

Adolescents and Anxiety: What Can Parents and Students Do?

Milne Valley M.S. and Victoria Park C.I.

November 12, 2014

Dr. Ian Brown, Psychologist

TDSB STUDENT CENSUS

- 103,000 students grades 7 to 12 2013
- 38% of secondary students “under a lot of stress” often or all the time
- 17% of secondary students “down” often or all the time
- 26% of grade 7 & 8 students “nervous or anxious” often or all the time
- 70% of grade 7 to 12 students with high to middle emotional well-being enjoyed school and felt they belonged in school

TDSB STUDENT CENSUS (cont.)

- 97% of staff indicated that student emotional well-being is very or extremely important to academic achievement
- 44% of TDSB staff reported that anxiety was their top concern
- 41% of TDSB staff reported that depression was their second most pressing concern

What is anxiety?



- Common emotional state
- Intertwined with concepts such as stress, worry, fear, and uncertainty
- Fear is a response to signal “danger” (present)
- Anxiety is anticipatory (future)
- Developmental considerations: is the child functioning at his/her age-appropriate level?

Normal developmental anxieties

- Infants, toddlers: separation, loud noises, novel situations
- Preschoolers: masks, dark, animals, separation
- Latency age: performance, family, thunder, staying home, bodily injury
- Pre-adolescents: tests, school performance, health, mortality
- Adolescents: social, future, appearance

STRESS

THE NON-SPECIFIC
RESPONSE TO A
PERCEIVED DEMAND

PHYSIOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS

- Rapid heartbeat
- Sweaty palms
- Flushed face
- Shallow breathing
- Headaches
- Stomach aches
- Clenched jaw

PHYSIOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS

- Heightened senses
- Weak knees
- “Butterflies” in stomach
- Feeling ill
- Weight loss
- Dry mouth
- Tight muscles

PHYSIOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS

- Cold hands and feet
- Digestive problems
- Physical complaints without medical symptoms

BEHAVIOURAL SYMPTOMS

- Poor concentration; preoccupation
- Fidgeting
- Frustration
- Aggression; anger
- Crankiness
- Withdrawal
- Nail biting

BEHAVIOURAL SYMPTOMS

- Increased clumsiness
- “Frozen fright”
- Sleep difficulties
- Recurring dreams or nightmares
- Crying
- Over or under eating
- Excessive eye blinking, hair twisting

EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS

- Feeling numb, detached
- Feelings of low self-worth
- Lack of confidence
- Irrational fears, terrors
- Generalized anxiety
- Bewilderment
- Self-blame

EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS

- Confusion
- Uncertainty
- Disbelief
- Denial
- Delusions
- Anger
- Amnesia

COGNITIVE SYMPTOMS

- Decreased or hyper alertness
- Difficulty making decisions
- Generalized mental confusion
- Disorientation to people, places, time
- Serious disruption in thinking
- Problems with naming and recognizing
- Confusion

COGNITIVE SYMPTOMS

- Lower attention span
- Calculation difficulties
- Memory problems
- Poor concentration
- Seeing an event over and over again
- Blaming others
- Disruption in logical thinking

Anxiety

Frequently misunderstood signs

- Angry outbursts
- Oppositional and refusal behaviour
- Temper tantrums
- Aggression
- Attention seeking behaviours
- Hyperactivity and difficulty sitting still

Anxiety

Frequently misunderstood signs (cont.):

- Attention and concentration problems; difficulty learning
- Underachievement; excessive resistance to doing work
- Difficulties with social or group activities

Anxiety

Fight, flight, or freeze response:

- Aggression, tantrums, opposition, irritability
- Refusal, avoidance, phobia
- Immobility, inhibition

Anxiety

What can parents do?

- Take the child's / youth's concerns seriously
- Actively listen; model calmness
- Reassurance, confidence, support
- Journaling, reading, drawing
- Recognize “oppositional”, “defiant” behaviour for what it might be
- Reason for behaviour rather than outward manifestation

Anxiety

What can parents do? (cont

- Communicate with teachers
- Coping strategies (e.g., breathing, visualizing, counting, self-talk, scaling, relaxation, etc.)
(don't excuse from class)
- Time outs; call home (cue system and place)



Anxiety

- *What can parents do? (cont.)*
- Flexibility; adjust expectations (evaluation; small chunks; intermediate deadlines; discourage perfectionism)
- Managing anxiety is tiring
- Don't single out for attention
- Consistency helps
- Ask about Student Services

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

What can parents do?

