

December 23, 2001

**Kids talk: about school, sports, stress**

Author: ANN HINES; Special to the Sentinel

Article Text:

"Stress is a big ball of anger that you keep inside," an 11-year-old girl told me.

"It floats around your body until it just gets too big and you freak out."

As a therapist who works with kids, I know that it's not peer pressure that's stressing them the most (as their parents predicted).

It's the pressure to succeed in school and in sports.

So how do kids cope with the stress? I asked high achievers in school or sports, 10- to 18-year-olds, how they deal with the pressure to achieve.

How does stress feel to you?

Laurel, 12 and very dramatic, says homework can overpower her and make her feel like she has no life.

"Just think of it!" she says. "No life at 12!"

Sara, in the 7th grade, sighs. "It just feels exhausting. Today I'm sick, but I have to go to school or I'll have too much to make up."

How do you deal with stress?

Most parents see that school is more stressful now than it was for them. So how do kids handle that extra stress?

Rachel, a high school junior, buckles down and pushes through.

"If I miss one honors math class, it's really hard to catch up," she says. "When I had my wisdom teeth pulled, I still had to do the homework."

"So many teachers think that theirs is the only important class, so they give us hours upon hours of homework."

"You have to prioritize: what's easier, what's harder, what might have to be dropped."

Eva, a 10-year-old who plays basketball, tells me, "There are all these people watching, and they're expecting big things. If you don't make it, there's this huge groan from the stands."

"At first it's: Shoot, I messed up! I hate myself. But then I give myself a pep talk. I tell myself lots of people mess up. It's not the end of the world."

Laurel projects into the future: "I tell myself that it won't matter when I have lots of children and I'm married to the man I love that I didn't win! the stupid PE race."

Taylor, a high school senior, has a reasoned approach. He focuses on doing his personal best. If he doesn't feel he did, he re-evaluates his goals and lets go of those he deems unrealistic.

How do top competitive athletes handle stress?

A.J., at 16, is one of the best junior surfers in the nation. He works on keeping a professional demeanor during competitions.

"You know judges can't be perfect; they're human," he says. "When you see that a judge scored you .5 less than someone they knew, it can be hard."

"But you don't show disrespect for yourself. You don't hit your surfboard. You can't let your emotions take over and turn into reactions."

"And you can always talk to your parents. They're always there for you, to support you."

Jon, 22, practices with the U.S. Water Polo Team and hopes to make it to the Olympics in Greece.

He thinks back on high school: "My senior year, I missed a penalty shot and lost the championships. I was really down on myself. Then the coach from the other team came to me and told me how good I was. It really helped me refocus on the bigger picture."

"Of course, I remember the bitter losses more than the best victories. But if I fail and I know I tried as hard as I could, I'm fine. I roll with the punches and move on."

What do you do to relax?

Sara dances. "I can get out my anger and anxiety," she says. "It comes out faster the longer I dance."

Taylor plays his bass. "It's a channel for my feelings," he says. "If I'm not in a good mood, I play hard, loud and fast until I get it out of my system."

Rachel and Jon vent to teammates. Then they move on and have a good time with their friends. Andrew, 16, goes surfing. "That's when everything falls into place," he says. "Things feel more natural."

What would you tell coaches, teachers and parents about how they can help?

To coaches:

Andrew believes that "a good coach doesn't forget that this person is not just a tool for them to use. "Praise for good actions is a far better motivator than critical comments or punishments, like push-ups and laps," he says.

"Winning and losing are temporary. But the love of your sport should stay forever."

When Eliot, 18, thinks back on middle school football, he remembers a coach who would "tell us how to grab someone in an illegal way without the ref seeing. That's when football became no fun.

"Coaches who are oriented to winning at all costs destroy the pleasure of the game."

Rachel describes a good coach as one who believes, not just says, that school has to come first.

To teachers:

"Teachers should keep in mind that education is not limited to books," Jon says. "You learn so much outside the classroom.

"The best teachers are role models. They make an effort to be friends with their students. The teachers I remember from high school are the ones who taught me a lot about life."!

Eva, in the 5th grade, thinks back on a teacher who did too much yelling: "I'd wish I could say, 'Take a chill pill!' I mean, kids make mistakes."

That makes me think of the quote on the wall at the Tech Museum: "He who never makes a mistake never makes a discovery."

To parents:

Emily, 12, says parents need to help their kids say no when it looks like too much.

"Sometimes kids give in to pressure to be on too many teams," she says.

Jon says parents need to be stable and not flip out at games.

"They need to talk when you need to talk and be quiet when you need quiet," he says. "It really helps."

Sara wants us to know that all we need to say is: "Remember, we love you no matter what happens.' That's really enough."

Ann Hines is a local marriage and family therapist, who works with kids, teens and families. Contact her at 476-9620

Copyright 2001, 2008 Santa Cruz Sentinel. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Media News Group, Inc. by NewsBank

Record Number: 122FFF7C897D7D38