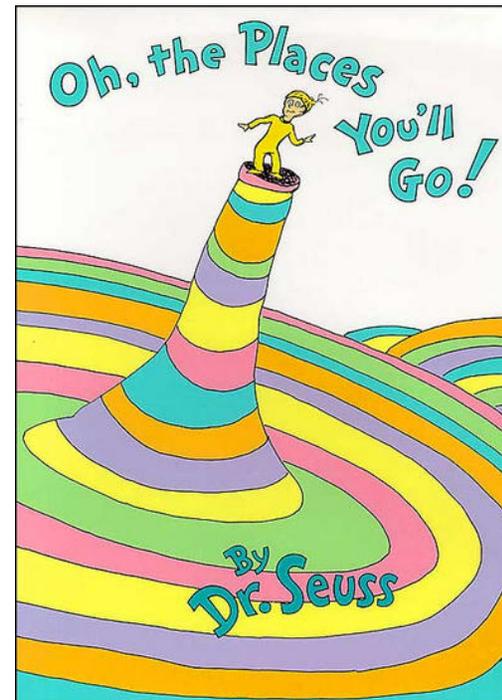


# The wisdom of Dr. Seuss...

“Wherever you fly, you’ll be best of the best.  
Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.

Except when you *don’t*.  
Because, sometimes, you *won’t*.

I’m sorry to say so  
but sadly, it’s true  
that Bang-ups  
and Hang-ups  
*can* happen to you.”

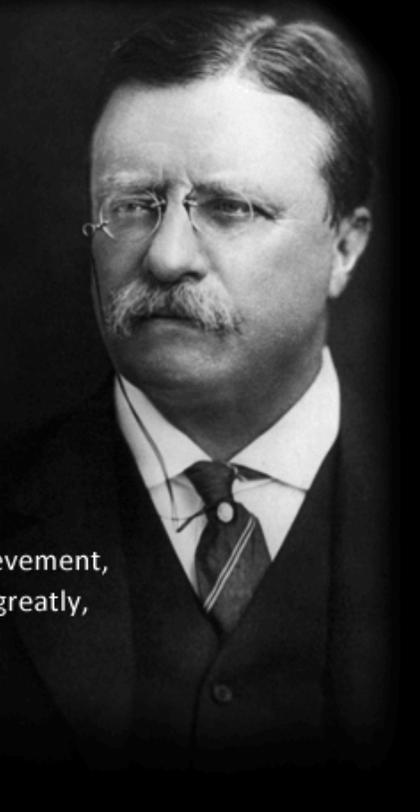


# Help your child value “being in the arena”

It is not the critic who counts;  
not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles,  
or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena,  
whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood;  
who strives valiantly;  
who errs, who comes short again and again,  
because there is no effort without error and shortcoming;  
but who does actually strive to do the deeds;  
who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions;  
who spends himself in a worthy cause;  
who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement,  
and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly,  
so that his place shall never be with those cold  
and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

— Theodore Roosevelt



# Know the character traits highly related to happiness and success

- ▶ Resilience (grit)
- ▶ Self control
- ▶ Curiosity / Enthusiasm / Zest
- ▶ Self efficacy / Self confidence / Optimism
- ▶ Gratitude
- ▶ Tenacity/persistence
- ▶ Work ethic/conscientiousness

Sources include Seligman, Peterson, Duckworth, Mischel, and Roberts

# Encourage independence

Basic rules for building independence:

- ▶ Give children increasing freedoms and responsibilities
- ▶ Let child be responsible for own success and failure
- ▶ Support from the sidelines
- ▶ Ensure child is developing the skills to manage his/her own life
- ▶ Avoid micromanaging and overparenting



