



Grade 11 student Sabrina Shigeoka, 16, is photographed at Steveston-London Secondary School in Richmond, B.C., Jan. 21, 2013. (Rafal Gerszak for The Globe and Mail)

Why are today's teenagers feeling so anxious?

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It might begin with the talk at the dinner table. Concerns about the mortgage or job security. Mom is working too many hours. Dad isn't sleeping. Both are too anxious to let their smartphones go unattended for the length of dinner. The stress spreads like a sneeze: Anxious parents create anxious offspring, both by nature and nurture. In a society infected with fretfulness, we're all in this worry stew together.

Officially, anxiety is defined by excessive, debilitating worry that significantly interferes with a patient's ability to function at home and at work, often causing physical side effects such as panic attacks. But the state of being anxious is also becoming *de rigueur* in our daily lives.

Take your pick: According to media sources, journal articles and bloggers, there's status anxiety, social media anxiety, test anxiety. Squabbling sisters can claim "sibling rivalry anxiety." Electric-car owners might suffer, according to one newspaper report, a case of "out-of-range anxiety." If you aren't feeling anxious right now, what's wrong with you?

A society that creates anxious, poorly coping adults doesn't leave its youth unscathed. Ever-younger children talk about worries and stress. Today's teenagers report being significantly more anxious than their mothers and fathers were at the same age – and they are certainly the most medicated generation of under-18-year-olds in history.

School guidance counsellors say they are seeing more students struggle with stress, and more getting prescriptions to manage it. Mental-health professionals report increasing referrals of teenagers and young children.

There is a positive factor behind this trend: Better public awareness means that teens, who might otherwise have suffered in silence, are now getting help.

But society's definition of mental health has also changed, moved by a widening definition of what constitutes illness and a powerful drug lobby plying the pills to fix it. Kids are watching how the adults around them cope under duress, a pattern that shows up in drug and alcohol use among teenagers.

“There’s already stress in the home, and [teens are] seeing their parents address it with pharmaceuticals or drink,” says Connie Easton, a high-school guidance counsellor in Richmond, B.C., and a former president of the British Columbia School Counsellors Association. “There aren’t as many examples of healthy coping as there could be.”

Well-meaning parents, worried about ensuring their child’s success and happiness, are also more likely to insist on therapy for the teens if they have trouble making friends or are anxious about taking a school trip – things that older generations would have chalked up to growing pains.

“People expect more in terms of being healthy and happy now,” says Dr. Katharina Manassis, the director of anxiety disorders at Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children.

But the stress isn’t all manufactured. Experts such as Manassis point out that teenagers are facing a complex set of pressures – to succeed in a bad economy, to manage divorced parents, to navigate social media, to deal with celebrity culture bombarding them with a fame-and-fortune ethos (as well as death, disease and doomsday predictions).

And while low-income students are more at risk, kids from wealthier families report rising anxiety rates as well, with girls, in almost all surveys, feeling the panic of high expectations most of all.

“Everybody is worried about being wearing the nicest clothes, and being popular and measuring up to the people they see on TV,” says Sabrina Shigeoka, 16. A competitive hockey and baseball player at Easton’s school, who aspires to an U.S. college sports scholarship, she says that feeling stressed is a constant topic of conversation among her friends.

Her parents just want her to be “happy,” she says. But there are nights when she can’t sleep, and days when her heart is racing, as if she is always in competition. “It kind of scares you when [your friends] do one more extra club and sport, and you think, ‘Is a university going to choose them over me?’ ”

Part of the problem is that students don’t learn the proper coping skills for what Easton calls “garden-variety” anxiety, the stress that results after a fight with a best friend or failing a test. And after years of well-meaning “participation” ribbons and well-meaning but permissive parents, the counsellor watches competition in the higher grades sink many students.

“Now they are in a shark pool, fighting their way into university,” Easton says. “If you have no coping skills and those things come along, you just basically shut down. Those kids will just say, ‘That’s it, I’ve had it, I am crawling under the covers.’ ” That makes the situation only worse: “Everybody has crappy days,” she says. “Unfortunately, [hiding] doesn’t help inoculate them from the stresses of daily life.”

“We are basically taking normal life and saying this is a sickness,” says Dr. Stanley Kutcher, a psychiatrist at Dalhousie University who specializes in anxiety among adolescents. He suggests that the lesson not being taught is that anxiety is a gift inherited from our ancestors to protect us from threat and to kick-start ambition. To fight it, we have to face it. “Anxiety is a driver for skill development, it’s a driver for adaptability,” Kutcher says. “If you’re anxious about your test, then, for crying out loud, go and study.”

This is the first in a series of upcoming stories about how anxiety is affecting our culture.