

HELPING THE OVERANXIOUS, PERFECTIONISTIC TEENAGER

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I — Our Perfectionistic Culture

"I sit in class and worry so much about who is my friend, who is loyal to me, who likes my boyfriend and whether he likes her back, that I can't pay attention."

"I worry so much about whether I will play well at my soccer game that I start to get sick the night before. I think about how everyone will yell at me if I miss a play."

"I worry about being fat. Do you think I'm fat?"

The last statement was made by a lovely 16 year old girl who is a cheerleader. The irony of the anxious teenager is that, for the most part, it is a problem with teens who, by anyone's measure, are the most successful in high school—they are attractive, sociable, good students, who are succeeding in extracurricular activities. They are well liked by most everyone. In fact, teachers, parents, and other less successful students do not understand what it is they have to worry about.

So why do they worry? In many ways, they worry because they are a product of our culture. We are a society of over-achievers and get-aheaders. These teens often come from families who climb the corporate ladder, move into an upscale subdivision, and drive a high status automobile. The children wear designer clothes, have their teeth straightened, and their hair is professionally styled. They may attend a private school and receive a nice car on their 16th birthday. These families live the American dream. However, much is expected of these teenagers if they are to have the same lifestyle as their parents. This fact is made very aware to them—that to achieve what their parents have will be very difficult. Yet to achieve less, to live at a lower standard of living, is to be a failure. It is perhaps an irony that children from lesser privileged families tend to be less anxious. They do not have to achieve so much to do better than their parents did. To simply be the first in the family to go to college may be, in and of itself, quite an accomplishment for them.

I believe these teens are also influenced by the media who espouse a philosophy of consumerism—if you are attractive enough, if you drive the right car, if you have high social status, then happiness will follow. For teens this may translate to having a perfect body,

having the right friends, having the latest electronic gadgets, and having money to spend. To keep that going into the future one must have perfect grades, be on the winning team, and get into the best college.

We know what the correlates of happiness are, and they are not attractiveness and money. They are—having a sunny disposition to start with, having close and caring relationships with others, meaningful work, and a religious faith. We rarely hear about these because they cannot be sold in the marketplace. This is one place where teens really need to hear from their parents. Tell them about a time in your life when you weren't well off and didn't have much, but you were happy. Tell them why you were happy. Have them visit relatives who don't have perfect lives yet who are nevertheless quite content and satisfied with their lives. Ask them when they have been

truly, deeply happy and what made them feel that way. Point out to them the people you admire who don't have fame and beauty but who are still very important people who do important things in the world. Broaden their horizons beyond the perfectionistic culture.

II — The Importance of Temperament

Since the 1950's, psychologists have known that temperament plays a big part in human behavior. What do we mean by temperament? Temperament is a set of behaviors that seem to be genetically transmitted and that are relatively stable throughout life. Think dogs. Golden retrievers are known for being very tolerant of little children, very gentle. And pit bulls are known for being—well, pit bulls. Likewise, some children are born shy and inhibited and others are born with an outgoing and fearless personality. Anxiousness has a strong genetic component. We know this from years of research in which anxious people have been found to have a high proportion of anxious family members. Also, studies of twins raised apart have found that they are amazingly alike in traits such as anxiousness and have little in common with their adoptive parents and siblings in terms of temperamental traits.

Anxious teens are often those who as children were eager to please and eager to do well. You rarely have to punish them because they are intimidated by just the thought of making a mistake, failing in school, or getting into trouble. They may have had some



Overanxious Tennagers, continued

problems with separation anxiety as a young child, or phobic reactions to ordinary situations such as getting dirty, swimming in deep water, or going on carnival rides. Anxious teens, like anxious adults, have a high need for predictability and for control over events around them. They continue to experience new situations and new experiences as stressful. They also tend to have distortions in thinking or “irrational ideas” which seem to contribute to their anxiety. Here are a few:

- **Failure to sort out the big stuff from the little stuff.** They may understand the slogan “Don’t sweat the small stuff,” but to them, there is no small stuff, everything is big stuff. One way to help the teen is to ask her, “What is the worst that could happen? How important will this be a year from now? A month from now? A week from now?” For example, the girl who was physically ill before her soccer game went through these questions with me. She determined that, in fact, whether her team won or lost the game, she would probably not be thinking about it by the following Monday morning. In fact, if she played so horribly that she had to leave the team, she would be secretly relieved because she would have more time to study, see friends, and participate in drama club.

- **Black-white thinking.** Another is what we call all-or-nothing thinking. One girl I worked with felt it wasn’t enough to be a straight A student. To be worthy of feeling good about herself she also had to be slender, very pretty, popular, and a top ranked soccer player. If she was only two of those, then she was nothing at all. Together we went through her class and we couldn’t identify anyone who was all of those. By that measure, everyone in her class was a failure. Another girl I work with said she wanted to be “a Broadway producer and director” and nothing less would be acceptable. I pointed out to her that probably 99.9 per cent of all people in theater work are not Broadway directors. They are in towns and cities all over the country, colleges and universities, in television and movie work. They are grips and cinematographers, costume designers and prop builders, editors and writers, managers and stagehands. The majority love what they do and do it well. Should we call them failures? Both girls were helped to expand their horizons beyond this narrow view that only “perfection” is acceptable for them and that anything less is “nothing at all.”

- **Catastrophizing.** Another distortion in thinking is what I call the “cascading dominos” outlook. It goes like this—“If I get a C in chemistry, I might get a B minus for the course, and then I won’t get into a good college, I’ll only get into a bad college, and I won’t be able to be successful, and I’ll be a failure, and I’ll end up on the street as a homeless person.” Teens need to be helped to see that growing up isn’t a series of steps up a staircase leading to success or cascading dominos that end in disaster. It is a journey with many turns along the road. We are blessed to live in a society that is so open to all and that holds so many opportunities to go in a different direction, start over, and even re-invent oneself. The anxious teen might make a C in chemistry and conclude that science and math are not his strong suit. He may end up in business instead. She may not go to the college of her choice but end up at a perfectly good college and have a

wonderful experience there. He may never graduate from college at all, find work he loves, and do very well in life (see the next section). Again, it is important to talk with your teen and relate your stories and those of people you know. Tell her of your own setbacks in life and how you learned from them, regrouped, and went in a new direction. I have found that teens see adults as two dimensional, the finished product that they are now. They have no idea what failures and obstacles those adults encountered and how they overcame them. They don’t know how they got out of a slump, who might have helped them, and what role luck played in their lives. Yet I have found that most teens who turn a deaf ear to a parent’s lectures, are fascinated to hear these stories.

III — Misguided Misinformation from Adults

“If I get a C in Chemistry [or even a B], I won’t get into the right college, and if I don’t get into the right college, I won’t get a good job.”

“I’m afraid if I don’t get a good job I’ll be a homeless bum.”

“My parents say that if I don’t get a [four year] college degree, I’ll be flipping burgers somewhere.”

Does this sound like your teen? These are actual statements I’ve heard from adolescents I’ve seen in my practice over the last few years. I have come to believe that many teens are over anxious because they have been given inaccurate information and well meaning but misguided warnings about the perils of less than perfect success. I often find myself giving them, and their parents, accurate information. Here are a few points parents and teens should know.



Several years ago I was startled to read this statement in a newspaper article, “Where you go to college has almost nothing to do with future earnings compared with college major.” The statement was taken from *The College Majors Handbook* by Fogg, Harrington, and Harrington, published in 2004. Intrigued, I bought the book and read the opening chapters. It was a revelation. The authors reviewed a number of large scale statistical studies of college majors and adult earning capacities. They concluded that some college majors, particularly those in chemical engineering, for example, had high earnings, with median incomes of \$75,600 per year. On the other hand, students who obtained a four year degree in say, teaching, averaged around \$43,000 per year, regardless of the college they attended. In other words, students who studied technical fields, such as chemistry majors, were going to make considerably more money (median incomes of \$61,600 per year) than those who majored in elementary education, whose median incomes were about \$38,500 per year. (These figures were taken from a 1993 survey).

The differential within one group from those who went to elite colleges versus those who went to nonelite colleges was only about 2 to 3 per cent over a person’s lifetime. How can that be you say? Don’t the best and brightest go to the elite colleges? Most often they do. However, the authors found that graduating college students

were hired based on college major, the demands of the economy, their grades in college, and their aptitude for excellence. Technical skills and high achievement predicted lifetime incomes moreso than the college they attended.

