



McLean HOSPITAL

HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# STRESS AND TEENS

How We Can Help

Karen Monroe, MD  
Medical Director, Child Outpatient Clinic  
McLean Hospital

# DEFINITION OF STRESS

- Our response (mental, physical, psychological) to the environment's demands or pressures
- Especially the demand that we adapt to change



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# HEALTHY STRESS

- When stress is temporary, intermittent and manageable
- Exercise
- Taking a math test
- But when stressors are repeated or chronic or exceed our ability to cope they become problematic



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# TYPICAL ADOLESCENT CHANGES

- Adolescence has always been a time of tremendous change and thus a particularly stressful time for kids
- The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry lists the typical or normal changes experienced by young to mid adolescents as part of their Facts for Families Guide



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# MOVEMENT TOWARDS INDEPENDENCE

- Struggle with sense of identity
- Feeling awkward or strange about one's self and one's body
- Often an increased focus on self, alternating between high expectations and poor self-esteem
- Interests and clothing style influenced by peer group



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

- Moodiness
- Improved ability to use speech to express one's self
- Realization that parents are not perfect; identification of their faults
- Less overt affection shown to parents, with occasional rudeness



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

- Complaints that parents interfere with independence
- Learning to drive and share family automobiles
- Tendency to return to childish behavior, particularly when stressed
- Resistance to following their parents' belief system or cultural traditions, especially if these are different from what they see in their community.



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# FUTURE INTERESTS AND COGNITIVE CHANGES

- Mostly interested in present, with limited thoughts of the future
- Intellectual interests expand and gain in importance
- Greater ability to do work (physical, mental, emotional)



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# SEXUALITY

- Display shyness, blushing, and modesty
- Girls develop physically sooner than boys
- Increased interest in sex; this can be with the opposite, the same sex, or either
- Concerns regarding physical and sexual attractiveness to others
- Frequently changing relationships



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# MORALS, VALUES AND SELF-DIRECTION

- Rule and limit testing
- Capacity for abstract thought; beginning to understand the potential consequences of future behaviors
- Development of ideals and selection of role models
- Experimentation with sex and drugs (cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana)



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# TEENS EXPERIENCE ALL THESE CHANGES IN THE CONTEXT OF:

- Increased academic demands at school
- Adult expectation that they will be more responsible
- Increasingly complex relationships with friends and significant others
- Trying to make good choices in the face of temptations



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

- Trying to look ahead to college and beyond
- Managing their own expectations and those of their families (and their anxieties about whether or not they can meet them)
- EXHAUSTION! due to normal adolescent sleep shift and early school start times



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# BUT WAIT - THERE'S MORE . . .

- Increase in academic demands in the age of technology
- Changes in the college admissions process
  - Decreased acceptance rates at elite schools lead to
  - College concern at earlier ages
  - Pressure to take more APs, add more extracurriculars, have a perfect record
  - Intense fear of failure



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# TECHNOLOGY AND THE NON-STOP SOCIAL LIFE

- Before the technological revolution kids could spend the day with friends at school or in the community, but could get a break from social drama in the evenings
- Teens can now be in contact 24/7 via text/facebook/snapchat....
  - Evening and late night contact distracts from homework and family time and disrupts sleep
  - Teens don't get any off time from social demands/pressures
  - Ease of contact can result in reaching out to peers at night when they really need an adult



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# INTERNET ACCESS

- Very difficult to monitor
- Frequent exposure to idealized/sexualized images of women- impacts girls' body image and self esteem
- Easy access to portrayals of adult sexuality on NetFlix, Youtube or any number of other websites shape their views on sex
- Easy access to web pornography and the knowledge to hide their viewing
- Regular exposure to graphic depictions of violence from countless sources



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# ACCESS TO IMPORTANT ADULTS

- 21st century adults are just as busy and stressed as 21st century teens
  - Job demands stretch well beyond the 40 hour work week for many
  - Less time to care for ourselves
  - Less time than we would like with those we love
  - Often end up feeling tired when we're home
  - Can be very challenging to be calm and present for our teens
  - (Especially when they're stressed and tired too)



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# HOW DO TEENS MANAGE STRESS?

