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Helping Teens Thrive: What Parents Can Do

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

Dennis Portnoy, LMFT, begins his article, “The Mental Health Crisis of Today’s Youth - The Hidden Culprit Every Parent and Therapist Should Know About”² with the story of Patrick, who had suffered a relapse of crippling anxiety as he entered college. “This young man’s story is unfortunately quite common,” Portnoy explains. “Academic stress has been [directly linked](#) to depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation rates [among](#) today’s youth, and grades are a major source of this kind of stress.”

Portnoy quotes Ana Monayoun from her recent book, [*Erasing the Finish Line: The New Blueprint for Success Beyond Grades and College Admission*](#): “For years, we’ve been led to believe that great grades, high test scores, and college acceptance are key to a successful life. Yet our laser focus on these achievements leaves students feeling anxious, demoralized, and unprepared.”

This pervasive emphasis on achievement, Portnoy explains, can lead to dire consequences: “Internal struggles often escalate later in life when thrown into a competitive college environment or workplace, which include eating disorders and addictive behaviors.”

The personal cost of such a limited focus becomes clear in Patrick’s case. “When I asked him to tell me what he believed made him a worthwhile human being, but to omit anything that had to do with



achievement or the good he does for others, Patrick was totally stumped by my question, and could not come up with anything.”

What can parents do to counteract the overemphasis on performance and achievement? Portnoy has several suggestions: “They can begin by finding ways to convey to their child that they are valued, loved, and worthwhile regardless of their achievements and successes.” ([Eugene Beresin M.D., M.A.](#) and William Capriola similarly stress the importance of parents’ showing their children “unconditional love, encouragement, and praise.”³⁾)

Further, Portnoy suggests, “Since having an outward focus causes young people to define their worth according to their accomplishments . . . parents can encourage them to become the arbiter of their worth. If their value is based on who they are rather than what they do, then they won’t need to achieve or please to feel adequate.” The goal is to “cultivate an inward orientation by teaching them to trust and become attuned to their intuitions and emotions.”

Amy L. Eva, in her article, “Five Ways to Help Teens Feel Good About Themselves,”⁴ encourages parents help their teens focus on self-compassion, rather than self-esteem, that is, showing compassion for themselves in the face of failure or perceived inadequacies. Eva also suggests parents “encourage children to discover and develop their personal skills and strengths. This not only leads to feelings of competence, but deep enjoyment and satisfaction.”

It’s important to help your children “identify and challenge negative thought patterns,” according to Claire McCarthy, MD, FAAP (“Anxiety in Teens is Rising: What's Going On?”⁵⁾). When parents detect signs of emotional distress, they should talk with children about stressors,



including social media use, and help young people take pride in their unique identity and their differences. If parents have questions or concerns about their children, they should seek consultation with a medical or mental health professional.

Perhaps most important in helping children develop these positive attitudes and avoiding the negative is the modeling of these behaviors by parents and other adults, especially such behaviors as self-compassion when things go wrong, and appreciation and enjoyment of their own activities and sense of self-worth.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/21/health/surgeon-general-adolescents-mental-health.html>

² <https://www.madinamerica.com/2023/10/the-mental-health-crisis-of-todays-youth-the-hidden-culprit-every-parent-and-therapist-should-know-about/>

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/inside-out-outside-in/202206/low-self-esteem-in-adolescents-what-are-the-root-causes>

⁴ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/five_ways_to_help_teens_feel_good_about_themselves

⁵ <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Anxiety-Disorders.aspx>