- Realistic expectations and interactions
- Break down assignments
- Check-in
- Advance notice

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

What can parents do? (cont.)

- Advance preparation for changes
- Support need for consistency and predictability
- “things to do today”
- Study schedule
- Clear directions
- Support mental health treatment

Social Anxiety Disorder

What can parents do?

- Gradual desensitization
- Supportive peers; modeling
- Don't force into humiliating situations
- Provide options; create opportunities to speak up or socialize
- Drama; memorizing short poem or speech



Social Anxiety Disorder

What can parents do? (cont.)

- Multi-media presentations
- Reassurance: not alone in feeling embarrassed
- Model self-talk
- Encourage relaxation techniques (breathing, visualization)
- Classmates to invite participation
- Support mental health treatment

Panic Disorder

What can parents do?

- Permit leaving classroom (limited); set time to return
- Encourage coping behaviour; discourage avoidance
- Coping book
- Model calmness



Panic Disorder

What can parents do?

- Provide reassurance and support
- Draw or act out what's being imagined
- Support mental health treatment

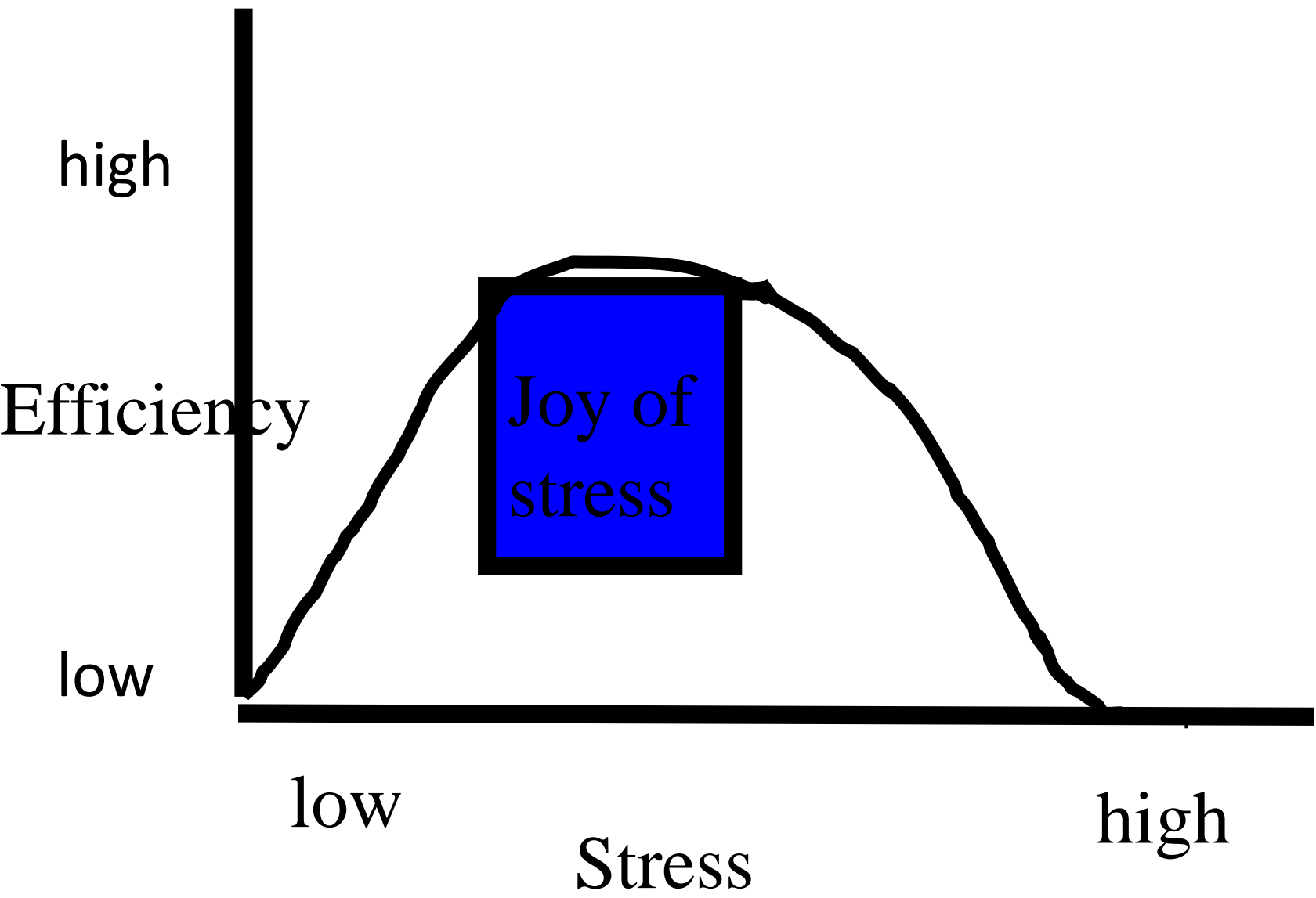
Specific Phobia

What can parents do?

- don't force children into feared situations
- gentle support & encouragement
- alternatives to demonstrating knowledge or meeting requirements
- support mental health treatment

STRESS MANAGEMENT KEYS

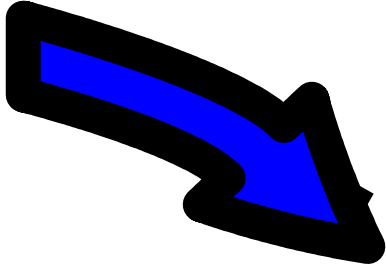
- PERCEPTION
- CONTROL
- PERSPECTIVE



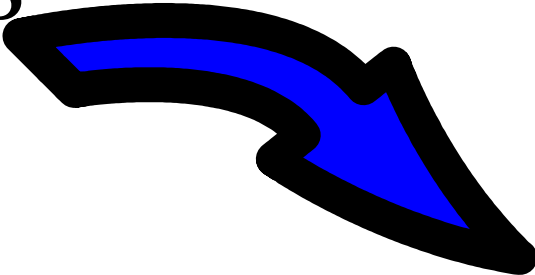
Stress benefits

- Stress as a performance aid
- Repeated manageable stressors in childhood can make people more resilient later in life

STRESSOR

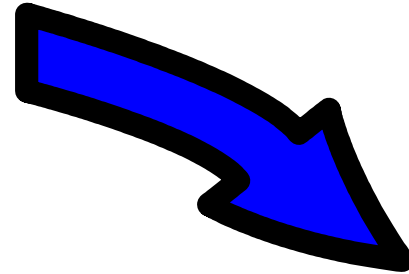
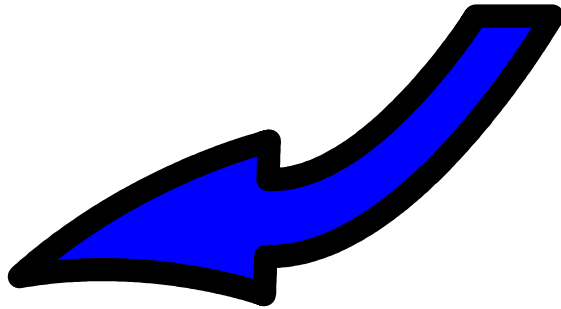


THOUGHT
PROCESS



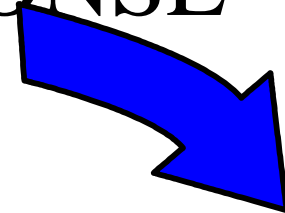
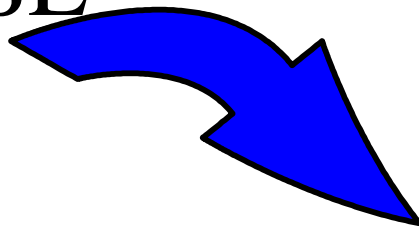
RESPONSE

