



STRESSED OUT

Five Research-Based
Methods to Help Teens
Beat Stress and Anxiety

DR. TIM ELMORE

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Introduction

My children, Bethany and Jonathan, were born four years apart. They have always adored each other and have grown into fully functioning, full-time employed adults. I could not be more proud as a father.

But their journey was not without struggle.

When Bethany turned 18, we began noticing a downward spiral in her personality. At first, it was only something her mother and I recognized. Our typically upbeat, fun-loving girl grew more quiet and reserved. We watched her smile less. We saw more tears. (For seemingly no reason, she'd begin to cry.) She didn't want to be left alone. We witnessed less energy and more anxiety. Soon, others began to notice and wondered if something had happened to her. We wondered the same thing.

At night, I would walk into her room and see a melancholy teen, lying on her bed, reading her Bible, trying to get some relief and consolation. As I interacted with her, she'd tell me she had no idea why, but that she felt hopeless and lost. She described her situation as "a very dark place."

This was so unlike the Bethany we'd come to know. She was a laid back girl who seldom got ruffled about anything; whose favorite activity was laughter and whose favorite words were "whatever" and "chill."

Over the subsequent weeks, we tried everything, including fun activities, diversions, conversation, reducing her responsibilities, and seeing a counselor. My wife, Pam, and I tried to be the best parents we could be—but despite our seemingly healthy home, we had an emotionally unhealthy daughter.

It was a difficult time for every one of us.

Over a decade later, Bethany now enjoys a productive life. She's herself again. But it required her to take some specific steps and even some medication to balance the chemicals in her body.

For our son, Jonathan, the story was slightly different.

Jonathan was attending college in Los Angeles—more than a four-hour flight from our home in Atlanta—when his battle began. His anxiety and depression challenge was more subtle than his sister’s, but it was just as real. He’d been a boy who was hyperactive in his early childhood years, always wanting to play with friends, always wanting to move around, and seldom lacking a vivid imagination during any activity. He loved life.

During his first year away from home, however, something was triggered inside of him. He found himself migrating toward the familiar. He was a good student and continued to make good grades in school, but he grew more quiet, pensive, and melancholy, just as his sister did. When we’d talk to him, he told us he’d just had a tough day, but not to worry about his gloomy feelings. We all rationalized that maybe this was simply him adjusting to his move across the country. He put off doing something about his “moods” until months into the symptoms.

But by now, we’d become familiar with these symptoms. We insisted he take action.

Jonathan had to take his own specific steps to emerge out of the emotional pit he’d fallen into during this season of his life. His steps were not identical to Bethany’s, but they were essential for him to gain equilibrium and thrive again as a young man.

Out of this journey with both of my kids, I’d like to offer not only research on the expanding struggle American teens seem to be having with anxiety and depression, but also five specific and proven methods for climbing out of an emotional pit and back into the life they were meant to live.



Survey Says: The Kids Are Not OK

At this point in history, social scientists have collected loads of data on the mental health issues kids face today. In a case study published by TIME magazine, Faith-Ann Bishop tells of cutting herself, inflicting wounds on her arms or legs as a response to feeling troubled and overwhelmed. As the report explains, “The pain of the superficial wound was a momentary escape from the anxiety she was fighting constantly, about grades, about her future, about relationships, about everything.”ⁱ

Experts are struggling to help the growing number of teens like her.

Sometimes Faith-Ann would cry. Sometimes she’d vomit. Very often, she felt sick, and at times, she would avoid school completely. She said later, “It was like asking me to climb Mount Everest in high heels.”ⁱⁱ

Anxiety and depression in high school kids have been on the rise since 2012, after several years of plateau. It is a reality that crosses over all demographics—urban, suburban and rural—and among adolescents who are college bound and among those who are not. Teens from different ethnicities and genders are all experiencing the issues associated with angst, although some studies suggest the girls are having more trouble with it than the boys.

The Department of Health and Human Services reported that, in 2015, some three million teens, ages 12-17, had at least one major depressive episode in the past year.ⁱⁱⁱ More than two million reported experiencing depression that impairs their daily functioning. Sadly, the Child Mind Institute informed us in 2015 that just one in five teens who've had an anxiety disorder get treatment.^{iv} Most just live with it.

In my book, *Generation iY: Our Last Chance to Save Their Future*, I spotted this trend about a decade ago. I relayed the results of a report from the American College Health Association, which told us how university students were faring at school:

- 94% said the top word they use to describe their life is "overwhelmed."
- 44% said it was difficult to even function.
- Nearly one in ten had thought about suicide in the last year.^v

Anxiety is the most common mental-health disorder in the United States, affecting nearly one-third of both adolescents and adults, according to Harvard Medical School.^{vi} But unlike depression, with which it routinely occurs, anxiety is often seen as a less serious problem.

"There is a growing body of evidence that this is a serious enough problem that it deserves additional attention and prioritization," John Auerbach, president and CEO of the Trust for America's Health, said.^{vii} Experts are now calling suicides that result from anxiety and depression "despair deaths." In a recent report issued in November 2017, several nonprofits called for a national "resiliency" strategy to combat America's deaths of despair, which totaled 64,591 in 1999 but more than doubled to 141,963 in 2016. That report said such deaths will rise 60% by 2025 if trends continue. In Utah, current trends predict a 40% spike, or a jump from 50 to 70 deaths per 100,000 people.^{viii}

In a recently released paper, the Well Being Trust and the Trust for America's Health call for routine screenings to detect mental health problems in students, increased staffing, and a more flexible approach to the use of federal grants that could help troubled children.^{ix} According to the *Deseret News In Depth*, "The report also calls for specialized training for teachers to help them identify students who have suffered traumatic events and those at risk for suicide. And it advocates for special schools for students recovering from substance abuse disorders."^x

We are just now realizing how serious the issue is.

Average Kids Becoming Anxious Kids

The New York Times recently summarized a number of studies on this topic, telling us, “Over the last decade, anxiety has overtaken depression as the most common reason college students seek counseling services. In its annual survey of students, the American College Health Association found a significant increase—62 percent in 2016 (up from 50 percent in 2011)—of undergraduates reporting ‘overwhelming anxiety’ in the previous year. Surveys that look at symptoms related to anxiety are also telling. In 1985, the Higher Education Research Institute at U.C.L.A. began asking incoming college freshmen if they ‘felt overwhelmed by all [they] had to do’ during the previous year. In 1985, 18 percent said they did. By 2010, that number had increased to 29 percent. Last year, it surged to 41 percent.”^{xi}

Further, a record number of universities report they cannot keep up with the appointments students request to see a counselor. There just aren’t enough counselors to meet the demand on the campus. Somehow, I can’t help but think—life was not supposed to be this way. A statement from Dr. Robert Leahy, Director of the American Institute of Cognitive Therapy, summarized the problem best when he reported that teens today have the same level of anxiety as a psychiatric patient did in the 1950s.^{xii}

Teens today have the same level of anxiety as a psychiatric patient did in the 1950s.

-Dr. Robert Leahy



These numbers are enough to make me pause and become concerned. On top of them, however, are attempted suicides—usually an outgrowth of teens feeling anxious or depressed. There has been a doubling of hospital admissions for suicidal teens over the last 10 years, with the highest rates occurring soon after they return to school each fall.^{xiii} This comes as little surprise to high school principals nationwide, who increasingly report a surplus of anxious, overwhelmed students.

What is going on? Is this our new normal?

It is challenging to separate whether this spike in statistics is simply associated with our increased awareness and diagnosis of these disorders or if our youth are actually becoming more anxious. Is it just that we know about these analyses more than we did 50 years ago? Do we rely too quickly on meds and overmedicate them? I say this tongue in cheek, but if they were around today, Dennis the Menace would be on Ritalin and Charlie Brown would be on Prozac. And Tom Sawyer? He might just be sedated and placed in a ward.

In this e-book, I am arguing for a calm, common sense approach to today's challenges. As we work with schools and students around the world, however, I believe it's more than just awareness. These high numbers can't be explained away.

The fact is, kids now suffer from secondhand anxiety—even when their lives are fairly well managed—due to the angst occurring around them such as school shootings, drug or alcohol abuse, or domestic abuse. Just like smokers spread secondhand smoke, which can impact others, the problems surrounding this issue spread like a virus among students today.

Something dark is happening.

What Are Some Common Symptoms?

Before we talk about potential solutions, let's first answer a question: how do you know if your young adult is struggling with anxiety or depression?

There are many signs of anxiety and depression in young people:

1. Social withdrawal from friends or family
2. Anger and extreme impatience with random, small triggers
3. Obsession with (and spending too much time on) their phones
4. Napping or sleeping far more often than usual
5. Emotional spells filled with tears or even weeping (mood swings)

6. Extremes—either wanting to be alone or needing to cling to others
7. Low energy and reduced motivation
8. Self-harm, cutting or mutilation with sharp objects
9. Feeling overwhelmed by normal activity
10. Neglecting to shower or take care of personal hygiene
11. Extreme weight-gain or weight loss
12. Substance abuse
13. Feeling hopeless and helpless

Because each personality is unique, students may experience a strange combination of these symptoms, among others. While my daughter Bethany became “clingy” to her parents during her bout with depression, my son Jonathan became a recluse. She was attracted to people; he was avoiding people. A friend of ours has a teenage daughter who wanted a little of both. She’d storm out of her bedroom, angry and venting about how no one understood her, how everyone was against her, and how she needed them to “get” her. But just as quickly, she would disappear into her room to be alone. Sometimes, an anxious teen becomes self-aware during these spells and begins to cry because they don’t understand what’s happening inside of them.

When anxiety or depression turns into violence, there are more signs to look for. According to a report by the U.S. Department of Education, “In terms of identification, the students most at risk for causing harm are those who present some combination of signals, including drawing pictures or writing about harm to others, making verbal statements about hurting others (online or in person), assaulting other students for minimal slights, and disrupting the classroom process with outbursts. Some students may not be participating in school activities, not joining others at lunch, or walking alone between classes.”^{xiv}

Among children 17 and younger, deaths from suicide jumped 84 percent in the past decade. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for children ages 10 to 14 and the second leading cause of death among ages 15 to 24. The number of high school students who reported seriously thinking about suicide increased from 13.8% in 2009 to 17.7% in 2015.^{xv}

In a society rich with modern technology and conveniences, this just seems strange.