And what about this oft-quoted statement from parents, “If you don’t get a college degree, you won’t get a good job.” Is this true? While certainly individuals with four year college degrees, as a group, make higher incomes than those with high school diplomas, there are wide discrepancies, depending on the field one chooses to enter. I have seen this countless times in my practice--that the parent’s income listed on the application form, is far higher than the average for those with a college degree—(\$54,000 in 2004)—yet the parent’s education is listed as “high school diploma.”

I have seen printers who make \$90,000 per year, real estate agents who make \$100,000 per year, pipe laying contractors who make \$120,000 per year, parents who sell computer systems to large corporations who make \$250,000 per year, and managers of auto dealerships who make \$300,000 per year, all of whom did not have a college degree.

I have been so struck by this phenomenon that I spent several hours on the website of the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Statistics (2006-2007), tracking down well paying jobs that do not require a four year college degree. I found 60 and have listed them in a handout for parents. Here are just a few listed as median income:

Mortgage Loan Officers	\$70,000
Car and Boat Sales	\$62,400
Paralegal (Fed. Govt.)	\$59,400
Dental Hygienists	\$58,240
Computer programmers	\$68,890
Airline Pilots, Copilots, Flight Engineers. . . .	\$129,000

Again we can see the trend that those people who are good in sales, and who have mastered high level technical skills that are in demand, can do very well. On the other hand, consider several occupations that require a Bachelor’s Degree:

Child, Family, School Social Workers	\$34,000
Newspaper and magazine Reporters.	\$31,000
Market researchers	\$26,500
Recreation therapists	\$33,000

As parents and counselors we would do well to consider what we tell our teens about the adult world of college degrees and incomes. We would do better to say, “a college degree is no ticket to a good income. If you find something you love and you’re not concerned about the money, go after it. But if you want to make a good income, you’ll need to find something you would enjoy that is also in

demand in the economy. You will need to find out what kind of training is necessary to excel in that field. This may involve a four year college degree in a science and technology or business field. However, it might involve a couple of years of technical school followed by on the job training and advanced certifications.”

IV — Just Being a Teen

Lastly, much of the source of worry in overanxious teens comes from the place where they are in their development toward adulthood. As we said before, often everything that is going on with them feels “terrible,” and “awful,” and they feel it has never happened



to anyone but them, it is a problem that is impossible to solve, and that it will last forever. I see many teens who take on too many activities, try to succeed at a high level at all of them, and get overwhelmed. They have had little life experience to that point with prioritizing, planning ahead and scheduling their time effectively, working in an economical and efficient manner, to get things done on time. These are skills that can be learned over time. They often view small failures as frightening and as having a lasting impact on them simply because

they haven’t lived very long yet and haven’t learned that they do get over most things in time and go on to be happy, and they often do so sooner than they thought they would. They may view a problem as overwhelming simply because they haven’t had to handle a problem such as this one before. With time they will be able to say, “Well, I got through that, and if I can get through that, I can get through this too.”

If you are a parent, one of the best ways to help is to tell your life stories to your anxious teen. I know this sounds old fashioned, but I have seen teens who turn a deaf ear to parents’ lectures, suddenly listen up with great interest to real stories about the parent’s life. They are eager learners. Even my own teens have told me the stories their favorite teachers told them about their own lives as a teaching example. Throughout time, we have transmitted culture and wisdom through the telling of stories, passing them down through the generations. So turn off the television, silence the cellphone, shut down the computer, cook a family meal, and talk.



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Raising a Responsible Child

(Birchlane Press, 1995) and

Divorce Wars

(American Psychological Association, 2000).

as well as numerous papers in the field of child and family forensic work. Her paper "Help for the Alienated Parent" appeared in the *Journal of Family Therapy* in the Fall of 2005 and "Ten Ethical Pitfalls to Avoid When Doing Child and Family Forensic Work" appeared in the May 2006 issue of the *Georgia Psychologist*.

Dr. Ellis' most recent paper, "A Stepwise Approach to Evaluating Children for Parental Alienation Syndrome" was published in the *Journal of Child Custody* in January 2008.

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Coming Soon...

Why Are Adolescent Boys Falling Behind?

Did you know that in many entering classes at universities around the country, the ratio of female students to males is 60 to 40? Even the University of Georgia has had to raise the admission criteria for girls and lower the bar for boys in order to achieve a roughly equal balance between male and female students. Most high school students will tell you that the girls are the ones who make the highest grades in the class. Adolescent boys are at greater risk of dropping out of high school. Why are boys falling behind? We'll explore this in the next issue and will look at a variety of theories about this, some of which may surprise you.