STRESSOR PLUS THOUGHT



RATIONAL
RESPONSE

UNREALISTIC
RESPONSE



EUSTRESS



LESS STRESS

DISTRESS

10 FAULTY ASSUMPTIONS

- 1. ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING:**
You see things in black-or-white categories. If a situation is anything less than perfect, you see it as a total failure.
- 2. OVERGENERALIZATION:**
You see a single event as a never-ending pattern of defeat by using the words always or never when you think about it.
- 3. MENTAL FILTER:**
You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively. One word of criticism erases all the praise you've received.
- 4. DISCOUNTING THE POSITIVE:**
You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count". If you do a good job, you tell yourself that anyone could have done as well.
- 5. JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS:**
You interpret things negatively when there are no facts to support your conclusion. Two common variations are *mind-reading* (you arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you) and *fortune-telling* (you assume and predict that things will turn out badly).
- 6. MAGNIFICATION:**
You exaggerate the importance of your problems and shortcomings or you minimize your desirable qualities.
- 7. EMOTIONAL REASONING:**
You assume that your negative emotions reflect the way things are: "I feel guilty. I must be a rotten person."
- 8. "SHOULD" STATEMENTS:**
You tell yourself that things should be the way you hoped or expected them to be. Many people try to motivate themselves with *shoulds* and *shouldn'ts*, as if they had to be punished before they could be expected to do anything.
- 9. LABELLING:**
This is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking. Instead of saying "I made a mistake," you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm a loser."
- 10. PERSONALIZATION AND BLAME:**
You hold yourself personally responsible for events that aren't entirely under your control.

Watch your language!

- “worried about it” vs. “thinking about it”
- Worrying vs. thinking vs. strategizing
- Never has a society worried about so much - and so little - simultaneously
- worry begets worry
- Parents worry  kids don't adapt to reality  anxiety

Reducing worry and anxiety

- Distraction
- Positive self-talk
- Thought stopping
- Positive visualization
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Focus on exceptions (when don't you worry?)

Reducing worry and anxiety (cont.)

- Designated worry time each day
- Worry journal / diary
- Coping cards: what helps?
- Challenge distorted cognitions
- Inhibit compulsive rituals
- Problem solving training and practice

PERSONAL POWER GRID

	CAN CONTROL	CAN'T CONTROL
ACT	MASTERY	CEASELESS STRIVING
DON'T ACT	GIVING UP	LETTING GO

Optimists and Pessimists

Contrasting strategies for coping with stress

OPTIMISTS:

- Make specific plans for dealing with stress; implement these plans
- Refrain from other activities until stress is reduced
- Obtain advice from others

Optimists and Pessimists

Contrasting strategies for coping with stress

PESSIMISTS:

- Ignore the problem or source of stress
- Give up on reaching goals blocked by stress
- Engage in emotion-releasing activities instead of working on the problem directly

FIGHTING THE EFFECTS OF STRESS:

Hardiness and Fitness

- Engages in exercise regularly



High fitness level

With high level of hardiness, fewer events perceived as stressful

Remain healthy in the face of stressful life experiences

FIGHTING THE EFFECTS OF STRESS:

Hardiness and Fitness

■ Fails to exercise regularly



Low fitness level

With low level of hardiness, more events are perceived as stressful

Become ill in the face of stressful life experiences

TIME MANAGEMENT MATRIX

	URGENT!	NOT URGENT (LATER!)
IMPORTANT	1	2
NOT IMPORTANT	3	4

Anxiety

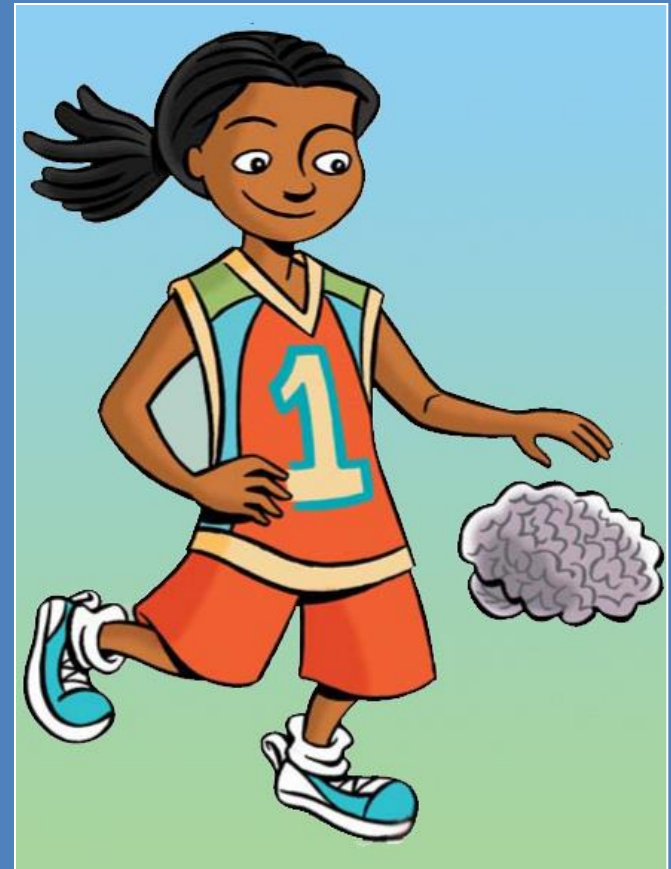
- *What can parents do? (cont.)*
- Build resilience in children and youth

RESILIENCE

- The ability to bounce back from adversity or negative experiences
- Originally looked at psychological survivors of major world traumas
- Now broader applicability
- “hard knocks” changed from war atrocity (e.g.), to divorce, emotional disorders, learning difficulties, school stress, etc.

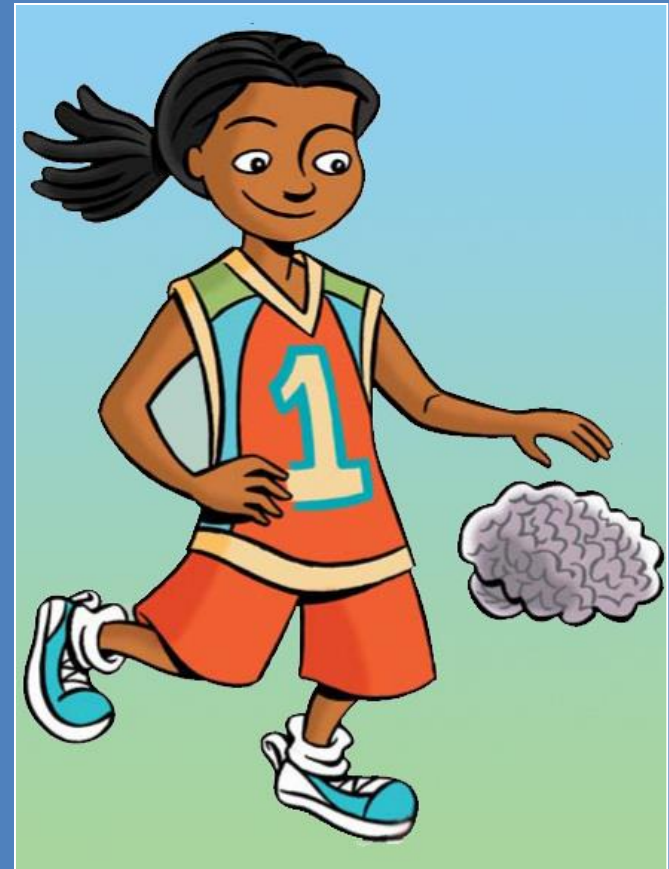
What is "Resilience"?

- ✓ It can be learned
- ✓ Capacity to adapt well to trauma and adversity
- ✓ Bouncing back



What is "Resilience"?

- ✓ Capacity to manage strong feelings and impulses
- ✓ Capacity to make realistic plans and carry them out
- ✓ Having a positive view of self and confidence in strengths and abilities
- ✓ Skill in communication and problem solving



Why do kids & teens need resilience?

- ✓ Makes them stronger
- ✓ Better able to cope with life's problems; substance use, gangs, gambling, gaming, and other harmful or unhealthy behaviours
- ✓ Helps them manage during tough times

“Why isn’t my kid resilient?”

- Why do some children succeed and others develop pathology or engage in unhealthy and harmful behaviours?
- What drives some students to continue learning a difficult skill until it’s mastered, and others to give up and drop out?
- How do these personal qualities develop?