*Talk It Over: Have you spotted any of these symptoms?
How about any others?*

Four Prevailing Reasons for Their Angst

In a brief piece like this, I would never claim to explain every cause for our rise in anxiety and depression. On the one hand, all of us experience varying levels of anxiety. It's a normal part of life in the 21st century. If it's inhibiting your daily routines, however, it's time to take some steps to diagnose it and treat it. For many teens, it's the result of a chemical imbalance. They need a doctor or counselor to help them regain balance. Additionally, our culture has evolved into a place that actually induces anxiety into our lives. Like walking outside during the spring in the South—the middle of pollen season—where you are more apt to sneeze or get watery eyes than at other times during the year, we are in a season where our stress levels are higher than our ability to cope with them. Today, we live in an era of high stress, high anxiety, and even high depression. It's crazy. One could argue we should be the happiest, most emotionally well-adjusted people in history, with more technology, more conveniences, more time- and stress-saving devices available than ever. Sadly, we seem to be more stressed than past generations. Let me explain four reasons why this is happening.

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Four Characteristics of Today's Students

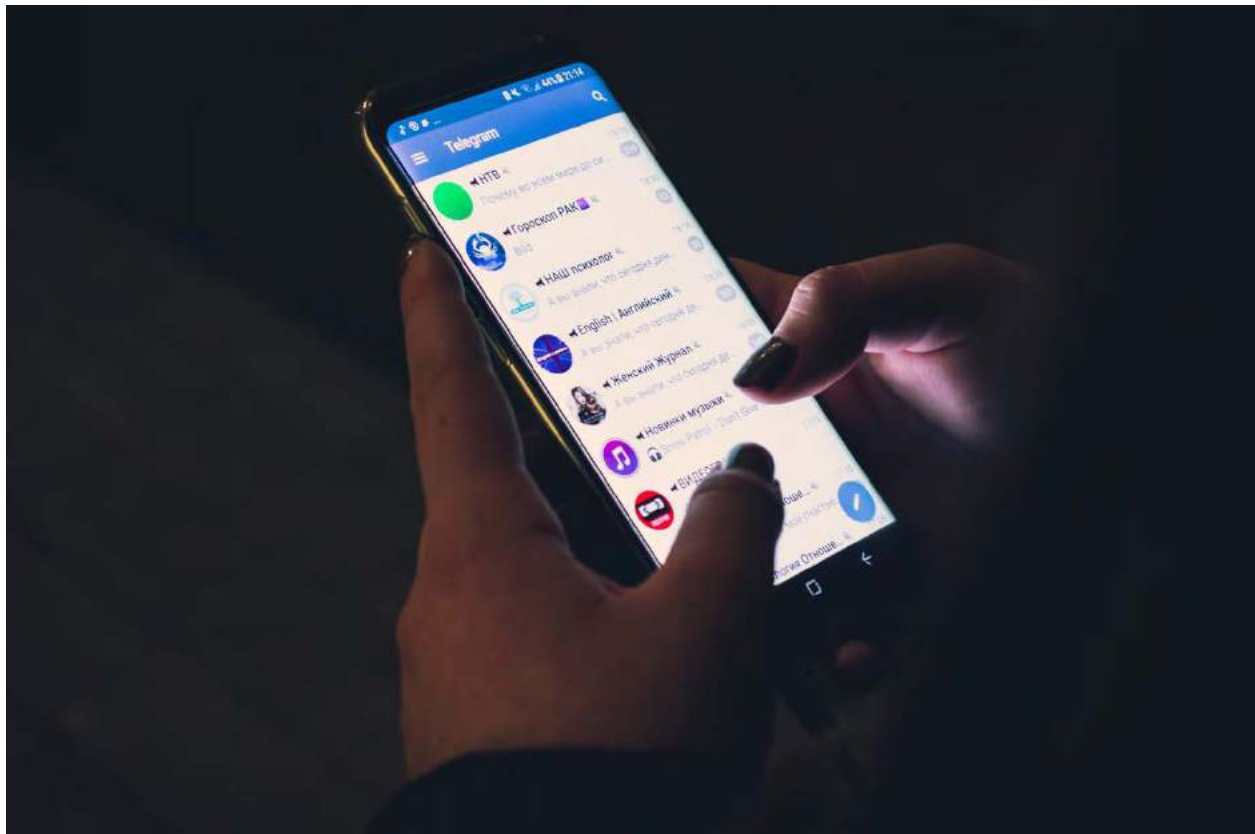
Overwhelmed

Times in the past were simpler times. We expected less to get done during our days; we attempted less during any given day; we said less and we felt entitled to less than we do today. All of the clutter and expectations are catching up to us. As I consider my typical day, there are lots of items screaming at me to stimulate me; there is so much “clickbait” out there. So when I experience periods that are not as stimulating, I can feel down. Even melancholy. It’s as if I’ve conditioned my mind to need external stimulation to feel “up.” I need the hype. In addition, Generation Z (the youngest population being measured today) has grown up in a darker world than even Millennials did. The realities that mark their first two decades are the dot-com era bubble bursting, corporate scandals, terrorist attacks, unemployment and recession, racial unrest, school shootings, cultural complexity, and uncertainty. It’s enough to overwhelm any kid. As I mention above, the number one term college students use to describe their life is “overwhelmed.” With all that’s going on, even the little things feel overwhelming.

Overcommitted

Certainly not every young person among Generation Z fits this description, but a majority of them do. We have raised American students to be committed to more activities than any past population of kids: soccer practice, karate lessons, clubs, homework, ballgames, recitals, rehearsals, and other extracurricular activities. I am not sure how we migrated into this place of “no margins,” but it has added to the angst of a generation. What’s more, in my neck of the world, each activity demands your very soul. Every coach, teacher, and trainer wants the child to give everything they’ve got to the activity. Students in our focus groups agreed they are all afraid of disappointing the adults in their lives. They feel constant pressure to make the grade, make the team, make the cut, and make the honor roll so they can eventually make the money.

Nothing short of being number one will suffice for their parents or for them. The fact is, adults unknowingly emphasize perfect kid performance: you must make all A's, you must get playing time on the team, you must score, you must start a non-profit. And there is constant competition from peers. It can be paralyzing when they don't know where to even start to reach those goals. One student recently told me, "Everything has to be perfect. It's not OK to be average. It is not OK not to be OK."



Overexposed

The average teen consumes more than 10,000 messages a day, thanks to social media, television media, Spotify, Netflix, smart phone apps, and everything else going on in their lives. By adolescence, kids are on their phones the equivalent of a full-time job. At 18 years old, the average child has witnessed 16,000 murders on TV and 200,000 assaults.^{xvi} "If you wanted to create an environment to churn out really angsty people, we've done it," Janis Whitlock, director of the Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery, said.^{xvii} While parenting styles can be a factor, as can school stress, Whitlock doesn't think those items are the main drivers of this epidemic. "It's that they're in a cauldron of stimulus they can't get away from, or don't want to get away from, or don't know how to get away from," she said. One high school student put it this way: "We are the first generation that cannot escape our problems at all. We're all

like little volcanoes. We get this constant pressure, from our phones, from our relationships, from the way things are today."^{xviii}

Overprotected

This one is counterintuitive. Some kids feel anxiety because they've never had parents who've equipped them to be resilient. They have very little grit. They are in fact, fragile. I don't blame the kids for this, I blame adults. Children have been raised in a world where things have arrived with a "quick click." Their world is on-demand and instant access, providing very few delayed gratification skills. Parents have often nurtured them, coddled them, and done a much better job protecting than preparing their kids for the world that awaits them as adults. We've prepared the path for the child instead of the child for the path. It would be easy to assume this is only true for adolescents from a very busy and affluent area of our country. But it's happening everywhere. You see it in North and South Dakota, Idaho, and Montana. "Nearly 30% of the state's teens said they felt sad and hopeless almost every day for at least two weeks in a row," according to the 2015 Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey.^{xix} The irony is that we've attempted to protect kids from harm and risk and, in the process, have put them at risk for anxiety and hopelessness.

I first heard about Madison Holleran in 2015. She became famous for all the wrong reasons. In 2014, she was a two-sport athlete at the University of Pennsylvania. She came from a good family, who attended games and matches to watch her perform. Everything appeared as if it were perfect in her life. But she suffered anonymously with anxiety. Her world was split in two: the public one on social media—photos of smiling friends at parties—while the other was a private one—desperate and hopeless. No one had any idea. One evening, Madison jumped from the ninth floor of a parking garage on campus to her death. Notes of love and sorrow were left behind.

Situations like Madison's are becoming far too common.

"Honestly, I've had more students this year hospitalized for anxiety, depression, and other mental-health issues than ever," Kathy Reamy, school counselor at La Plata High School in southern Maryland and chair of the NEA School Counselor Caucus, said.

"There's just so much going on in this day and age, the pressures to fit in, the pressure to achieve, the pressure of social media. And then you couple that with the fact that kids can't even feel safe in their schools—they worry genuinely about getting shot—and it all makes it so much harder to be a teenager."^{xx}

Question: What symptoms have you spotted among your students?

3

Five Resources to Combat Anxiety and Depression

At this point, let me suggest the obvious. This issue is not going away. In fact, I believe it is only going to get bigger. So, I'd like to invest the remaining portion of this e-book discussing what you can equip students to do to combat anxiety levels in their lives. If you will work with them to instill new habits and attitudes—the chances of them returning to emotional and mental health will rise measurably. Below, I offer five specific components to resource their mental health.



