

Names are changed to honor client confidentiality.

Rehearsing for Harried Lifestyle

Sixteen-year-old Jamie is a stressed-out overachiever—driven to excel in every arena of her life. The list includes grades, sports and dance competitions. Call it a full plate of pressure.

“When I get home from school,” Jamie said, “I have at least four hours of homework staring me in the face.”

This isn’t an easy feat with all her extracurricular obligations.

She’s not alone. Of the teens I counsel, their life pattern takes one of two main forms. Either they’re a new kind of underachiever, too hypnotized by Xbox to get anything done, or they’re like Jamie, frenzied and overstretched.

What’s sad is she’s rehearsing for a harried lifestyle consisting of long working hours, fast-food chains, endless deadlines and impossible schedules. Overload is becoming the norm for such teens.

What’s amusing, if not ironic, is several years down the road, these same people will be told—probably due to health problems—that a major course correction is in order. They’ll be instructed to slow down and learn to relax.

In their stress management, yoga or meditation classes, they’ll cultivate the ability to pace themselves and take time to smell the roses. They’ll also learn that the way they’ve been conditioned—behaving like crazed hamsters on an ever-spinning wheel—is all wrong; it’s not how life should be lived. A lifestyle that creates high anxiety and ulcers simply cannot be healthy or happy.

Heightened anxiety is exactly what I’m seeing with teens like Jamie. She’ll work on a single project in the wee hours of the morning to avoid getting anything below an A+.

She can’t cope with failure and, to her, failure means a B+, a misspelled word on a report, a botched serve in volleyball or losing by a half-second in a swimming competition.

She agonizes over upcoming tests.

“I’m restless all night, and I can’t eat the next morning.” she said. “I have awful stomach cramps, and I’m just too nauseated to eat.”

Why is the idea of getting a lower grade such a ghastly prospect? Because she's conditioned to believe that perfection is tantamount to worthiness.

One of my former adult clients, similarly conditioned, would agree. For years, she placed exceptionally high standards on herself at work and wouldn't leave at night until all her tasks were complete and polished to perfection.

"I felt like a loser if I didn't give it my all," she explained.

The conditioning process occurs both at school and in the home.

"My father would get bent out of shape if I came home with a B," Jamie said. "I don't think he'd ever get over it."

Her mother's reaction would be less extreme, but she'd start to worry. "Jamie wants to get into the best schools when she graduates," she said, "so she has to stay on top of her game."

But in the same breath, she voiced concern. "I'm worried about Jamie. Since the beginning of the school year, she's had meltdown after meltdown. I don't know what to do for her."

We explored possibilities. For starters, Jamie could drop some of her extracurricular activities.

Parents who push for academic success are well-intentioned, believing they're helping their children. Those same parents are pressured by societal norms to shape them into successful adults. But when parents start spotting signs similar to Jamie's, they need to rethink and redefine success. Earning power and attaining a high status position is a limited measuring stick.

Success is something bigger. It includes being able to successfully manage one's physical and psychological well-being.

Christopher Morley, a novelist, defines success in this way: "There is only one success—to be able to spend your life in your own way."

Conditioning and exposure to our cultural values isn't the only cause. Sometimes it's a matter of biology. Some children are wired to be anxious and compulsively driven.

I suspect this of Jaime to some extent.

Her parents can help, first, by recognizing how they inadvertently fuel her anxiety. When she comes home with all A's and one B, the last thing she needs to hear is, "Why the B?" I'll be helping Jamie learn how to take that B in stride rather than degrading herself or viewing herself as a failure.

So when shown the B, her parents should compliment her for being able to accept a less-

than-perfect score. They should praise her for taking good care of herself when she removes items from her schedule, when she chooses—and actually enjoys—doing nothing, and when they notice she can relax in the midst of pressure.

Accepting a B is just a start. When Jamie can accept imperfection in all arenas of her life, when her sense of worth is derived from who she is instead of what she does, her stress level will lessen.

Call it being successful.

© 2010 Salee Reese