Stress Levels You May Not Know About

All of these scenarios are sources of stress in students. The stress begins as early as elementary school and extends all the way through college. According to the Wall Street Journal, “one recent study found that the rate of moderate to severe depression among U.S. college students rose from 23.2% in 2007 to 41.1% in 2018, while rates of moderate to severe anxiety jumped from 17.9% in 2013 to 34.4% in 2018.”

I have found that anxiety and depression often begin with high stress levels.

Five Common Sources of Stress in Teens

1. The Filtered Life
Living in a world of constant updates leads to something called “FOMO”—the fear of missing out. Students are constantly comparing themselves to others they see on Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest. This often leads to feelings of stress and anxiety. Alexander Brent, a law student from the University of Tennessee, put it this way: “Social media provides a filtered view of our friends and peers—the good shines through while the bad stays hidden. This can make us feel as if everyone is happier than we are, as if we’re the only ones with problems, and as if our problems can’t be solved.”

2. The Constant Notifications
You already see the influence of the smartphone—and what it does to us all. Students from Generation Z have grown up with smartphones, not just cell phones. Thousands of pings, notifications, pop-ups, and personal messages bombard them daily, minimally distracting them, but often damaging them in a far worse manner. The most common word today’s college students use to describe their lives is overwhelmed.

3. The Supervised Norms
Today’s parents, teachers, and coaches are conditioned to prescribe every minute of the young people they lead. Kid’s lives are so overly prescribed that by the time they hit college, many of them don’t have any experience with self-direction. Elizabeth Hildebrandt, from the University of Toledo, describes this new reality this way: “The typical college student arrives on campus after 18 years of being scheduled and micromanaged by parents. College preparation begins at least at age 5, when kids can be shuttled from activity to activity—apparently that’s what ‘successful parents’ must do.”

4. The Undo Pressure
Students tell me they feel pressure from every direction: college applications, scholarship competitions, test scores, parental hopes and fears, club sports, you name it. In fact, when we ask high school students in focus groups what causes them the most stress, school is the number one answer. Emily Kaib, a student at Vanderbilt University, describes her feelings this way: “College is so expensive that students feel as if they have to be perfect. Otherwise, they might think they’re failing themselves and their families, who have invested so much in them and their futures.”

5. The Instant Gratification
Perhaps no greater cause of misplaced expectations exists than a culture of instant gratification. The fact that young people can easily gratify almost any desire means that they often grow accustomed—even addicted—to that gratification. This can lead to a lack of resilience in tough situations. Alexander Brent, from Tennessee, revealed the consequences of growing up in a culture of instant gratification this way: “By pressing a few buttons we can have meals delivered to our homes; receive step-by-step directions to our destinations; and even find people to date. This ability to satisfy our wants and needs instantly has created a tendency in many of us to panic when faced with real problems. We often lack the ability to grind through adversity, as we’ve come to expect quick and easy solutions. When things don’t go smoothly right away, they can seem hopeless.”