1. Margin

I mention this element first because it represents the quickest step kids can take. The people who maintain a happy life; those who are emotionally healthy are those who create margin in their calendar. They schedule portions of their day to create space. They remove noise and clutter during those portions of time. They experience solitude. Quietness. Simplicity. They take control of their day instead of remaining at the mercy of all the busyness going on. They intentionally unplug.

Let's talk about unplugging.

Life has changed in industrialized nations over the last decade. Why? Our phones. The cell phone changed our lives. The smartphone, however, absolutely transformed them. Suddenly an entire computer is in our hands, with access to unlimited information, push notifications, noise, pings, alerts, and news. Perhaps nobody saw it coming, but with all the marvelous positive aspects of this innovation came a subtle and sinister aspect. Too much stuff is coming at us every day. Between 2008 and 2018, the levels of anxiety in adolescents skyrocketed. Measurably. In a relatively short amount of time, the teen experience dramatically shifted.

"What happened that so many more teens, in such a short time, would feel depressed, attempt suicide and commit suicide?" San Diego State University professor Jean Twenge wrote in a column for the Washington Post. "After scouring several large surveys for clues, I found that all of the possibilities traced back to a major change in teens' lives: the sudden ascendance of the smartphone."^{xxi}

"Teens who spend five or more hours online a day were 71% more likely than those who spent only one hour a day to have at least one suicide risk factor," Twenge's wrote.^{xxii}

One of our board members told me recently about his high school daughter's report card. Although Rick and his wife both knew she was an intelligent, college-bound teen, her grades were diminishing quickly. After evaluating what was going on in her life, the only controllable they felt might be a reason was the time she was spending on social media. It was about four hours every day. It tended to consume her. She was preoccupied. So what did Rick decide to do? He replaced her smart phone with an inexpensive cell phone he bought from Walmart that had no capacity for apps. It was simple, yet functional, with only a GPS for tracking where she was and where she needed to go. That's all the teen carried with her, and because she was embarrassed to even take it out of her purse, she rarely was on it.

The result?

Rick told me that within 48 hours, his daughter's behavior changed. She was engaged again at home and at school. Her grades began to come back. In fact, it became an inside joke that whenever any member of their family began to slip away from meeting their goals, that person would get the "family phone" for a week. Inevitably, it helped that individual return to the best version of themselves.

Why is this such a big issue today? Students in Generation Z have grown up in a world full of noise and clutter.

According to marketing firm Sparks and Honey, kids from Generation Z have average attention spans of about 8 seconds, down from 12 seconds for teens in the year 2000.^{xxiii} This simply means that after about 8 seconds, they may get distracted unless they are engaged with something intriguing. Further, approximately 11% of kids from Generation Z have been diagnosed with ADHD.^{xxiv} These realities frequently lead students to invite noise and clutter into their lives. They have a difficult time sitting still and being quiet. Unfortunately, this is the very antidote they often need most. Quiet and still.



One of the worst travesties kids can imagine today is boredom. They hate to be bored. While I remember hating boredom when I was a teen, we know something today we did not know back then. Our brains actually need boredom to be healthy. According to one report, neuroscientists tell us today that it is in times of boredom (when we have space for quietness) that we develop empathy and creativity. The margin we experience when our brains are bored provides us the capacity to become better people. Consider for a moment a typical adolescent's life filled with noise and pings and activity coming at them all the time. They have little time to care about others—they are simply trying to react to everything. To survive the week themselves. That's just it. Many shift into survival mode. Getting by becomes the goal. Coping with life.

Leslie Smith and her administrators at Orange Lutheran High School, in Orange, California, have recognized the rising levels of anxiety in their students. In response, they've taken numerous steps, including the launch of R.O.A.M. (Re-vitalize On A Monday). Students get to choose an activity that energizes them—from basketball to ping pong, corn hole to reading—or they can catch up on a subject they've fallen behind in. Most of all, they can just rest and enjoy some “margin” in their day. It's more than study hall. They actually encourage their college-bound, often stressed out students to create space in their life to be healthy humans. They communicated the research and reasoning behind R.O.A.M. and then allowed their students to determine how to revitalize themselves.



Is it working?

Leslie told me they've made adjustments to the game plan, but students, faculty, and staff are all enjoying a deepened culture of relationships and growth. They mix in real life activities with discussion and reflection. And the students are winning.

There is measurable growth in the emotional intelligence of everyone, increased focus on the right priorities, authentic conversations among adults and kids, and celebration of the growth these students enjoy.

Action Steps

Let me suggest some steps you can take to help your students increase the margins in their lives and, hence, decrease their levels of anxiety:

1. First of all, decide to stay current on cultural statistics and trends. Keep up on media outlets and music. This can tip you off when you hear language or terms used by your young people. The statistics can be a sort of translator for you. You can simply Google the most popular sites and apps teens use, and you'll discover lots that will help you remain relevant. I watch MTV and VH1 from time to time, just so I will know what's being heard and seen by young adults. I find the more I know about what's happening in society, the better I can interpret the patterns of kids.

2. Monitor your student's social media accounts. Apps can help you to explore and to monitor your teen's activity on their phone—what they are consuming and how many hours they are using it. Keep in mind, the greater the volume of hours on a smartphone, the greater the probability of symptoms of anxiety. The following apps are among several that are helpful to monitor social media accounts:

1. Norton

This allows you to set phone time limits and filter web content coming in.

2. TeenSafe

This allows you to track your child's calls, texts, GPS, and social media activity.

3. MobSafetyRangerBrowser

This enables you to view your child's website browsing and set time limits.

4. PhoneSheriff

This enables you to do all of the above, but is available for fewer devices.

5. DinnerTime

This allows you to limit phone internet use during family meals.

6. Qustodio

This allows you to track and set phone curfews, which causes phones to shut down.

Apps can empower a parent to know what's happening on their child's phone.



3. Communicate “unplugged” times and curfews. Every healthy home I know of has set some boundaries for portable devices, and these boundaries apply to everyone—even the adults. Many families have a basket in their kitchen where all members place their phone during meal times or game times. Some even have a curfew at bedtime, just to provide margin for their brains. “Unplugged Times” can be challenging at first, as kids may view it as punitive, but after a few days, everyone usually feels liberated from the tether of their phone or tablet. Margins require boundaries. Mental health demands that we separate ourselves from our devices.

4. Plan weekly date nights or weekend dates. These are times where, once again, you enjoy margin in the week, where portable devices are off-limits. These face-to-face times enable their brains (and yours!) to refresh themselves, over laughter, debriefing the week, or just good conversation. I did this with each of my family members as my kids were growing up. It provided a time of connection where I could listen and earn trust in their lives. The marvelous benefit was the space it created for us to slow down, to breathe and to reflect. The results found in a study by Monitoring the Future found that kids who had

more face-to-face time enjoyed better mental health than those who had more screen time and less face-to-face interaction.^{xxv}

5. Create a phone contract. Because the need for margin is almost always associated with over-using our smartphones, I believe it's wise for a parent or teacher to create a phone contract that both the adult and student signs. Yes, you read that correctly. Years ago, I read about a parent who bought a phone for her middle school son—but wanted him to use it with the proper perspective. So, she created a simple and clear contract they both signed before she turned it over to him. (By the way, that's the best time to establish boundaries—at the beginning.) She reminded him that she bought the phone—so it was her phone. At the same time, she was going to let him use it as long as he stayed within the boundaries of their agreement. She laid out how it should be used during school hours, afternoon hours, and when it should be turned in at bedtime. While this may sound antiquated, she established a great mindset for him to handle his phone well.

6. Delete social media accounts. My daughter Bethany is now a licensed counselor. She's told me the irony of social media use is that it is both self-soothing and a source of anxiety. It makes us feel better and worse. We often resort to it when we don't know what to do with ourselves, yet it frequently becomes a root cause of negative emotions: angst, envy, and the fear of missing out. She often recommends to clients that they simply delete some or all of their social media accounts when their anxiety becomes too much to handle. While it's only one of several solutions, for many, it is a source of peace. It diminishes the clutter and noise that lead to anxiety.

7. Create boundaries or guidelines on extra-curricular activities. One way to create margin in our lives is to enter a new season with boundaries for how much we'll allow ourselves to be at the mercy of someone else. Some students for instance will join three or four extra-curricular activities in the fall or spring and are compelled to make every practice, rehearsal, game, or competition. Every coach, trainer, or instructor seems to demand their soul and to make it a priority in their lives. Now, don't get me wrong—I am a fan of being committed. I just believe we must create sane boundaries for how many commitments we make at one time. My favorite Habitude® called "Rivers and Floods" echoes this truth. People are either rivers or floods. They're either flowing in one direction or expanding in many directions and doing damage. I say this to students all the time: "You can do anything, but you can't do everything. Sooner or later, you

must learn the power of saying ‘no’ if you’re going to flow.” So what do rivers have that floods don’t? Banks. There is a wall of dirt or rocks that enables a river to flow in a single direction. I am simply asking: What are your banks? What are your student’s banks? If you say yes to something, what else are you denying in order to create margin in your day or week?

8. Help them to minimize the possessions they own. Minimalism is a fad for some today, and I’m hopeful it becomes more than a fad. I believe part of our problem with stress and anxiety is the pressure we feel to own so much. Materialism is alive and well in our post-modern society. Certainly there is nothing wrong with owning nice clothes, technology, cars, or luxuries, but too frequently, they begin to own us. Author Kathy Lipp once said, “Why do teens tend to want so many ‘belongings’? Because they ‘long to be’.”^{xxvi} They can draw their identity from external, not internal possessions; our being is derived from “stuff” rather than an internal sense of belonging—to family, to a community. When we unwittingly put our sense of identity in external items, we’re sure to have an up and down experience and will encounter anxiety, as life will eventually feel volatile—it’s out of our control to keep up. When we feed an appetite it becomes stronger rather than satisfied. A minimalist believes the richest people are not the ones who have the most, but those who need the least. So, talk over these questions with your teens:

- Would it help to clear out the clutter in your life?
- How could we slowly but surely minimize the “stuff” in our lives?
- What should we give up or give away first?

