



Youth Anxiety: What to Say When Your Mentee Is Anxious

In the September 26 edition of Chronicle of Evidence-Based Mentoring, Justin Preston summarized an article by Carey Wallace:

Today's kids are more worried than any kids in recent history. According to some long-term surveys of mental-health literature, [the average kid today is more anxious than people who were hospitalized for anxiety in the 1950s.](#)

And those worries tend to intensify around times of transition — like the start of school.

Is there anything adults in mentoring relationships can say to help kids handle stress?

From the *elementary age* on, says Jill Emanuele, senior clinical psychologist and director of training at the Child Mind Institute, the most important thing for adults to do is to validate a kid's worries. "When people say, 'I'm worried or anxious,'" Emanuele points out, "the first thing a lot of people want to do is say, 'You're going to be fine. It's going to be O.K.'"

But when adults take that tack, "you never give the person the opportunity to experience what they're anxious about," she says. Comforting words may provide temporary relief, but if anxiety is not faced head on, says Emanuele, it will come back again, even stronger. Instead, when kids are worried, adults can help them face their fears by asking them questions about their worries, and helping them come up with strategies to face their fears.

Middle-school kids face a whole new world of social stress — both real life, and on social media. One way for adults to manage anxiety in kids, says Marilyn Wilcher, senior director and founder of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine, is to manage their devices: "Limit the amount of time kids can be on their computers or their phones."

It's also a good age, she says, for adults and kids to explore the science behind stress. "Stress happens automatically," Wilcher says. But "we have to teach our body how to do the relaxation response." There isn't just one answer for everyone, says Wilcher, but adults can start conversations with kids about what strategies work to help them release stress, from yoga to singing: "whatever you can do to break the train of everyday thought that's disturbing you."

High school kids, Emanuele says, are going through “significant brain changes,” which leads to increased mental-health issues. For adults, the strategies for helping high schoolers manage stress are the same as at any age: help them identify their specific anxieties, and strategies to deal with it. But with high school kids, says Emanuele, there’s an added step. Since they’re so close to adulthood themselves, “you have to get buy-in. You want to collaborate.”

Adults can also help kids at this age by putting the pressure to succeed in perspective. As they’re gearing up to leave school and begin college, or some other phase of life, the stakes may seem impossibly high. Adults can help them, Wilcher says, by letting them know that one bad grade won’t destroy their chances at future happiness, and that “they can get a good education anywhere in the country.”

And at any age, adults want to be careful that they’re not part of the stress themselves. If kids see “that [adults] are anxious or worried for them, they will be even more worried,” Wilcher says. And on the flip side, if kids see adults managing their own stress well, kids will begin to model that behavior themselves. So one of the best things adults can do to help kids handle stress is to find ways to be less stressed themselves.

From the Chronicle editor: Parents may provide the initial support, but mentors can also play a role in reinforcing and supporting that message in other contexts outside of the home. Mentors have the opportunity to serve as an additional model of positive coping strategies and behaviors for their mentees when facing anxiety, particularly in moments of transition and change.

<http://chronicle.umbmentoring.org/youth-anxiety-say-mentee-anxious/>

To see Carey Wallace’s original article at time.com, click [here](#).