## A much more effective strategy

- ▶ Prepare your child for the road, not the road for your child



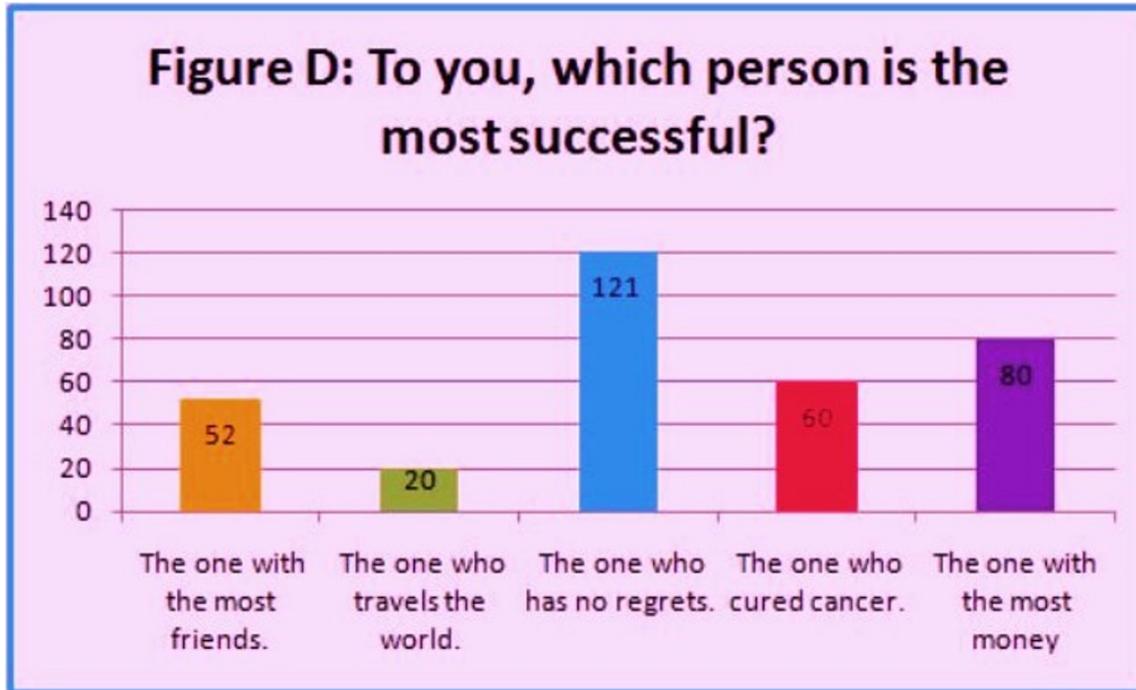
# Protect some down time

- ▶ Children and teens need (unplugged) free time and psychological space to develop a sense of self



# Examine your beliefs and priorities

- ▶ Value your children's psychological health as much as their academic and extracurricular achievements

