



The Catholic Youth Community of St. John Neumann

Dear Parents,

As you seek to help your teenager navigate the pressure they feel to perform in life, have you ever considered reducing the pressure at home? That's right, what if you, as parents, turned down the heat when it comes to performance and allowed your teens to have a place to rest and breathe? What if you helped your teenagers' experience of this phase of life be characterized by fun, encouragement, rest, security, and peace instead of memories of pressure, stress, conflict, and anxiety? I am no scientist... I'm just a lowly Youth Minister... but I think your teens would be healthier in the long run!

Where does all this pressure on teens come from? Is it from teachers? Peers? Maybe the overall culture at school? Is it just their personality? Does it come from you?

Most kids today are feeling *overwhelming* pressure when it comes to their performance. They are learning that "You have to perform or you're just not good enough." We all recognize that the way kids perform in school, sports, or drama has a real impact on their future. Their school performance can dictate if they can further their education in college, and it is important. But how important?

Is all of this so important they should feel such immense pressure to perform that it crushes them? Is their performance so important that it should consume their middle and high school years and rob them of experiences they can never get back? Is the long-term benefit of getting that extra three-tenths of the grade point or average or being a little better at kicking, throwing, hitting, or catching the ball worth the lost years that so quickly fade away? Is it so important that we're okay with our kids believing they are not "good enough" if they don't get the best grades, get into the right college, make the right team, or get the best part in the play? Is the anxiety worth it?

I hope all of you reading this scream a resounding "No!" We have to do some things to help our kids and teens lower their stress. We have to be proactive in helping to steer them away from the anxiety that we know can lead to some real depression.

Stress is part of life.

Everyone experiences stress, and some stress is OK. It can get your child ready for action and give them the motivation to get things done. For example, feeling stressed about an upcoming test can motivate your child to study. Knowing they have to get to the bus on time can help your child get ready in the morning.

Signs of too much stress in pre-teens and teenagers

Although some stress is OK, too much stress can be overwhelming. It can interfere with sleep, thinking, and learning, and it can get in the way of your child enjoying life.

When pre-teens and teenagers have too much stress, they might have:

- tense muscles, headaches, a tight jaw, teeth-grinding, a racing heart, and sweaty palms
- trouble sleeping
- low energy, tiredness, or exhaustion
- the feeling of being on edge and irritable
- difficulty concentrating
- loss of motivation
- the feeling of being overwhelmed.

Health Risks

When your child has too much stress for a long time, this can be bad for your child's physical and mental health. It can also lead to anxiety, anxiety disorders, and depression.

Stress can look and feel similar to anxiety. Anxiety is the worry, apprehension, or dread that something bad is going to happen or that you can't cope with a situation. Anxiety can happen even if there isn't a challenging situation or event. When you understand the difference between stress and anxiety, it can help you work out what your child is feeling and how to help.

Causes of stress for pre-teens and teenagers

Many situations can cause stress for pre-teens and teenagers. These include:

- schoolwork, decisions about subjects, exams, and pressure to do well
- relationships with friends and romantic relationships
- life changes like leaving school, moving houses, going to university, or getting a job
- too many things to do, and feeling unprepared or overwhelmed by all of the tasks
- exciting things, like trying a new sport or club
- family conflicts
- big decisions, like deciding whether to talk about something sensitive or important
- lack of sleep.

Stress management for pre-teens and teenagers

Stress management is important for pre-teen and teenage mental health and well-being. You can help your child learn to manage their stress.

Acknowledge your child's stress

If you notice that your child is stressed, let them know that you've noticed and that you're there to support them. Responding to your child with warmth and compassion can help your child be kinder to themselves. If your child treats themselves with self-compassion, it can reduce the effects of stress and help your child 'bounce back' during or after difficult times.

Work out what's causing the stress

If your child knows what's causing the stress, it can be easier for them to deal with it. You can help by getting your child to write down all the things they're doing. Then they can think about how they feel about these things. For example, do some of them make your child feel tense or stop them from sleeping? Remember that good things can be stressful too, and stress can also come from having too much to do.

Work out how to handle stressful things

You could start by helping your child prioritize. For example, if your child is feeling stressed by homework, you

might help them plan their week to spread out the work. Then you could look at whether your teen can change any of the stressful things in their life. For example, if your child gets stressed because they're always running late in the morning, they might be able to reduce the stress by getting ready the night before or waking up earlier.

Next, look at any stressful things your child can prepare for. For example, if your child is very concerned about an upcoming exam, you can help them prepare by working out a study timetable together.

Last, some stressful things can't be changed, but they can be talked about. For example, if your child is troubled about your family's financial situation, listening and talking about their concerns might help to reduce the stress they feel.

Encourage a healthy lifestyle

Healthy lifestyle choices can often help your child handle stress or reduce its effects. Here are some ideas for your child:

- **Be physically active.** Physical activity and exercise improve mood and can give your child a sense of achievement, as well as boost their physical health. Exercise also burns off the 'stress hormone' cortisol and can help the body relax.
- **Eat good food.** Eating well can help your child feel good, strong, energetic, alert and able to concentrate.
- **Relax and unwind, especially before bed.** This might be going for a walk, reading a book, having a relaxing bath, listening to some music or doing breathing exercises, muscle relaxation exercises, or mindfulness exercises.
- **Confiscate their phone at night.** Teens get awakened throughout the night. Take their phones at night to charge them in your room.
- **Sleep well – pre-teens need 9-11 hours of sleep and teenagers need 8-10 hours of sleep a night.** Getting enough good-quality sleep can help your child feel more alert, positive, and energetic. Not getting enough sleep is one of the biggest causes of stress in teenagers.
- **Avoid alcohol and other drugs, including caffeine.** Although older teenagers and adults often use alcohol and other substances to cope with stress, these substances make the symptoms of stress worse and can lead to other problems.

You probably feel stressed sometimes too. The best thing you can do is be a stress management role model for your child by being kind to yourself, trying to deal with the causes of your stress, and making healthy lifestyle choices. Your teens are watching and emulating your actions!

I know this week's OPM has been lengthy, but I pray that it is informative and helpful for you and your family. Have a great week!

Peace,



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