

Just Stressed or “Burnout”?

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Stress Is On the Rise

With mounting academic pressure and increasing competition for college admissions, parents, teachers and administrators in International Schools across Germany are starting to take note of their students’ rising anxiety levels. At LIS for example, according to a recent counselling survey, more than 50 % of secondary school students feel some kind of a school related stress.

Students worry about assignments and stress about the future and how to take the next step. When trying to manage all these things at once (did I mention boyfriends and girlfriends too?) they are left feeling overwhelmed. Every spare minute seems to be filled with worrying; they feel like there is always something that needs to be achieved... So typically, instead of relaxing during the weekends and holidays, they're working on the already missed or upcoming deadlines, exams and other school related items.

Feeling the “Burn”

The bad news is that if you’re not careful, working too hard and worrying too much, can lead to “burnout” – when everything seems bleak and it feels like there is nothing else left to give.

Experts have classified burnout symptoms in three categories:

- **Emotional exhaustion:** Students affected feel drained and exhausted, overloaded, tired and low, and do not have enough energy.
- **Alienation from school activities:** Students affected find their school work increasingly negative and frustrating. They may develop a cynical attitude towards school and peers. They may, at the same time, increasingly distance themselves emotionally, and disengage themselves from school work.
- **Reduced performance:** Burnout mainly affects everyday tasks at school or at home. Students with burnout regard their activities very negatively, find it hard to concentrate, are listless and experience a lack of creativity.

Because burnout and depression have similar symptoms, some people may become confused about their condition when performing (self) diagnosis. It would be a mistake, for example, for someone with depression to take a longer vacation or time off school. This may help a person exhausted due to extensive work load but it may cause more problems for a person with depression because of very different support needs such as psychotherapy or drug treatment.

So how could someone distinguish between the two? Some characteristics of burnout are very different from those of depression. These include alienation, especially from school work. In depression, negative thoughts and feelings are not only about school and school work, but about all areas of life. Some typical symptoms of depression are lack of self-esteem, hopelessness, and suicidal tendencies.

So even though depression and burnout share similar symptoms not every case of burnout will have depression at its root. However, students should be aware that burnout symptoms may increase the risk of someone getting depression.

Good News: “Burnout“ Can Be Avoided

The good news is that living a more stress free life is possible. There are some really easy ways to avoid burnout effectively. Here are some ideas I want to share with you:

Healthy dieting: Eating fresh ingredients and lots of fruit is really important. Juices filled with vitamin C, such as orange or grapefruit juice, are said to be good for your immune system so can help with stress. When you're busy and tired it can be tempting just to grab another pizza or ready meal, but cooking from scratch can be therapeutic as well as being healthier.

Thou Shalt Exercise: Being physically active is the best way to reduce stress. It helps your body produce endorphins, which make you feel good. Daily walks or jogging (minimum of 30 minutes) can help reduce stress levels. It is even better when combining it with swimming, football, basketball or other higher intensity sports. The team sports environment will also help with stress and the regular contact with other people will improve your self-esteem and confidence.

Sleep (and sign off Facebook): Sleep is always the best medicine...but how long do you sleep every night? In this new age of technology and Web 2.0 students tend to spend too much time on social media sites, answering emails and texts. This may sound like fun but it can lead to more stress. Failure to “switch off” and get much needed sleep, will only get someone closer to burnout.

Kick the “bad habit” (Are you smoking?): Some students say they smoke to relax, but researchers on the European Board for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco suggest that nicotine suppresses the hormone serotonin, which fights stress: another good reason to quit!

Laugh: Medical practitioners at the Mayo Clinic (US) say that laughter is the best medicine, and it's really true. Studies have shown that laughing out loud increases oxygen and blood flow which automatically reduces stress. Planning for fun activities and hanging out with people who laugh can help anyone live a better and easier life. Make time for yourself, log out of Twitter, Facebook or any other social media network and go out with your friends. It's about time you had a good laugh!

Does it mean That Stress is All Bad?

Researchers at UC Berkley found that, in small doses, stress has many advantages. For instance, stress can help people meet daily challenges and motivate them to reach their goals. In fact, they proved that stress could help people accomplish tasks more efficiently. It could even boost memory.

The experts concluded that stress, indeed, can be something that makes a person better, however it is still a question of how much, for how long and how that person interprets or perceives it.

How really stressed are you?