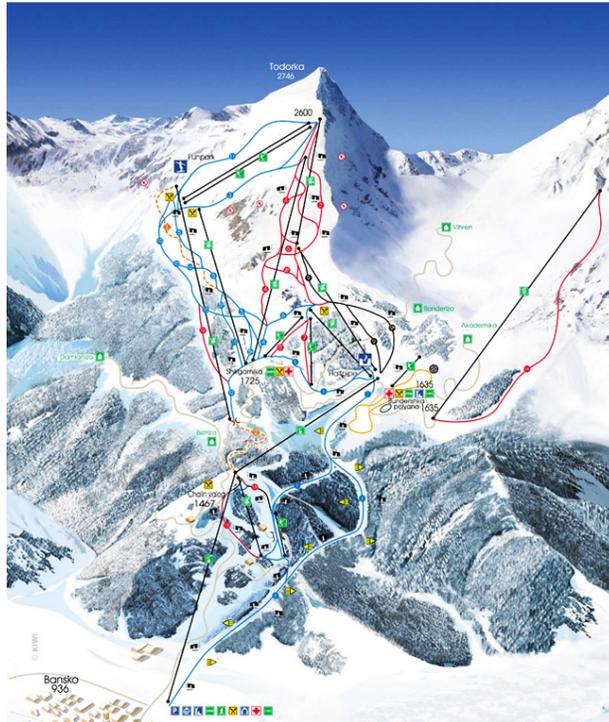


# Take a long view of success

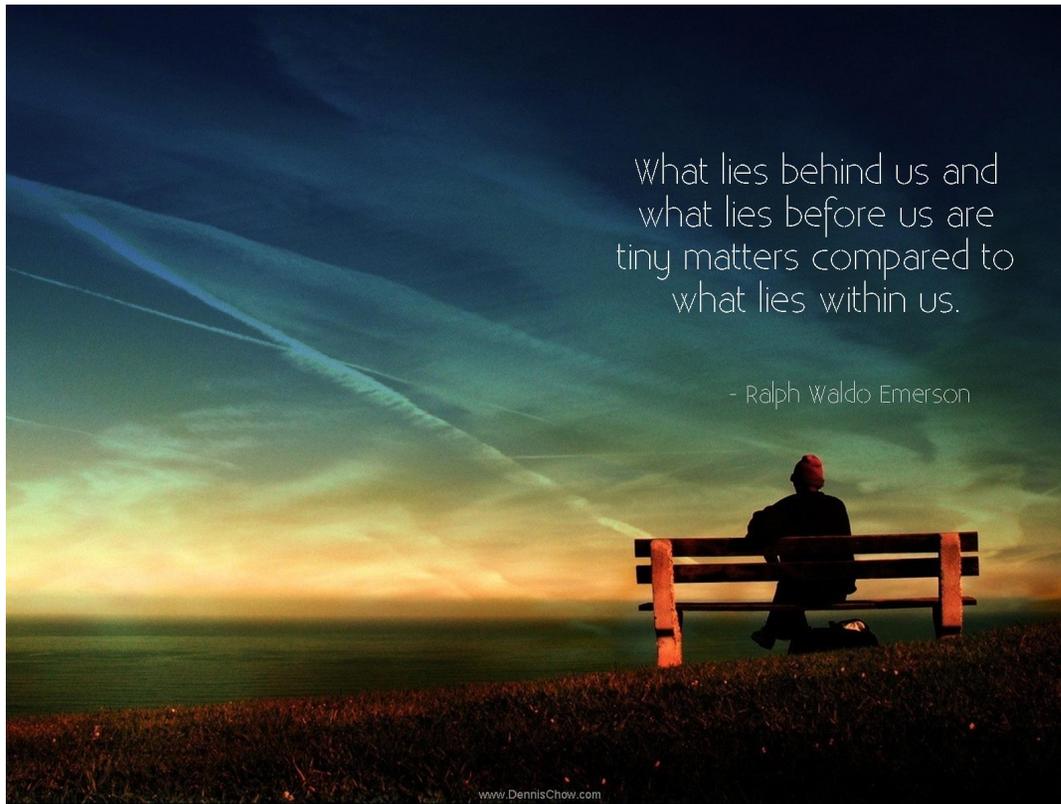
- ▶ How would you like to describe your child at age 30?
- ▶ Looking long term can take pressure off everyone



# Teach kids there are multiple paths to a successful adulthood



# Final thought to reduce stress and anxiety



Thank you for listening!  
Any questions?



## Some good resources for further reading

- ▶ Lynn Lyons, Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents, 2013
- ▶ Bonnie Zucker, Anxiety-Free Kids, 2009
- ▶ Julie Lythcott-Haims, How To Raise An Adult, 2015
- ▶ Wendy Mogel, The Blessing of a Skinned Knee, 2001
- ▶ Carol Dweck, Mindset, 2006
- ▶ Paul Tough, How Children Succeed, 2013
- ▶ Kenneth Ginsburg, Building Resilience in Children and Teens, 2011

## For More Information

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# How can I tell if my child needs professional help?

- ▶ Challenge: “normal” adolescence can look a lot like mental illness!
- ▶ Key aspects are duration, severity, and change
- ▶ Signs your child might need mental health treatment:
  - ▶ Mood swings that are out of character or enduring
  - ▶ Behavioral changes such as loss of interest in valued activities or acting out
  - ▶ Impaired performance in school and extracurricular activities
  - ▶ Reduced peer relationships or withdrawal from loved ones
  - ▶ Physical signs of stress such as changes in eating, sleeping or appearance or frequent stomach aches, headaches, back aches, etc.
  - ▶ Self-medicating behaviors such as substance use, cutting, or unhealthy eating
  - ▶ Feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness