

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP THEIR TEENS COPE WITH STRESS

By: Chris Palmer

According to one study, approximately half of all high school students feel a great deal of stress on a daily basis. As author and film producer Vicki Abeles writes, there's a "nationwide epidemic of school-related stress." The cause? Abeles says that "expectations surrounding education have spun out of control," with excessive loads of activities, homework, and sports. As I explain in my book, "Raise Your Kids to Succeed," this stress can be excessive and even toxic if kids are ill-prepared. Like many parents, I've wondered what I could have done to help my teenagers adjust well to high school. As a parent and teacher, here's what I've learned.

What can parents do?

How can you, as a parent, help your teen manage their anxieties in a healthy way? Here are six ideas:

1. Be caring, empathetic and affectionate: Listen to teens intently and give them emotional security. Be as supportive as possible. Try not to give advice too quickly. Let them solve their own problems if they can. In fact, some research suggests that extreme levels of parental protection can be counterproductive.

2. Listen: More importantly, listen without making judgement and without rushing to offer your own solutions. Remember their roiling anxiety and that they need you now more than ever – even if they try to be "cool" and push you away. Expect your teen to be occasionally grumpy, moody and cantankerous. Try not to take it personally.

- 3. Be supportive:** Emphasize that you love your teen unconditionally, and that you admire and respect him/her for the effort he/she's making to tackle the challenges of starting high school. Research shows us that diligence, effort and hard work can increase intelligence. Grit is something to be encouraged.
- 4. Attend to the basics:** When teenagers are stressed, the essentials can be neglected. Do whatever you can to help them get enough sleep, eat healthily and exercise regularly. All of those things will help them to manage their stress.
- 5. Help them get involved:** Find out – or have your teen find out – about extracurricular activities. Joining a club, sport or activity can be a great way to build a community of friends quickly and adjust to new surroundings.
- 6. Get help:** If you think it advisable, reach out to the school counselor before school begins and set up a meeting for your teen to meet the counselor to talk about this. This may not be the right move for all teens, but consider whether it would help with your child.

Stress can be good and bad

Your teen cannot — and should not — avoid all stress. Stress arising from challenging situations that they can successfully handle is healthy and even desirable. Even biologically, stress prompts the body to produce adrenaline and the stress hormone cortisol. In short bursts, these hormones raise our performance, keep us focused and increase our capabilities, which is good.

However, over the long-term, prolonged and excessive stress can be damaging. In short, some anxiety is natural and to be expected. It will help your teen get prepared for the start of school. But if you sense your teen has a damaging level of anxiety, reach out to the school counselor (or another appropriate professional) for help. Helping your teen face stress head-on at high school will help him or her prepare for potentially higher levels of stress associated with getting into college or finding a job.