“Why isn’t my kid resilient?”

- Over-protected; rescued? (a “victim”?)
- Safest in history, but most anxious and medicated ever
- Hidden message: “I don’t have confidence in your ability to handle this situation.”
- No-fault life? Responsibility and ownership
- Uncertain and uncomfortable with authority as parents
- Crave affection and attention; afraid of being judged by others for their children’s behaviour

“Why isn’t my kid resilient?”

- Poor self-control (e.g., impulses; delay of gratification)
- No experience with hardship and failure?
- “disappointments” = “disasters”
- Incorrect belief about what “success” means


“Why isn’t my kid resilient?”

- “Success means moving from one failure to the next with no loss of enthusiasm.”
- Should not be protected from trauma of every kind (e.g., disappointment)
- “real world” is a reality: hurts your feelings and doesn’t care
- Emotional bumps and bruises lead to emotional growth

Ask....

- “How will you take responsibility for your failures and learn from them?”
- “What might you do differently so that you’ll achieve your goal next time?”
- “What did you do to recover?”

What predicts good outcomes in adulthood? (mental health and well-being)

- Failure is not a tragedy but a key to success
- Marks count for very little of the variance on measures of success
- Character counts (but self-esteem is over-rated!)
  narcissism and entitlement and lack of clear picture of skills and strengths
- Praise process and effort, not product (behaviour specific); attention better than praise
- Perspective: see negative incident as part of larger mainly positive picture

What predicts good outcomes in adulthood? (mental health and well-being)

- A little adversity is a good thing! (necessary social pain)
- Experience of volatility and uncertainty
- Boost confidence in ability to solve problem
- Introduce to broader culture or protect from it?
- Believing that you're special leads to disappointment (1963 vs. 2013)

Post-Secondary Life

- Canadian Association of College and University Student Services 2013 survey of 30,000 students in 34 colleges and universities
- 89% overwhelmed by all they had to do
- 54% feeling hopeless
- 64% lonely
- 87% exhausted
- 56% overwhelming anxiety
- 10% seriously considered suicide

Post-Secondary Life

- Cornell U. : “suicide U.”
- Queen’s U.
- Ryerson; Western: 200% increase in demand for urgent psychiatric help
- U of A 2011 survey: “hopeless”; “overwhelmed by anxiety”; very lonely”
- UCLA study since 1985: 5 X more likely to be anxious, disengaged
- StatsCan: 30% drop out rate from university

Protective Factors

- School factors:
 - Connectedness, belongingness
 - Positive school experience
 - Mastery, accomplishment
 - Expectations of success (planning for post-secondary)

Resiliency: Key Factors

- Caring and supportive relationships
 - Within and outside the family
 - Create love and trust
 - Provide role models
 - Model maintaining balance: eat, exercise, rest, don't over-schedule
 - Offer encouragement and reassurance (but don't solve the problem for them)

Resiliency: Key Factors

- Capacity to make realistic plans and carry them out
- Positive view of oneself and confidence in one's strengths and abilities
- Skills in communication and problem solving
- Capacity to manage strong feelings and impulses

Resiliency: Key Factors

- All of these factors can be learned and developed

Interventions: What can we do?

- Promote positive relationships between teachers and students, among peers and family
- Foster islands of competence
- Promote self-efficacy, optimism, adaptability to cope with change and disappointment
- Develop social competence
- Teach stress management

Resilience and Teens

- ✓ Talk whenever you can; ask for their opinions and listen; be present, pay attention, but don't rescue
- ✓ Make home a safe place emotionally
- ✓ Recognize biological changes happening


Building Resiliency: How?

- Recognize the positive things teen does
- Encourage pursuit of what s/he's good at
- Give them challenges
- Encourage trying new things: to gain skills, experience, success (or failure)
- Respect individuality and need for privacy
- Support their decision making and discuss results of those decisions with them

Building Resiliency: How?