- In different ways depending on temperament, family, culture, past experience



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# CHANGES IN MOOD

- sad/tearful
- anxious/tense
- compulsive
- irritable/angry
- indifferent (bored)
- withdrawn



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

- Fatigue
- GI distress
- Headache
- Back pain



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR

- School avoidance
- Difficulty completing homework
- Disordered eating (restriction or overeating)
- Overachieving/underachieving
- Changing peer group
- Risky behavior (substance use, sexual, dangerous driving)



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# THESE ARE SIGNALS TO TALK TO YOUR TEEN

- Many of these manifestations can also be normal parts of adolescent development
- If you see a change that concerns you, talk to your teen about how they are feeling and what stressors they are facing



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# HOW CAN WE HELP?

- Kids need balance in their schedules and the types of activities they are involved in.
  - A schedule that allows time for schoolwork, extracurriculars, downtime (at least a little!) and self care (especially sleep.)
  - At least one extracurricular activity or hobby that they enjoy whether or not it builds their college resume
  - If your child is overscheduled and stressed be bold and cut back.
  - They will feel better and be able to give more to the activities that remain



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

- Fitness is a life goal for all ages
- Physical activity decreases anxiety, improves mood and increases focus
- Countless options are available for teens from competitive sports to dance or yoga to taking the dog for a walk
- US Department of Health and Human Services recommends that teens get 1 hour of physical activity daily



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# HEALTHY SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

- We want teens to seek balance in their social lives
  - Talk to them about your expectations re texting/social media while doing homework or after bedtime
  - Be prepared to stay calm and negotiate
  - Explain why you feel the way you do
  - If they are unwilling to work with you (and you are uncomfortable taking the phone), discuss the circumstances that will trigger further discussion or intervention (if grades drop, if unable to get up for school... )



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# ALWAYS BE AVAILABLE TO LISTEN

- If teens want to talk about the struggles they or their friends are having socially
- If you really don't have time at that moment, schedule a time ASAP when you can talk



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# LIFE SKILLS

- Problem solving skills- the ability to
- Identify a problem
- Think of a possible solution
- Try it out



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# EMOTION REGULATION SKILLS

- Take a break when stressed to exercise (even briefly) or find a pleasant activity
  - Relax using mindfulness or deep breathing
    - Mindfulness has become a popular practice in recent years
    - Form of meditation that focuses on breathing and nonjudgmental awareness of what is going on in the moment
    - Easy to learn and effective in helping people feel calmer and more focused
    - Taught at BHS in Positive Decision Making Class
- We will come back to this later



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# WHAT DO TEENS NEED FROM US?



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

- Love is a tremendous force in our children's lives
- Gives them the security they need to go out into the world, take risks and discover who they are
- *“Children need at least one person...who is absolutely, exuberantly and irrationally in love with them. This love is not really irrational because it is rooted in a child's essential goodness, the core of her being that only her parents truly understand.”*
  - Ginsburg, K; Raising Kids to Thrive



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# UNCONDITIONAL LOVE CONTINUED

- Try to find ways to show our love for them and our pride in who they are
- Remember they are insecure and in a time of transition
- The more we can remind them of our love, the better



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# OUR TIME AND PRESENCE

- Time is a precious commodity in our busy lives!
- Try to eat dinner together as often as you can
  - even once per week can help families feel more connected
- Look for activities you enjoy together
  - sports/exercise
  - music (playing or listening)
  - going to the movies



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# TIME AND PRESENCE

- Be available even as they push away from us
- Show them they have our full attention (put down the phone!)
- Validate their feelings (doesn't mean you necessarily agree)
- “Cringe, don't pounce” (don't jump in to solve the problem)
- Do look for opportunities to encourage emotion regulation and problem solving



