Teenage Anxiety: Yes, it is Worse

The evidence is in. Teenage anxiety has gotten worse. We have seen it in our clientele at Far West and school counselors are reporting the same thing in their schools. Now the research shows us that what we are seeing is indeed true, and the picture is the same nationwide.

The New York Times recently published an article titled “Why Are More American Teenagers Than Ever Suffering from Severe Anxiety” by journalist Benoit Denizet-Lewis. The article cites information from the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, which began asking incoming college freshmen in 1985 if they felt overwhelmed by all they had to do during the previous year. In 1985, 18 percent said they did. By 2010, that number had increased to 29 percent. In 2016, that number had surged to 41 percent.

The article also notes, “Those numbers—combined with a doubling of hospital admissions for suicidal teenagers over the last 10 years, with the highest rates occurring soon after they return to school each fall—come as little surprise to high school administrators across the country, who increasingly report a glut of anxious, overwhelmed students. Anxiety is the most common mental-health disorder in the United States, affecting nearly one-third of both adolescents and adults, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. But unlike depression, with which it routinely occurs, anxiety is often seen as a less serious problem.”

If you are the parent of an overly anxious child, you know how hard and confusing parenting these children can be. Anxiety affects children and teens across a wide spectrum, including both high-achieving and low achieving kids, as well as those whose lives are impacted by trauma. The symptoms can look a lot like bad behavior—school avoidance, tardiness, an inability to focus in class, or a drop in grades. But anxiety is much more complex than that.

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Let's Stop Overusing the Word “Suicide”

These days, the word “suicide” is all over the Internet and social media. “I’m going to commit suicide if my mom doesn’t stop telling me what to do!” “My girlfriend broke up with me. I’m suicidal.” “I hate my life. I’m going to commit suicide!” The extreme act of taking one’s own life has become the buzzword for people who are truly stuck in a hard place. People throw the word around as if it were a simple solution for feeling miserable.

The risk of using the word “suicide” so lightly is that we miss those who are truly at risk for suicide, which has become the number one killer of teens and young adults.

There are many other words we can use—and teach our children to use—to name or describe the difficult feelings we have. Many therapies today teach people how to better recognize and name their feelings in order to better understand and manage their emotions. Many kids are simply overwhelmed by their feelings and choose a flight response to escape the bad feeling. They’ll do anything to distract themselves from an uncomfortable emotion—one word for all of her feelings: scared. With practice, the girl learned to use specific words to express what she was really feeling. Instead of just saying, “I’m scared,” she began to say things like, “I’m really afraid of failing,” or, “That hurt my feelings.”

The Center for Non-Violent Communication has come up with a list of 162 words to describe negative feelings. The list includes words like disappointed, disconnected, frustrated, angry, discouraged, worried, unsure, hopeless, grieving, betrayed, guilty, devastated, hurting, and many more. For the entire list, click HERE.

Cry for help

What does it mean when someone says, “I just want to die”? It all depends on the person and the situation. Often it means, “I am in terrible pain and I want it to stop.” Underneath their statement might lie feelings of self-hatred, uncertainty, failure, shame, disappointment, hopelessness, and fear that the bad feeling will never go away. “I just want to die,” is a cry for help. Most of these young people truly do not want to die, but they do want the pain to go away.

What parents or loved ones can do

When someone says, “I just want to die,” what should we do? The answer is not about minimizing anyone’s feelings. If you are worried, ask your child or your friend if he or she is feeling suicidal. Some people worry that asking someone if they are suicidal makes them more likely to take their own life, but that is just not so. Get the feeling out in the open and name it—and get help when it’s needed.

More often than not, you’ll need to listen to what’s behind the statement—and you’ll need more than just words. First, there’s naming the emotion, and then there’s sitting with it. Practice reflective listening. Really listen, repeat back what your friend or loved one has said, and be affirming and non-judgmental until that person feels fully understood. You can see the release in the body and the sigh of relief. Then change can begin.

Learning how to understand and manage feelings is a very important developmental lesson. So much in the media and in our society shows poor emotion management. As adults, we need to work on managing and caring for our own emotional health too, so we can better model and teach young people good coping skills. It is not easy work! It might be helpful to get some counseling or develop a meditation or mindfulness practice of your own.

At a time when so many things in our society and the world feel out of control, teaching children and teens how to name and manage emotions can help them cope with the challenges they face today, and those that may arise tomorrow.
What Happened to Parenting?

Perhaps as a parent, you get the feeling that Dorothy had in the Wizard of Oz, “Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore!”

Somehow, between the time your parents raised you and the time you became a parent yourself, the rules changed. Unfortunately, no one told you and no one handed you the book on the new rules of parenting. In fact, many of us feel like we are figuring things out as we go along. The authoritarian role your parents once played is gone. The old school, top-down method of parenting no longer works.

“Nothing has been more top-down than the family. The problem is the life we are sending our kids into is not top-down.” Bruce Feiler, author of The Secrets of Happy Families

What changed? We could sum it up in one word—TECHNOLOGY.

Parenting coach Chuck Adam, MSW, puts it this way, “[Children] have at their disposal highly sophisticated toys and influential networks of other children which stoke the fires of curiosity, independence, and autonomy within them. They often develop their own ways of resisting and defying parental rules and expectations, as they become more connected to the world outside the home, more savvy, more desirous of innumerable attractions, and more strong-willed than perhaps we were as children. They might evade their parents’ guidance by getting caught up in sophisticated electronic games, the Internet, cell phones, and other influences beyond their parents’ reach. Finally, children who are angry at parents can show a remarkable—and frustrating—ability to be unfazed by a parent’s punishments or deprivations.”