- Give teens reasonable responsibility and control; appreciate their contributions
- Strengthen communication and problem solving skills
- Model good coping: anxious parents create anxious offspring
- Avoid exposure to “adult” conversations
- Turn off the technology!! Avoid “social media anxiety”

The Curse of Technology

- Diminished ability to focus and retain information
- 31% dinner table; 31% restaurant; 29% bathroom; 1/3 before getting up; ½ before falling asleep
- Raises stress level
- “Internet Use Disorder”; Internet addiction (CAMH)
- “Reward Anticipation”  constant anxiety
- Strong correlation: more Facebook friends and bipolar mania, narcissism, obsessive-compulsive behaviour

The Curse of Technology

- Internet creating major shifts in personality and psychological health (act less maturely, more narcissism and grandiosity)
- Expect more from technology, less from each other
- Makes us busier than ever, and more stressed

Building Resiliency: How?

- Make connections
 - Good relationships with family, friends, others
 - Spend time together as a family
 - Accepting help and support from those who care about you and will listen to you
 - Being active in groups, organizations, etc.
 - Assisting others in need
 - Avoid “status anxiety”

Building Resiliency: How?

- Make connections (cont.)
 - Get to know their friends and appreciate their good qualities
 - Check where they're going; negotiate curfew and activities
 - Help them understand healthy relationships
 - Support them doing activities different from friends'
 - Community events
 - Volunteer experience

Building Resiliency: How?

- School:
 - Know the school and teen's timetable
 - Encourage participation in events and activities
 - Support good study habits and meeting deadlines
 - Work with teachers to discuss concerns and find supports

Building Resiliency: How?

- Avoid seeing problems as insurmountable
- Can't change the fact that highly stressful events happen, but can change how you interpret and respond to these events (perception)
 - Look beyond the present
 - Note the ways you feel better and cope effectively

Building Resiliency: How?

- Accept that change and stress are part of living: “normal life” is not a sickness
 - Focus on what you can change
- Move towards your goal
 - Develop realistic goals and expectations
 - Do something regularly that allows you to move toward your goal
 - “what can I accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?”

Handling Traumatic Events in the News

- ✓ Limit exposure
- ✓ Talk about it
- ✓ Use news as a catalyst but don't let it overwhelm



Handling Traumatic Events in the News

- ✓ Reinforce ideas of safety and security
- ✓ Show children how they can help
- ✓ Provide soothing activities



Building Resiliency: How?

- Take decisive action
 - Act, don't detach yourself from problems and stress (don't just "wish" them away); ("learned helplessness")
- Look for opportunities for self-discovery
 - Learn something about yourself
- Nurture a positive view of yourself
 - Develop confidence in your ability to solve problems and trust your instincts

Building Resiliency: How?

- Keep things in perspective
 - Consider stressful situation in a broader context; keep a long-term perspective; avoid blowing the event out of proportion
- Maintain a hopeful outlook
 - Optimistic outlook; expect good things will happen; visualize what you want rather than what you fear

Building Resiliency: How?

- Take care of yourself
 - Pay attention to your needs and feelings
 - Engage in healthy activities you enjoy and find relaxing
 - Exercise regularly
 - Alcohol , medication, drugs? (modeling?)

MY PERSONAL PLAN OF ACTION

- I am going to start.....
- I am going to stop.....
- I am going to continue.....
- The first steps I am going to take are.....
- The factors that will help me are.....
- The people who will help me are.....

Who is Resilient? The 7 Cs

- Build **Competence**
- Build **Confidence**
- **Character**: fundamental sense of right and wrong
- **Contribution**: actions for betterment of others
- **Coping**: problem solve and manage stress
- **Control**: impulses; delay gratification
- **Connection** with others

10 Ways to Build Resilience

1. Make connections.
2. Avoid seeing things as insurmountable problems.
3. Accept that change is part of living.
4. Move towards your goals.
5. Take decisive action.

10 Ways to Build Resilience

6. Look for opportunities for self-discovery.
7. Nurture a positive view of yourself.
8. Keep things in perspective.
9. Maintain a hopeful outlook.
10. Take care of yourself.

Useful websites

- Anxiety Disorders Association of Ontario
 - <http://www.anxietyontario.com>
- Canadian Mental Health Association
 - <http://www.cmha.ca/english/about/index.html>
- The Child Anxiety Network
 - <http://www.childanxiety.net>
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
 - http://www.aacap.org/info_families/index.htm