

Back to School, Back to Stress

Jessica Zaucha, LCSW

The signs are everywhere you look... summer is officially coming to a close and, just like that, kids are heading back to school. For some, the shortening of days and the explosion of back-to-school sales bring feelings of excitement and anticipation. For most parents and students, going back to school also means going back to stress as we face supply lists, new schedules, homework, and novel social challenges. Some stress and even anxiety is a normal response to the transition back to classes. Understanding the difference between back-to-school jitters and anxiety that warrants clinical attention is key to helping our youth feel happy and be successful this school year.

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, anxiety disorders affect 1 in 8 children and 1 in 4 teens between 13 and 18 years old. Anxiety and depression are treatable, but 80% of kids with a diagnosable anxiety disorders and 60% of kids with diagnosable depression are not getting treatment, according to the 2015 [Child Mind Institute Children's Mental Health Report](#). Research shows that untreated children and teens with anxiety disorders are at higher risk to perform poorly in school, miss out on important social experiences, and engage in substance abuse.

There are several signs that may indicate that a child's anxiety is cause for concern. Some shyness or worry about schedules, schoolwork, or friends is natural during the back-to-school transition, but ongoing withdrawal or worries that cause distress, interfere with school performance, avoidance of activities, or difficulties with peer relationships may signal a problem. Stress that cause changes in appetite or sleep patterns or physical symptoms like stomach aches or fatigue should be evaluated by a mental health professional.

Anxiety can be debilitating for those who suffer with it. In most case, individuals who suffer with anxiety know that it is "irrational" or not a typical or helpful response. Part of their brain that is telling them not to worry so much but the message doesn't seem to get through and their body responds as though something is very dangerous or wrong. Kids and adults feel alone in their experience even though anxiety is the most prevalent health issue facing our nation today. They are often embarrassed that they can't control it and very aware that it is causing them problems. They may be frustrated with themselves that they cannot "get over it" and they pick up on the frustration of those around them which only makes them feel worse. This is one of the reasons that anxiety can be a risk factor for depression and low self-esteem.

If your child or someone you know is struggling with anxiety, there are things you can do to help. First, be aware that some well-intended phrases may actually be very unhelpful. Know that someone with anxiety may not be able to explain why they are anxious so asking lots of questions about "why" they feel worried may make things worse. Similarly, saying that "nothing is wrong" or that "there is nothing to worry about" may seem like a very supportive thing to say but the person suffering may already know that they are overreacting and may actually be more anxious about their lack of control over their emotions and reaction than they are about the situation that triggered them in the first place. With that in mind, it is not usually helpful to tell someone with anxiety that they are overreacting or to "just calm down" as this will only make them feel more alone and judged for their experience. Reassuring the person that you are there for them and not questioning or judging his or her experience is a great first step in providing support.

When the support family and friends can provide is not enough, treatment and professional help for anxiety is available. A counselor or therapist trained in assessing and treating anxiety can help someone better understand their brain's reactions to stress and how the cycle of anxiety works. A person can then begin to more effectively manage his or her anxiety and to actually "rewire" the brain to respond differently. By recognizing unhelpful messages, improving coping techniques, and learning to slowly face our fears, therapy is often considered the single more effective way to treat anxiety. Improvements often occur after just a few sessions!

To learn more about anxiety and the treatment options available, call BZA Behavioral Health at (847)221-5622. In September, we are offering a free workshop at our Lake In The Hills location to parents and students who are interested in better recognizing, managing, and treating anxiety. This workshop will also provide hands-on techniques for dealing with stress and reducing anxiety for kids, teens, and adults! Check out our website www.bzabehavioral.com for more detailed information and pass on the information to someone who may benefit.