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# OUR HIGH EXPECTATIONS

- That they will be compassionate with others, work hard and do their best at whatever they do
- But remember that our ultimate goal for them is healthy adult functioning, not just success in higher education



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# WE HOPE OUR CHILDREN, AS ADULTS, WILL:

- Find a livelihood they enjoy and find meaningful
- Be able to work hard and delay gratification
- Cherish their relationships with family and friends
- Be flexible, creative and innovative in solving problems



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# HOPES FOR ADULTHOOD, CONTINUED

- Develop the social and emotional intelligence to be good collaborators and leaders
- Be resilient and seek growth in difficult times
- Be able to attain a good education and earn a living
  - Ginsburg, K; Raising Kids to Thrive



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# COMMUNICATING OUR HIGH EXPECTATIONS

- We want and need to communicate our expectations, but we need to be mindful of how we communicate
- Our time with our kids is limited
- It is tempting to use that time “efficiently”
- We ask “How’d the math test go?” or “Did you study for the SAT yet?”



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# OUR KIDS CAN'T READ OUR MINDS (OR HEARTS)

- We know how much we love them
- But our kids are young, insecure
- If we focus on performance when we're with them they may come to see our love as somehow dependent on their performance
- This perception adds an even higher level of stress to our kids' lives



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# BALANCED TIME WITH TEENS

- Find time just to be with our kids
- Talk about what they want to talk about
- Talk about their performance as one of many topics
- When you're not happy, be sure you express disappointment in what they've done, not who they are



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# ADJUSTING OUR EXPECTATIONS

- We need to be able to adjust our expectations when needed
- It helps no one if we are expecting something our teenager just can't provide, or can only provide at a very high emotional/personal cost



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# OUR PROTECTION

- It is our unquestionable duty as parents to protect our children to the best of our ability when they face significant danger
- Our teens need to know we will protect them even if they push back and accuse us of babying them
- We can also help them protect themselves and save face socially
  - Create a code word to use in a call/text if they need a ride home
  - Let them know they can blame us



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# ON THE OTHER HAND...

- If safety is not a major issue we may need to step back and let them take some risks
- Accept that they need to try new things and even fail sometimes in order to grow
- Of course we may still need to negotiate limits around new behavior



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# OUR EXAMPLE

- Teens need us to model the behaviors we want them to work towards
- They are very much influenced by what we do (though they would not admit it!)
- They can also spot hypocrisy a mile away...



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# AS PARENTS, THINK ABOUT MODELING:

- Balance in our own lives especially between work, family time and leisure
- Self care (sleep, exercise, nutrition)
- Use of technology
  - Try leaving your phone in another room during family dinner and asking your kids to do the same



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# PARENTAL MODELING CONTINUED

- A meaningful social life (even if it is more limited than we'd like)
- Emotion regulation when we're under stress
  - Mindfulness exercise



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# WHEN TO SEEK HELP FOR YOUR STRESSED TEEN

- If you are concerned that your teen is experiencing significant distress or difficulty functioning it is time to seek help
- Seek urgent assessment you are concerned about your teen's safety from self harm, thoughts of dying or any significantly risky behavior
- Your teen's pediatrician is the best person to start with for a referral
- In non-urgent situations your insurance company can provide a list of mental health providers covered by your plan



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

# WORKS CITED

- The Medical Free Dictionary- [medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/stress](https://www.thefreedictionary.com/stress)
- AACAP Facts for Families Guide: Adolescent Development Part 1- [www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Normal-Adolescent-Development-Part-I-057.aspx](https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Normal-Adolescent-Development-Part-I-057.aspx)
- Ginsburg, Kenneth. *Raising Kids to Thrive: Balancing Love with Expectations and Protection with Trust*. Elk Grove Village: American Academy of Pediatrics Publishing, 2015.
- Lythcott-Haims, Julie. *How to Raise an Adult*. New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2015.



McLean HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