9. Host conversations about who’s the “boss” of their time. I believe caring adults need to host discussions with students about technology being a wonderful servant but a horrible master. There’s nothing inherently wrong with smartphones, unless they become the boss of our lives. We all have seen people (of all ages) become slaves to the pinging of their phones, distracted from relationships and even their own mental health because they feel they must react to every notification or text message or social media ping coming at them. When we become the master, not the slave, of our devices, we can insert margins in our day and maintain good mental health.

Question:
How do you help kids practice establishing margins each week?

2. Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a buzzword today. Some folks are wary of it, as it feels like some ancient Eastern ritual for meditation. Others swear by it. Still, others simply do it because it's fashionable. Regardless of what you feel when you hear the term "mindfulness" the practice of being mindful is an absolute assault on poor mental health. It almost works like medication for millions of people. It calms, it offers perspective and it focuses a person on what's most important.

Let's talk about it here.

If you ask people to define mindfulness, you'll likely get a variety of responses. To define it simply, mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us. It means exchanging all of our multitasking for "monotasking." One task or thought at a time. It includes putting down all the juggling balls for a bit. It's about embracing the beauty of one thing.

Let's face it. Haven't we all had those moments where we must admit: I'm here, but I'm not here. We are a distracted generation of people, regardless of our age. There are too many things going on and too many things being said to be clear and focused. The average American consumes 10,000 messages a day. Five years ago, I read there were 950,000 apps available for our devices. Today, it is 4.2 million. There's stuff to consume all the time. When we practice mindfulness techniques, however, we can overcome our distractions. According to a new study published in *Monitor on Psychology*, mindfulness (and clearing or focusing our minds) can control stress and even help with treating depression in both adults and adolescents.^{xxvii} The perks of mindfulness actually extend further. The American Psychological Association cites it as a hopeful strategy for alleviating stress, boosting memory, and increasing focus.^{xxviii}



Best-selling author Daniel Goleman reminds us that our bodies are designed to be energetic and active and then recuperate.^{xxix} Frequently, we don't get that recuperation time. Many of us wear our overstimulation like a badge of honor. We are busy. We are communicating all the time. We are producing. And most of all, multitasking. According to Sparks and Honey, Generation Z multitasks on five screens, not two.^{xxx} While our brains can achieve amazing goals, they weren't designed to multitask. And it is adding to our anxiety.

What to Do About Multitasking

I remember becoming acutely aware of student's multitasking in 2005. I watched my daughter, who was a senior in high school, do her homework while also enjoying four other inputs—music from her iPod, a television show, her laptop, and her phone, which enabled her to continue an ongoing conversation with a friend.

Today, most of us can't imagine doing life without multitasking. Our calendars are so full and our expectations so high, we feel we must accomplish two or more tasks at a time. In 2007, students from Kansas State University surveyed themselves and discovered they cram 27.5 hours of activity into each day through multitasking.^{xxxi} I think that number is conservative.

Today, I wonder what multitasking has done to us.

As busy people, most of us would agree that multitasking is helpful. We pick up our child at school while talking with a friend on our mobile device. We can keep a grocery list and a recipe on a smartphone, enabling us to cook dinner without the hassle of paper lists and cookbooks. Unfortunately, at the same time, it seems that few people really pay attention to one thing well. We lack clarity.

- We are shallow, not deep.
- We are fuzzy, not focused.
- We are distracted, not aligned.
- We often live with duplicity, not integrity.

What's Wrong with Multitasking?

Thanks to social media, our students have grown up multitasking. As I suggested earlier, however, I've concluded multitasking is damaging them. Apart from the obvious "texting while driving" dangers, multitasking plays a role in the anxiety and depression levels our students experience. A squirt of dopamine is released when we accomplish one of the items on our multitasking list. It makes us feel good. We tend to pursue more short-term tasks that give us this dopamine shot, and soon we're caught

up in quantity over quality. We actually work harder not smarter. And we don't really focus. Sadly, we trade in health and value for speed and volume.

MIT neuroscientist Earl Miller reveals that our brains are "not wired to multitask well... when people think they're multitasking; they're actually just switching from one task to another very rapidly. And every time they do, there's a cognitive cost." ^{xxxii}

A study at the University Of London demonstrated that people who multitask while performing cognitive tasks experience measurable IQ drops. ^{xxxiii} Believe it or not, the IQ drops were akin to what you see in those who skip a night of sleep or who smoke marijuana. Wow.

Most of all, doctors tell us that multitasking causes an increase in the production of cortisol, the stress hormone. When our brain constantly shifts gears, it creates stress and tires us out, leaving us feeling mentally fatigued. In addition, the barrage of information, it's overwhelming. Figuring out what you need to pay attention to and what you don't can be downright exhausting.

A Game Plan: Monotasking

I have a challenge for you. Why not talk this over with your students and encourage them to look at the data? Then, invite them to trade in "multitasking" for monotasking. You read that correctly. Monotasking is a lost art. It means concentrating on one important task, instead of four or five. It's giving your best effort to one item, not your mediocre effort to several. Most importantly, it enables a student to integrate their life. Integration is taken from the same root word as integrity. It means being one person. Clear. Focused. On-mission. It's choosing to shun duplicity and hypocrisy in favor of authenticity. It's really all about mindfulness.

Integration is the smoothest path to overcome stress, and mindfulness is the best path to take toward integration. Mindfulness has become a buzzword in many circles today. In layman's terms, mindfulness is clearing one's mind of the clutter of multitasking and focusing on the here and now. It can go as far as deep breathing and meditation, but it can begin by simply pushing pause on the noise and activity of a stressful day.



Neuroscientist Moshe Bar, at Harvard Medical School, tells us our brains switch back and forth from activity to recovery mode.^{xxxiv} We need periods of recovery—but rarely get them. Mindfulness, as I said earlier, is about putting down our “juggling balls” for a while and recovering. It’s a step to combat the unhealthy lifestyles of our youth:

- Overstimulated
- Overtaxed
- Over-connected
- Overcommitted
- Overwhelmed

These are all terms to describe lifestyles our young have accumulated. The American Psychological Association reported that 34% of Americans’ stress levels increased in 2015.^{xxxv} I believe it’s even more so among our youth.

Let’s make a trade.

What if we rebelled against the inclination of our culture for noise and clutter? What if we rejected the compulsion to be aware of everything all at once... and then decided to be mindful? It begins with acknowledging our anxiety, then taking steps to address it. Reject FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) and let’s do MONO... as in monotasking.

Neurologists claim that every time you resist acting on your anger, you're actually rewiring your brain to be calmer and more loving. Do you suppose that might work for our anxiety too? The more we are able to resist anxiety by being mindful, practicing quietness or acting on what is in our control, is it possible to combat our anxiety this way? I believe this is one important step we can take.

Ten Steps to Help Students Be More Mindful

I want to offer some practical steps to become more mindful. Mindfulness doesn't have to be some strange, hyper-religious, meditative practice. It can be as simple as becoming fully present with the people or task in front of you. So, why not begin by helping students practice mindfulness with these actions:

1. Balance screen time with face time and alone time.

Moderation in all things is wise advice. Talk to kids about balancing time with screens, face-to-face conversations, and alone time. Depending on their personality, it may not be equal, but several daily hours with each is healthy. Reject the "binge."

2. Consume more magnesium.

This crucial mineral is depleted when we're under duress. It's a catch 22 because when it's low, we feel even more emotionally reactive, according to nutritionist Dana James. Magnesium is in foods like spinach, kale, bananas, cocoa, and almond milk. ^{xxxvi}

3. Pause and discuss two questions.

Host conversations in a safe place where you can ask them two important questions:

- a. What are the advantages of our addiction to technology?
- b. What are the disadvantages of our addiction to technology?

4. Sit down and do deep breathing.

This may sound weird, but intentional breathing—where you're mindful of your inhaling and exhaling—can do wonders to reduce stress and focus our minds. Have them pause, get quiet, close their eyes, and take long, slow breaths in and out.



5. Take a walk in nature.

Anytime we exercise, it can reduce stress and help us center ourselves, but strolling in nature is the best. A Japanese study discovered a link between chemicals released by trees—called phytoncides—and reduced levels of stress hormones.

6. Commit to a regular technology fast.

Everyone I know who's turned off the technology says the same thing: "At first, it was hard, and then it became liberating." Why not choose a weekly period of time and get away from the pinging of the phone? Stress usually drops, and peace rises.

7. Get eight hours of sleep each night.

It's common knowledge that teens actually need more sleep than their younger or older counterparts but often get less thanks to 24/7 social media outlets. We need to encourage them to actually turn off their phones and sleep deeply.

8. Talk about trade-offs.

Grab some coffee and converse about how successful people make "trade-offs" in life. They know that while they can do anything, they can't do everything.

They learn to make wise decisions and say no to certain options. And they learn to multitask.

9. Find challenging work that demands your focused attention.

Research by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi reveals that we get in a flow when we perform demanding work that forces us to focus our minds on completing it. We are not distracted, but devoted in this period. We are mindful.

