

The Cost of Success: Pressure to Achieve

A report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation notes that excessive pressure to excel ranks right up with poverty, trauma, and discrimination as factors hurting adolescent wellness. Today's teens are experiencing higher expectations and pressure to succeed in ways previous generations did not (American Psychological Association). Parents, coaches, teachers, peers, and society can all be sources of pressure in a teenager's life. However, it should be noted, that teens can also put a great deal of pressure on themselves in an effort to accomplish ambitious goals. Standardized testing and academic pressure, increased competition for college scholarships, over scheduling of extracurricular activities, a culture of achievement, and unrealistic expectations driven by social media, all have the potential to create an abundance of pressure on today's youth. While setting goals for achievement can be healthy, the constant pressure can be harmful and result in negative consequences. For example, teens who feel an increased pressure to perform and achieve may experience higher rates of mental illness such as depression or anxiety, lower rates of self-esteem, and sleep problems that interfere in overall well-being.



The good news is there are some things that parents and adults can do to help support healthier outcomes for youth who are experiencing higher levels of pressure to achieve and succeed. Below are a few suggestions to help teens overcome these challenges.

- **Prioritize unstructured time with friends and family:** Parents/guardians and other adults can play a role by helping youth to achieve balance. Teens need to learn not only how to work hard and prepare for the future, but also need time to be kids and unwind free of the pressures of life. The brains of teens are still developing. We can't expect them to adequately handle the same pressures and demands that mature adults can. Teaching teens about time management, encouraging them to take breaks and making sure they are making space for downtime and activities they enjoy can foster important coping skills.
- **Normalize asking for help:** Check in with teens frequently, even if they appear to be managing their responsibilities and holding it together. Teens who may be struggling under pressure may be suffering in silence. Clinical experts agree it is important to help teens recognize when they are feeling overwhelmed and offer them an open space to talk about what is going on internally. Asking for help is a positive coping skill that can help ease some of the pressure that kids are experiencing. Adults can help facilitate conversations by asking open-ended questions to help teens process their thoughts, emotions and experiences.
- **Teach and encourage healthy habits:** Self-care strategies can make a big impact in helping to reduce stress levels and improve mental health. Good sleep is especially important. Teenagers should get eight to ten hours of sleep per night. Sleep problems can actually contribute to the onset and worsening of different mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety and even suicidal ideation. Check-in with teenagers to discuss sleep habits, stress management strategies,

technology/social media consumption and overall health and wellness. If they are struggling in these areas, they may need some adult guidance and monitoring to help get them on track.

- **Talk about how to cope with setbacks, perceived failure and challenges:** Help teens reframe how they think about failure. Offer the perspective that setbacks are part of life and can be an important opportunity to learn and develop skills they will need to succeed such as emotional resilience, coping skills and problem-solving. Guiding your teen to think through and plan ahead for how they might respond to not achieving a desired outcome can also help prepare them for setbacks.
- **Step in when there are signs of trouble:** Monitor your teen's mood and recognize when commitments and activities provide stress rather than enjoyment. For teens that are feeling an intense amount of pressure and high expectations, this can mean encouraging and supporting them to take something off of their plate if their mental health is starting to decline. Sometimes teens feel like they may disappoint adults in their lives by dropping an AP course or giving up an extracurricular activity. When teens are trying to balance multiple activities on top of school work, the pressure can grow quickly. Experts note that teaching teens to value their well-being over their achievements can go a long way.

Setting goals and establishing expectations for desired achievements isn't a bad thing. However, when youth begin to see their worth in their achievements, rather than who they are as human beings, harmful outcomes such as self-criticism, exhaustion, anxiety, high levels of stress and even depression can result. If you are worried about a young person in your life, a consultation with a qualified mental health professional may be helpful.

References: American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association; Childmind Institute; National Education Association; Psychology Today, VeryWell Family