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The curse of perfectionism

The end of every academic year brings media stories about examination stress and the increasing pressures faced by students fighting for university places, training and jobs, but this year the spotlight has fallen on female students, with research from the University of New South Wales (UNSW) showing that girls, and particularly gifted girls, suffer the highest levels of stress, anxiety and pressure in their quest for academic success.

UNSW researchers interviewed 722 Year 12 students from a representative sample of Sydney schools, finding that 42% suffered from high-level anxiety and 16% reported severe levels of anxiety. Just over half of the students felt that too much was expected of them in Year 12, identifying workload as the main pressure they faced.

But what did they identify as the greatest source of pressure? Nearly half (44%) said the pressure they felt was self-inflicted, with other sources including family (35%) and school or teachers (21%). Gifted students, however, were the most likely to say that pressure was self-inflicted, with 47% saying they put pressure on themselves to achieve top marks compared with 24% of average-ability students.

While the result that 42% of students experience high levels of anxiety in Year 12 is concerning, the UNSW researchers state that “it is the impact of pressure, however, that is most concerning” with 44% of students describing themselves as regularly being agitated, irritable or nervous. Academic pressure leads to stress and altered learning behaviours, such as procrastination, lack of sleep and all-night cramming sessions. The result is that even the most academically able students can do poorly on exams due to the impact of stress.

What is the difference between stress and anxiety? Stress is a response to routine pressures, like exams, moving house or family difficulties. It occurs in reaction to a specific stressor and usually goes away once the stressful situation has resolved itself. Anxiety, on the other hand, results in a young person worrying that events in the future will have negative outcomes. Anxiety can be a normal reaction to stress, however clinically anxious children persistently overreact to minor threats and alter their behaviour to avoid the source of their anxiety. The Australian Psychological Society says that where symptoms of anxiety occur frequently and interfere with daily life, it is “typically considered an anxiety disorder”.

A factor in stress and anxiety that is receiving increasing attention is perfectionism, particularly in girls. Flinders University psychologist Dr Tom Nehmy, who reviewed 700 research papers from around the world, says that perfectionism is the common risk factor that best explains the problems associated with depression, anxiety and eating disorders. “Perfectionism,” he says, “basically involves things like very black and white thinking, being extremely self-critical and having an inability to cope with pressure because of fear of failure.”

Similarly, researcher Chloe Yu Shu from Curtin University has linked stress, low mood, anxiety and self-criticism in her thesis examining young females aged 14-19 who are struggling with “unhelpful perfectionism” and are at risk of developing eating disorders, depression and anxiety. She says her research shows that teaching skills to manage perfectionism and stress are effective in improving wellbeing, and that preventative programs can help young people before their perfectionism and stress “builds up into something big”.

Research summary for principals

Last year Judith Carlisle, headmistress of Oxford High School for Girls in the UK, started an initiative she called 'The death of Little Miss Perfect' in response to what she sees as a culture of perfectionism that is undermining girls' self-esteem and impacting on their academic performance. Initiatives have been introduced across the school to challenge perfectionism, from writing letters in French class wishing 'Mademoiselle Parfaite' goodbye to undertaking chemistry experiments designed to show that some experiments will not work, no matter how many times they are repeated.

Conclusion

Dr Nehmy says that the most effective way to address mental health problems is to prevent them occurring in the first place. Young people need to learn balanced, realistic thinking and how to regulate thoughts and behaviours associated with perfectionism. Similarly, the UNSW researchers say that regular sleep, exercise and relaxation time are all more important than an extra hour of study. Students interviewed for the UNSW study described a variety of "great programs" run by their schools from those designed to build resilience and identify stress and anxiety, to yoga and relaxation programs and sessions on study skills and organisation. "Perfectionism is only captured in a moment — it's not achievable longer term," says Judith Carlisle. "Unhappy people can't learn anything."

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