10. Build an integrated personal brand.

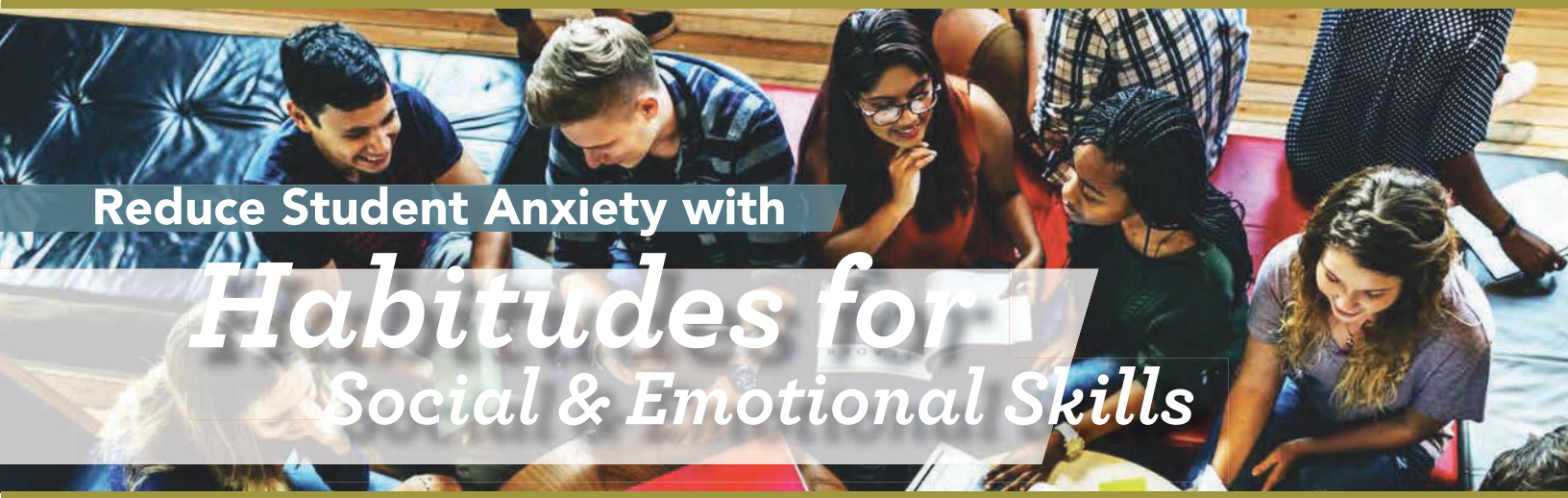
Remind students that everything they say and do is building their personal brand. Social media posts all play into this—by default or design. Creating an integrated brand is a smart way to align themselves with one persona.

It's vital that the journey out of anxiety begins with students acknowledging it. Solutions come only when we accurately define reality. It is also important for kids to recognize that while emotions are real (and should be acknowledged), they're often fleeting. They make a better servant than master. Self-awareness is vital. Some helpful apps to aid in practicing mindfulness are:

- Head Space
- Calm
- Simple Habit
- Stop, Breathe & Think

If you're a parent, I suggest you actually practice the steps on the app with your kid.

Question: What could you do to help your students practice mindfulness?



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Juli Diaz, Pricipal of Travis High School

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3. Metacognition

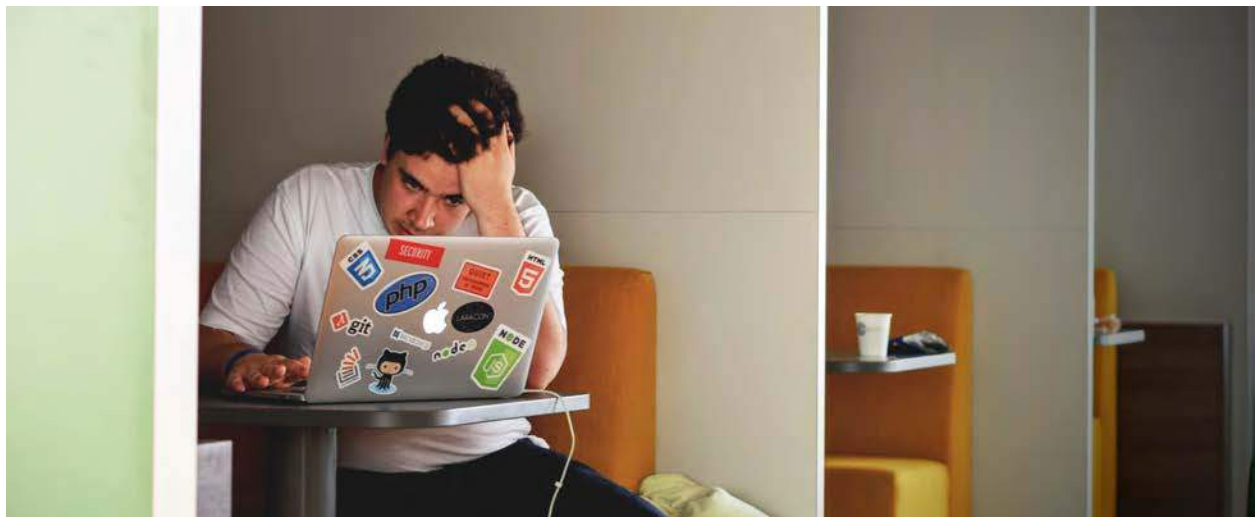
This is a term that has swept through the educational world over the last five to seven years. It is a practice that has been around since the beginning of humankind, but has been lost in today's current methodology in our homes and pedagogy in our classrooms.

At its root, metacognition is "thinking about our thinking." When kids practice metacognition, it means they reflect on how they learn something new and take ownership of it, rather than assuming the role of consumer. The secret, of course, is that it puts students back in control of their lives and their growth. Believe it or not, this positively impacts and reduces their levels of anxiety.

The first time I discovered metacognition was decades ago when I was mentoring a group of college students in leadership. One of those students emailed me asking who was going to choose the topic for next week's discussion. I grabbed my laptop and fired back, "I can do that." Or, at least, that's what I thought I said. The letter "I" and the letter "U" are next to each other on my keyboard. I actually sent the message, "u can do that," accidentally. When our meeting began the following week, I opened my mouth to begin our conversation and was shocked to see those students take ownership of the meeting. One hosted an opening activity; another showed a movie clip to spark discussion; another was ready to introduce the principle we would talk about at the meeting and later practice. The students actually led the meeting.

I never told them it was an accident on my part. And what I learned was the power of shifting control away from me and over to them. It's about empowerment.

Why do students today not feel or act empowered?



The Connection Between Empowerment and Anxiety

Dr. Jean Twenge (who I mentioned earlier) released the results of a study on student anxiety and depression levels. Her study was based on the MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory) and has been given to teens and young adults since 1938. She reveals that levels of anxiety and depression among students have risen each decade over the last 50 plus years and continue to rise.^{xxxvii} Psychologist Peter Gray suggests, “We would like to think of history as progress, but if progress is measured by the mental health and happiness of young people, then we’ve been going backward at least since the early 1950s.”^{xxxviii}

One of the connections Dr. Twenge discovered was between anxiety/depression levels and a student’s sense of control over their own life. People who believe they are in charge of their own fate are less likely to become anxious or depressed than those who believe that they are victims of circumstances beyond their control.^{xxxix}

Here’s what’s most interesting to me.

It would be easy to assume that a student’s sense of personal control would have increased over the last number of decades. We’ve made profound progress in many areas:

- Our ability to offer choices for careers
- Our capacity to prevent and treat diseases
- Our antiquated prejudices about race and gender
- Our opportunity to make money and enjoy options in life

Yet the data “indicates that young people’s belief that they have control over their own destinies has declined sharply over decades.”^{xl}

Who’s Really in Control?

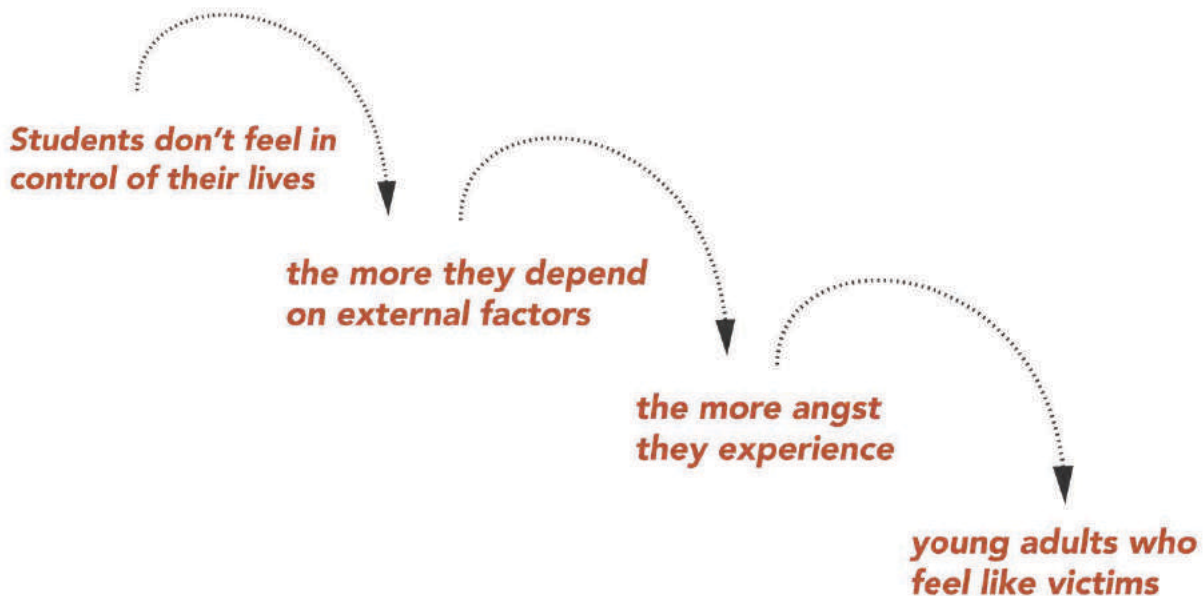
Let me illustrate. The standard measure of the sense of control is a questionnaire created by Julien Rotter called the Internal-External Locus of Control Scale. She gave pairs of questions to students then asked them to respond by indicating whether they felt the answer was “externally determined” or “internally decided”. In other words, if the issue was determined by fate or by the person involved. If they feel empowered, students strongly lean toward internal answers—they felt their success was under their control. If they don’t feel empowered, students’ answers tend to lean toward external factors. They feel as if success is beyond their reach.

Dr. Twenge and her team found that, over the decades, average scores shifted dramatically—for young teens as well as for college students—away from internal locus

of control to external. In fact, the shift was so great that the average young person in 2002 was more “external” than 80% of young people in the 1960s.^{xli} Sadly, the rise of externality on Rotter’s Scale over a 42-year period showed the same linear trend as did the rise in depression and anxiety.

It may sound both counterintuitive and ironic, but in short, adults have dictated the lives and agendas of today’s students. Take a look at the figure below as you consider the implications of our leadership. With such prescriptive leadership, students don’t feel in control of their lives. The less control they have, the more they depend on external factors. The more they’re driven by external factors, the more angst they experience. In the end, we have helpless young adults who feel like victims.

Fig. 1



The Bottom Line

So what can we make of this? What can we do?

1. Students do not feel like they’re in control of their lives. Some adult or some other factor is in charge. We need to empower them to take charge of their lives.
2. Students are overwhelmed and no longer feel they can make choices that matter, or they are afraid of choosing. We must help them take those risks.
3. Students are overwhelmed and somehow drift into a fatalistic attitude where they abdicate their right (responsibility) to choose for themselves. We must equip

them to know how to make wise and independent decisions.

4. Students must be encouraged to try new things; to risk failure; to explore new horizons without thinking they'll lose out on future opportunities.

So, the next time you see a student who's afraid of making a choice or taking a risk, I encourage you to do something counterintuitive. Begin to empower them, giving them control over their choices. Remind them they have what it takes to make a good decision and to follow through. Then, let them do it. It is imperative young people today believe that success is within their reach and responsibility. Someone did that for me 35 years ago—and I believe I owe it to the next generation.



Action Steps to Help Students Practice Metacognition

For teachers, this may remind you of the concept of “flipped classrooms.” That is certainly one example of enabling students to practice metacognition. I recognize all teachers don't have the luxury of flipping their class. But we can take some simple steps to move students toward metacognition. Here are some ideas you can practice immediately as you enable students to learn:

1. Create problems without offering solutions. Ask, don't tell. Bring up a genuine dilemma in our world and suggest the students consider how to resolve it.

2. At least once a day, refuse to answer a student's question. Instead, encourage everyone in the class to look up answers and see what they find.
3. Create disequilibrium. This is that awkward period of silence between the time a problem is clear and the moment a solution arises. Allow for long silent moments and discomfort.
4. Instead of traditional grading of papers, tests or essays, communicate how many mistakes were made on their project and turn them loose to find each one.
5. Choose a day and let students plan the entire lesson for the class period. In fact, let them record themselves teaching it, evaluating themselves afterward.
6. In your next exam, write in the wrong answers on those blanks—the very ones students have given in class. Let students grade the test, and finding the proper answers to the questions.
7. Ask students to pick a topic they feel they've mastered—a video game, a sport or a social media app. Then, have them write down how they mastered it and discuss it in class.

For parents, you can also help your kids do this at home.

1. When taking a trip, ask your child to own a responsibility—determining the route you take and handling the GPS; deciding when you'll make stops for food, fuel, and hotels; what points of interest you'll focus on.
2. As they mature, begin turning over adult tasks to them as a point of learning—doing their own laundry, paying for their car or insurance, choosing the menu for meals, or even sitting down with you to experience paying the bills.
3. If you have more than one child, ask the older ones to teach the younger ones certain tasks or projects they will need to learn as they grow older. What if your ten-year-old taught your six-year old how to make their bed or load the dishwasher?
4. Sit down and pay the family bills together. Even though you're ultimately paying them, let them see the expenses and help choose what to buy and what to wait on.
5. Plan experiences or service projects together and share the responsibility with them (or even give all the responsibility to them.) Allow them to feel others depending on them for their effort.



6. Regarding homework, let them determine when, where, and how they will get the tasks done. As an adult, the key is for you to ask yourself: What is the point? If the point is, indeed, that they get the homework or chores finished, then how they do it should be up to them, as long as it's done to the agreed upon standard.

7. Don't think prescriptive, think descriptive.

In order for your young people to practice metacognition (and hence reduce the anxiety in their life) be sure you don't tell them to do something, prescribing every step on how they should get it done. Instead, describe together the vision or goal to be accomplished, then let them decide how they'll achieve it.

Managing Their Three Buckets

One of our new *Habitudes*[®] is called, "Three Buckets." This image reminds students that everything that happens to them each day fits into one of three buckets:

1. It is in my control.
2. It is out of my control.
3. It is within my influence.

They become emotionally healthy when they place experiences and people into the right bucket. Those that are “in their control” require them to take responsibility. They must not wait for someone else to take initiative. The answer lies within them. To look to someone else or to blame someone else for what’s not working would be irresponsible and unhelpful.

Experiences that are out of their control require them to trust. There’s nothing more paralyzing than for a student to worry about facts or people that are completely outside of their control. They must trust the process they are in; they must trust the people around them. If faith plays a role in their life, they must trust God.

Experiences that belong in the third bucket are within their influence. Their response to the items in this bucket are a combination of the first two: they should take some action, but they cannot control other people. They can weigh in, they can encourage others to do something, but they can’t simply demand an outcome.

What if you discussed these three buckets with your students and both of you tracked your activities and experiences over the next week? List what happened and in which bucket it belongs. Then, talk about your responses. Did you control the controllables but refuse to worry about the others and learn to trust?

Question: What will you do to help your students to practice metacognition?

4. Movement

This might sound cliché, but since millions of us in 21st century civilization sit so much during our typical day and see a climb in our anxiety rates, there may just be a connection. What if part of our solution was to return to a lifestyle people enjoyed over a century ago that was active and full of movement?

Consider for a moment how sedentary our lives have become over the last 50 years. As average American families got a television and an air conditioner in their homes, people began to assume a seated posture more often. Slowly but surely, our economy outsourced blue-collar jobs overseas to other countries where active work was cheaper. Parents told their kids they should go to college, as they assumed white-collar jobs were preferable. Sadly, most (not all) white-collar jobs involve tasks where an employee sits most of the time. Over time, all of us began to sit more often, as kids traded in outside activities for inside ones:

- We usually sit to play a video game.
- We usually sit to work or play on our laptop.
- We usually sit to use our tablet.
- We usually sit to watch a television program.
- We usually sit in a classroom at school.
- We usually sit to do our homework.
- We usually sit at an office at work.
- We usually sit to view or post on our phone.



While there may be no research connecting the sedentary lifestyles we now have with the rise of anxiety and depression, I believe there is no coincidence that the two realities have climbed together. The less active we are, the more anxious we become. Furthermore, we know that when we move about or exercise, our serotonin levels rise, which gives us a sense of happiness or enjoyment. People who work out on a regular basis tend to benefit both physically and emotionally as well. Ryan Collins confirms that “Exercise can help relieve symptoms of depression in several ways. Among other benefits, it helps stimulate the release of feel-good brain chemicals.”^{xlii}

“Simply put, most people who are depressed have something wrong with their brain chemistry,” William Walsh, Ph.D., president of the Walsh Research Institute, a nonprofit mental health research institution in Illinois, said. “Life experiences can make things worse,” he adds, “but usually the dominant problem is chemistry.”^{xliii}

Physical activity stimulates the release of dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin. These brain chemicals play an important part in regulating your mood. Regular exercise also helps equalize your body's level of stress hormones, such as adrenaline. In short, it's a natural way to balance our chemicals well.

What Do the Tech Guys Know About This?

Not long ago, Facebook Founder, Mark Zuckerberg, wrote and posted a letter to his newborn daughter. If you read it, you likely found it interesting that he specifically encourages her (and her older sister) to “go outside and play.”^{xliv}

Wow. That advice seems to be at odds with the empire Zuckerberg has built.

Isn't it interesting that tech icons such as Zuckerberg and Steve Jobs have given the same advice? Jobs, who, upon releasing the Apple iPad, immediately gave an interview to the New York Times and told them he's not giving one of those tablets to his kids. They needed to be healthy and play outside.^{xlv} If you follow other technology icons from the Silicon Valley, they all seem to say the same thing. Get out of your indoor prison.

Are you hearing a pattern from these people?

Even technology wizards—perhaps especially tech wizards—know the secret of living well is to get off a screen for the better part of a day. Play. Go outside. Be with people face to face. Talk. Listen. Run. Walk. Tumble. Skin your knee.

Recently, I had a conversation with an educator in West Virginia. As we conversed, he mentioned an article he read about the greatest life-changing innovation of the last

century. When he asked me what I thought it was, I responded with predictable items, such as the personal computer, the internet, or the cell phone.

These made the top ten, but were not at the top of the list.

Can you guess what it was?

The air conditioner.

Yep. It was air conditioners. Just think about it. Once we had air-conditioned homes and offices, our time outside was reduced drastically. It was always too hot or humid or uncomfortable. We like comfort. So, we stay inside. We “veg” in front of a screen, sitting, staring, and sedate for hours. Inside. It’s the stuff that makes us unhealthy. And we, human beings, are inside for long, long periods of time.



Technology’s Rightful Place

Like most of us, I appreciate new technology. I’m using my MacBook Pro to write this. I don’t want to miss new iterations or products when they’re released. But I am reminded of their place today. As I’ve said, technology should be a servant, not a master and should not force us to stay inside, sedate.

So, as we live our lives (as adults) and as we lead our students, let's remember the timeless values such as getting up from our seated position and moving. Maybe even playing. Who knows, it may be the most valuable life-changing act we display for the emerging generation today.

One inspiring school solved several problems by doing this. Not only do they still provide recess for the elementary age students, but they decided to start each day using a Nintendo Wii. Yep, that's right. When faculty and staff at Conlee Elementary School in Las Cruces, New Mexico, started having students do five minutes of "Just Dance," (an active video game) at the start of each new day, they noticed a trend: tardiness went down. Kids began getting to school on time. What's more, they got some exercise every day playing the game. Students love it. They're now engaged.

Not bad.

Reporter, Nanci Hellmich wrote, "The dance activity is broadcast into classrooms that have TV monitors. [The school] was inspired to try this idea by researchers at New Mexico State University who are investigating the use of active video games as part of an obesity prevention project."^{xlvi} Now, researchers are looking into the use of games in physical education classes and to see whether doing an active video game before spelling or math tests improves performance. In other regions, similar projects are taking place. "Dance, Dance Revolution" is improving health and fitness in overweight kids during school time. In West Virginia, the game is available in high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools. Most everyone seems to like it. Kids who used to stand along the walls at the high school dance are now involved, and they are getting fit at the same time. I love it

Steps We Can Take... Literally.

Let me offer some suggestions for you and your students to get up and start moving more often and perhaps lower their levels of anxiety.



1. Join a fitness center and workout each week.

Getting 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity per week is an important part of staying healthy. It can boost your mood and energy, while strengthening your muscles, lungs, and heart. If you can't afford membership to a gym, schedule times to walk or run each week; find a way to get up and moving on a regular basis. Standing is better than sitting, and walking is better than standing. Our bodies weren't designed to spend endless hours in a seated position each day.

2. Have them review homework while shooting hoops or tossing a ball.

As I've mentioned, most students do their homework while sitting. But they don't have to. What if you encouraged your students to review their math equations while shooting a basketball or go over the upcoming history test while throwing a baseball with a parent or a friend. For kinesthetic learners, movement during studies will actually help them. For others, it will allow them to build healthy habits as they learn.

3. Take a family walk after dinner.

If you're a parent, what if you began a custom of taking a family stroll after dinner. Ask everyone to clear off the dishes then before doing anything else, you walk a mile or two together, just to burn calories, build health, and to keep the serotonin flowing. This is actually a good habit they can take with them when they move out one day.

4. If your child loves video games—get one that gets them moving.

If your students love video games, remember there are some that ignite physical movement, not just mental activity. Games like Nintendo's Wii or Xbox 360's Kinect are examples that some doctors actually prescribe for young people. I will never forget participating with my teenage kids in "Dance, Dance Revolution" years ago, where players actually emulate the dancers on the screen. Is it cheesy? Maybe. But it is tons of fun, and once again, it gets students moving. The Journal of Pediatrics shows that "high-intensity games (involving huffing and puffing) can improve health and energy expenditure in children."^{xlvii}



5. Replace Passive Routines with Active Ones

Studies have shown anxiety and stress levels to rise when a phone is nearby, even when a student isn't using it. Just sitting on a table within view raises our level of angst, knowing it could ping or ring any moment.^{xlviii} Replacing the phone's ping with ping pong is a great trade off. Or, perhaps, the phone's ring with a rink, as in a skating rink. What if the past routines that involved hours just scrolling through social media feeds were replaced with routines that involved moving their whole body, not just their fingers and thumbs. Have your students come up with a favorite activity that will consume the time they would have spent sitting and posting.

In short, our young people need quiet times, they need face-to-face interaction, and they need boundaries to ensure that technology is their servant—not their master. Additionally, they need active times to ensure they keep their serotonin levels up. This action step is all about making trade-offs that are healthy.

Question: Is there a need to enable your students to become more active?

5. Management

Probably the most important solution is the one people talk the least about. Today, everyone must learn to manage their stress and anxiety levels. We all have them, but stress does not need to turn into distress. Anxiety is a common part of living in a fast paced 21st century culture, but it doesn't have to be our boss. The key to managing anxiety is intentionality. Students must be intentional about the steps that enable them to overcome stress, anxiety, and depression. Let me clarify what I am saying:



This does not mean we give in and learn to put up with anxiety ruling the day. It doesn't mean we are forced to be slaves to poor mental health and have no recourse at all in managing the damage it does to us.

This does mean we must be intentional to take the appropriate steps so that we can make our way through such tumultuous waters with a helm and a rudder. It means we will need to develop skills to lead ourselves well.

Both my daughter and son have had to learn how their mind and body reacts to the stress levels they experience; they have learned to read them and to take steps in response to the symptoms. This is true for any condition we face.

My Story

In October of 1980, I was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. Although I was 20 years old and a junior in college, I became a juvenile diabetic. Up until then, my life was active and great. I was making honor level grades in school, playing intramural sports, and serving in community outreaches beyond the university campus. At the same time, I worked two part-time jobs, so my social life was almost nonexistent.

As I spent time in the hospital bed, I learned how to give myself injections of insulin, I how my diet would need to change, and how my lifestyle must be modified. At the same time, I began wondering if my stress levels were just too high. Perhaps I should have cut a class from my school or dropped one of my part-time jobs.

My doctors assured me my problem was genetic. They suggested I take some steps to manage my new reality. I learned how to exercise with my new condition (for me, it was at the end of a day, not the beginning); how to eat healthy, balanced meals, not the fried food I'd been enjoying; and how to check my blood sugars and take proper doses of insulin to replace a pancreas that didn't work.

A Bike and a Car

As I grieved my new challenge, I remember thinking about a metaphor that enabled me to manage my emotions. While I knew the steps I was taking would not cure me of my disease, they would keep me relatively healthy as I awaited that cure one day. The metaphor was a bike and a car. I got to thinking that if I were saving money to buy a new car to drive myself around town, I would not compromise my integrity if I rode a bicycle until I got the car. The bike would only serve to get me around until I was able to purchase that automobile. And so it was with the diet, exercise, sleep habits, and insulin. They were my bike I would ride to get around. They would help me manage my current situation.

Likewise, anxiety and depression victims should also develop steps and skills to address their less than optimal reality. Good ones are healthy ways of coping. They do not represent someone giving up or giving in; they are positive responses to tough challenges that enable us to experience a closer-to-normal lifestyle.

Practicing these skills is like lifting weights in a fitness center. The more you implement them in your daily routines, the stronger you'll become. The more reps you put in, the more these skills develop into muscle memory. Soon, they develop into a part of who you are and enable you to enjoy a lifestyle free from the bondage of anxiety, depression, and panic attacks.

Managing Anxiety in Your Daily Life

1. Develop skills and routines.

I've already mentioned new habits students can employ like solitude and quietness, unplugging from the social media apps on our phones, and taking control of our daily calendar. These are all healthy practices that, if done daily, can make a huge difference for anxiety victims. Let me summarize some fundamental ones below:



a. Learn your triggers.

It is paramount for those who suffer from anxiety to learn what contexts trigger them. Do certain people trigger it? How about specific situations? In doing this, be sure you are honest. It is imperative to fight any cognitive distortions. On the one hand, you may have to face a reality that isn't pretty. On the other, you'll want to ask yourself if you are jumping to conclusions, exaggerating, or personalizing a situation.

b. Name your emotions.

Once you recognize your triggers, it is helpful to name your emotions: what exactly is it that you are feeling? For some students, this is difficult. They can easier identify what they think than how they feel. If necessary, coach them with helpful descriptive words like: Are you scared? How about angry? Nervous? Lonely?

c. Try paced breathing exercises.

One way to reduce stress and anxiety is to breathe deeply. This is because anxiety attacks usually cause people to hyperventilate, which cuts off carbon dioxide levels in the blood, causing light-headedness. This exercise requires you to take long, deep breaths to replace the short, quick breaths that usually accompany anxiety.

d. Initiate cognitive behavioral therapy.

This treats panic attacks by shifting your thought patterns toward anxiety, hence changing the way you react to symptoms and maybe even removing the triggers of those symptoms. The bottom line—changing your cognition can change the entire way you see your situation and help you feel in control of your life.

e. Avoid social media notifications.

As I've mentioned, much of our anxiety directly parallels the input of social media in our lives today. So, what if we put the phone down? Just replacing the noise of a smart phone with the quietness of an hour of solitude may be a game changer.

Dr. Amit Sood, M.D., is a leading expert in resilience and stress management at the Mayo Clinic. He created the Mayo Clinic Healthy Living Resilient Mind program, which equips people to reduce stress and anxiety in their lives by understanding their brains better and practicing skills for as little as five minutes a day. There is a fee to sign up, but this program offers doable steps to combat anxiety.

Consider this. Neurologists claim that every time you resist acting on your anger, you're actually rewiring your brain to be calmer and more loving. Do you suppose that might work for our anxiety too? The more we are able to resist anxiety by being mindful, practicing quietness, or acting on what is in our control, is it possible to overcome our anxiety this way?

2. See a counselor.

Decades ago, a tangible stigma existed regarding seeing a therapist. People thought that if you saw a “shrink” you must be crazy. I am grateful that stigma is evaporating. Counselors represent objective listening ears, empathetic hearts, and often provide wise direction for someone suffering from mental health problems. Every one of us in my family has benefited from a counselor. We each received some perspective we didn't have going into the session and/or confirmation that we were on the right track as we dealt with our issues.

Sometimes it's difficult for a teen to talk to their parents. The very history you've experienced with them may be the precise reality that creates a chasm when it comes to opening up about anxiety, depression, or panic attacks. In light of this, counselors are likely the best chance you have of helping your students.



You need only to search online to find websites that can direct you to counselors in your area. There are so many, in fact, you'll want to narrow your search based on your specific needs and values. For generic purposes, you can begin with:

- [BetterHelp.com](https://www.betterhelp.com).
- [NetworkTherapy.com](https://www.networktherapy.com)
- [PsychologyToday.com](https://www.psychologytoday.com)
- [WebMD.com/mentalhealth](https://www.webmd.com/mentalhealth)
- [GoodTherapy.org/find-therapist](https://www.goodtherapy.org/find-therapist)
- [FaithfulCounseling.com](https://www.faithfulcounseling.com) (For faith-based counselors)

It is important to remember that counselors usually charge a fee. You'll want to inquire to see which ones are covered by your insurance plan. In order to expedite your counseling journey, I suggest you process your story, noting any causes you've found for your mental state and what it is you're experiencing.

3. Find their flow.

One valuable step young people can take to decrease stress and anxiety is finding their “flow”—where they’re able to use their strengths for a greater good. Put another way, kids can stress out when they’re doing too many things outside of their gift area. This is de-energizing to anyone. Finding their flow means they focus their energy on something they believe in and leverage their talent in that area. At Growing Leaders, we are all about empowering kids to solve problems and serve people. When they do this, they usually find their flow, and life become simpler and more purposeful. This may involve helping them take personal assessments on their life such as StrengthsQuest, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Enneagram Test, and the DISC Profile. Learn to name your emotions and say them to yourself or to others: I am feeling fearful, sad, anxious, overwhelmed, hopeless, angry, or helpless. Those who are self-aware are the ones who have a fighting chance at defeating the debilitating effects of anxiety in their lives.

4. Take medication.

As a last resort, medication may be needed. There’s nothing wrong with medicine. I am a type 1 diabetic and rely on insulin every single day. I simply contend that we should not rely first and only on medicine without fostering healthy habits like the ones on the listed above. Once we’ve taken steps to reduce anxiety in our daily routine, we are in position to judge (with a doctor’s help) whether we need medication, to judge which medication we need, and in what doses. Making medication our only source of help is like trying to lose weight by walking each day but never changing our “fast food” diet. After meeting with a counselor, both of my children discovered their situation required balancing the chemicals in their bodies. It wasn’t a case of absentee parents, or a destructive home life—it was simply that they had too much or too little of a chemical that prevented them from functioning in a healthy, hopeful manner. Just like I lacked insulin because my pancreas didn’t function properly, they lacked the right amount of chemicals they needed to be themselves.

Taking medication should always be done at the advice or prescription of a licensed therapist or doctor. Because our minds and bodies represent a cocktail of various chemicals and hormones, it is unwise to create a solution without a medical professional involved in the process. Both of my adult children take a prescription today, but arriving at the right medication and the right dosage was a process.

5. Social-emotional learning

At the end of the day, anyone struggling with anxiety or depression will benefit from what educators call: Social-emotional learning or SEL. This topic is taking the K-12 educational world by storm, as a growing number of administrators recognize that

students may be hindered from mastering reading, writing, and arithmetic without the ability to manage their emotions and relationships. Academic skills are worth little in the working world without life skills. A person without SEL skills will ultimately sabotage themselves with their relationships.

One could argue that social-emotional learning really is about life skills. A student may learn these skills and still wrestle with depression, but without these skills, a student doesn't have a chance to survive in the world they'll enter after graduation. SEL includes managing competencies such as:

- An accurate self-perception
- Recognizing their strengths
- Self confidence
- Self-efficacy
- Empathy
- Appreciating diversity
- Respect for others
- Social engagement
- Communication
- Impulse control
- Problem solving
- Analyzing situations
- Stress management
- Self-discipline
- Self-motivation
- Ethical responsibility
- Goal setting



When we pause and reflect, these are the skills that enable a young adult to thrive at a job, in a friendship, or in a marriage or family. They are as important as any academic subject we expect kids to learn today—and frankly, due to the current reality we face with anxiety and depression, they may prove to be more important.

At Growing Leaders, we have a special “bundle” of our *Habitudes*® that develop these SEL skills in young people. It’s a way of teaching timeless principles with the power of images, conversations and experiences. This is the natural language of today’s student.

Question: What skills have your students developed to manage anxiety?

The Perfect Storm

As I’ve worked with schools for almost forty years now, I’ve spotted a perfect storm that caught all of us off guard. On the one hand, kids are being raised today in a world where stressors are high on almost every front. Kids today have activities pulling on them from every direction:

- Multiple standardized tests in K-12 schools.
- Travel ball and practice multiple times a week.
- Social media that pushes thousands of messages at them daily.
- Theatre, sports, and dance where everything demands their soul.

I’ve spoken to elementary school teachers who say their kids are anxious at five and six years old. By the time kids reach middle school, they’re often stressed out. By high school and college, many students have run out of steam. Anxiety—the mental-health tsunami of their generation—has caught up with them.

Simultaneously, however, adults today have not prepared them for such times. Resilience and grit levels are down. Many parents today raise their kids the same way they were raised 35 years ago. But back then, there was much less pressure to perform and fewer messages to reply to—it was a simpler time. Today, many parents coddle their kids (sometimes because we see them so stressed out) and this does not prepare them for the uncertain future they’ll face as an adult.

Can you see the perfect storm?

We live in perplexing times and yet have done poorer in preparing them for life. This leads me to one clear conclusion: If we fail to prepare them, we will certainly be called upon to repair them. In short, the fact of the matter is that less preparing leads to more repairing.

Less preparing leads to more repairing.

Making a Balanced Decision

The U.S. Army made a change in their recruiting standards in August of 2017. Without declaring it publicly, they quietly modified a standard for acceptance. USA Today reported that “people with a history of self-mutilation, bipolar disorder, depression, and drug and alcohol abuse can now seek waivers to join the Army under an unannounced policy.”^{xlix}



Brook wrote, “The decision to open Army recruiting to those with mental health conditions comes as the service faced the challenging goal of recruiting 80,000 new soldiers by the next fall.”^l With a big goal like that to reach, you find a way to broaden your pool of applicants. What’s interesting is that this is not new. The previous year, the Army had softened its standard, allowing recruits with lower academic scores to file waivers. They also increased the number of waivers for candidates with marijuana use.

Why is this newsworthy?

The obvious answer to this question lies in the fact that accepting recruits with mental health issues puts both them and the military in a riskier position. According to former Army psychiatrist, Colonel Elspeth Ritchie. “People with a history of mental health problems are more likely to have those issues resurface than those who do not,” she said. “It’s a red flag, but just how big of a red flag is it?”^{li}

Great question.

The military reports that suicide rates among soldiers and former-soldiers are already on the rise. When you consider adding troops who have self-mutilated or who suffer from depression, and you give them weapons, such a situation could have a negative effect on a unit.

At the same time, if the U.S. needed to respond to a situation with North Korea or with ISIS, you tend to accept almost anyone who’s interested. Suddenly, any recruit looks appealing. TIME reported in 2014 that the Pentagon deemed 71% of 17-to-24-year-olds in the United States are not fit for the military due to “health, physical appearance, and educational background.”^{lii}

My point is simple. In the same way our military is finding a way to adjust to new realities, we must do the same. We can’t wish for better times. We can’t merely react as if we’re living in the “good, old days”. We must make wise and balanced decisions that maintain healthy standards, yet face less-than-optimal circumstances.

This topic is only going to get bigger, not just in the military but in civilian life as well. School shootings require not only good gun laws, but good mental health practices, and that is what these pages are all about. The problem is not going away—at least not until we change our lifestyles and make it a matter of priority. We will not be able to lead ourselves well, much less lead anyone else until we get a handle on this monster we call anxiety and depression.

The Reward

I introduced you to my children in the beginning of this e-book. My first born, Bethany, is now thirty years old and flourishing as a productive adult. She doesn’t claim to be perfect—she’s still learning to manage her budget, to reduce her school debt each month, and to handle all that life throws at her—but she is in a very different place now than she was a dozen years ago.

I now have the privilege of watching her help so many other people. She chose to enter the field of psychology and now serves as a licensed therapist, working with young adults who experience mental health challenges, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, delusions, narcissistic personality disorder, and yes, even those with anxiety and depression.

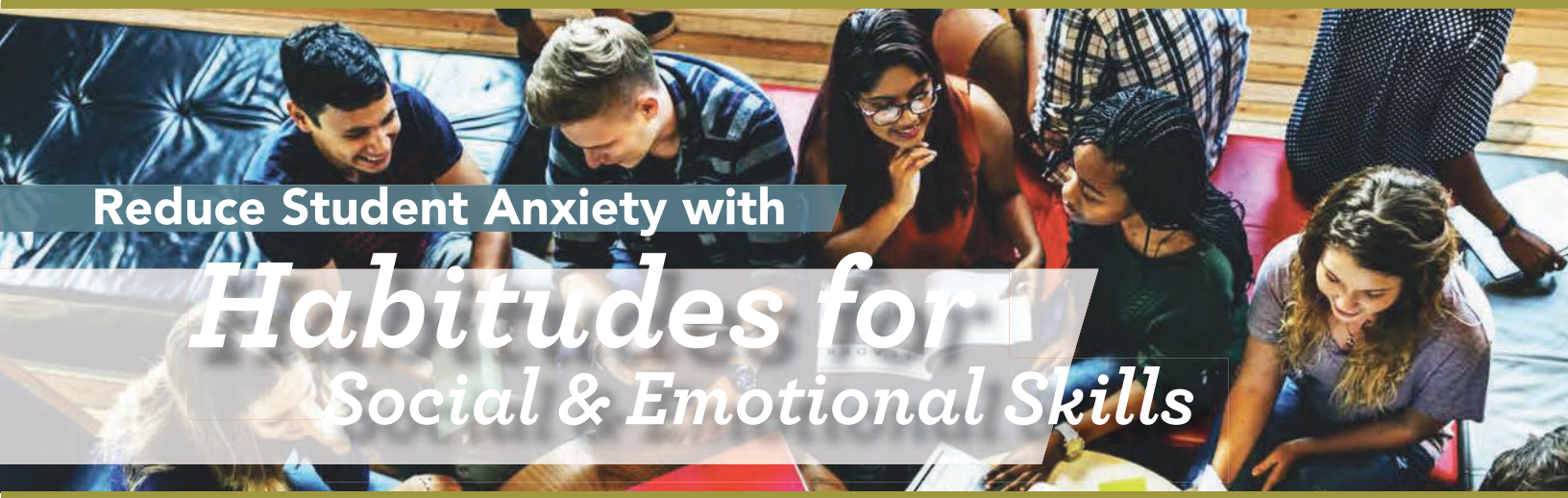
She is a deeply wise and empathetic counselor, as you can imagine.

In fact, I now learn from her. We try to enjoy regular dinner dates to catch up with each other, and I love how I learn and expand my own horizons each time I spend time with this young professional. She is in her element. She is herself again. She naturally makes me laugh and learn.

She readily admits she is a work in progress... but it's satisfying to see the progress.

If you liked this eBook and found this information to be very helpful,
then please share this with your family and friends.





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Juli Diaz, Pricipal of Travis High School

To learn more about Habitudes for Social & Emotional Learning curriculum, **CLICK HERE** to request additional information and a free sample.

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