The Old School Approach to Parenting

Chuck Adam writes in his blog, “For eons, right up till today, the idea of parental authority in raising children has meant top-down authority, with the parents making rules, setting expectations, and demanding compliance or obedience from children. The paradigm, or model, for this approach can be summed up this way:

1) The parent has the authority and does most of the talking.
2) The parent establishes the rules.
3) The child is expected to obey.
4) The parent punishes resistance or disobedience in order to encourage compliance.

Parents Speak ➔ Rules ➔ Obedience ➔ Punishment"

Adam says, “This is not a bad model. After all, parents do know better than children how the home should be run, what proper behavior is, and what the rules should be.”

But in our current world, with our current stressors and demands on families, coupled with the invasiveness of technology, Adam admits, “This model tends not to work well.”

Parenting today takes much more energy and creativity than ever before. There are some good parenting models emerging from evidence-based psychology, education, mindfulness, and even business. But all these new models will need to evolve frequently to keep up with the ever-changing developments in technology. Just when you thought you understood the latest apps your kids are using, something new and radical shows up—like sexting on Snapchat. Soon, with new voice sampling techniques, kids will... continued on next page
be able to say whatever they want in the voice of another person. In the future, how will children and teens know what is true and what is not?

You can be sure that kids will take over control of the household if parents don’t figure out how to parent differently.

**The New School Approach to Parenting**

Mr. Adam outlines a new model that responds much more directly to children’s innate need for control while not giving the reins of authority and ultimate decision-making over to them. He writes, “It takes advantage of the children’s intelligence and desire for independence and ability to verbalize their wants and demands. It does this by completely changing the rules of the (parenting) game, and the expectations that parents have of their children. It looks like this:

**Dialogue ➔ Agreements ➔ Cooperation ➔ Accountability**

The catch is that this new model requires that parents use better relationship skills with their children. In order to have meaningful dialogues with two-year-olds and teenagers (and everyone in between), parents need to use self-control and develop better communication skills. They need to do things like:

1. Listening,
2. Refraining from yelling, threatening, and lecturing,
3. Using I-messages to express their values, expectations, and desires,
4. Offering choices and, above all,
5. Negotiating agreements with children, then holding children accountable to what they agreed to.”

"In a New School approach, parents start with genuine dialogue with their children about expected behaviors and their consequences. (Yes, parents really can negotiate these things with two-year-olds! And even with kids who have ADHD.) Children (like adults) are much more likely to follow through on what they have had some control in setting up—in other words, they’re more likely to cooperate. And a New School approach prefers children’s cooperation over obedience. We want them to cooperate, and voluntarily choose to do what we want them to do. This is not a pipe-dream. It works."

The new parenting is going to require some studying and some self-reflection including clarity on your own personal values. Don't despair. The new parenting can open doors to a more rich and satisfying parental experience and deeper bonds with your children.

There are many excellent resources. Here are just a few:


For ideas on how to better organize and manage the new chaos of family life in a fast-moving world, watch Bruce Feiler’s TED Talk on Agile Families, or read his book *The Secrets of Happy Families.*

*Parenting from the Inside Out: How a Deeper Self-Understanding Can Help You Raise Children Who Thrive* by Daniel J. Siegel and Mary Hartzell

*Parentmap* magazine provides many excellent parenting articles, speakers, and events in the greater Seattle area.

For a Christian perspective on parenting, *Boundaries with Teens,* by Dr. John Townsend. ■

"Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."  
Ian MacLaren
Why Children Lie
Given so many costs of lying, why then do children lie?

By Carl Pickhardt, Ph.D.

First, understand what lying is. Lying is the act of deliberately NOT telling the truth in order to gain illicit freedom or some other gain. It is commonly done in three ways.

1. By **FALSIFYING** information, swearing one truth when the contrary is true.

2. By **WITHHOLDING** information, presenting part of the truth but not the whole.

3. By **MANIPULATING** information, misleading understanding by implying one truth to draw attention away from another.

There are many motivations behind why children lie. A few of the more common causes are listed below.

- To get to do the forbidden.
- To escape consequences of wrongdoing.
- To compensate for feeling inadequate by creating a false image to impress other people.
- To pretend that make-believe is real.
- To deny the reality of painful feelings or actual events.
- To avoid arousing emotional upset by being honest about what someone doesn’t want to hear.
- To outsmart adults by fooling them with dishonesty.
- To self-protect from the threat of interpersonal harm.

- To cover up for friends’ or loved ones’ misdeeds.
- To conceal a source of guilt or shame.
- To create secrecy in order to enable addiction.

Whatever the reason, parents need to treat lying seriously. The quality of family life depends as much as anything on the quality of communication, and lying can erode that quality to devastating effect. There is no trust without truth. There is no intimacy without honesty. There is no safety without sincerity. And there is no such thing as a small lie because when parents overlook one lie they only encourage the telling of another.

So, when a child lies, what might parents helpfully do?

1. Explain the high costs of lying so the child understands the risks that go with dishonesty.

2. Declare how it feels to be lied to so the child understands how loving relationships can be emotionally affected.

3. Apply some symbolic reparation—a task the child must do that he or she would not ordinarily have to do, to work the offense off.

4. Insist on a full discussion about the lying—why it occurred, how the child could have chosen differently so that lying did not occur, what the child is going to do to prevent further lying, and what the child may need from the parents in order to make future truth telling easier to do.

5. Declare that lying in the family will always be treated as a serious offense.

6. Finally, parents need to declare that they intend to reinstate trust and the expectation of truth in order to give the child a chance to resume an honest relationship and to not drive themselves crazy with distrust.

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"When it gets harder to love, let's love harder." Van Jones
Dealing With a Lie

When Jane discovered that her daughter Molly had been lying to her for several months about her homework and after school activities, she was stunned. Jane couldn’t believe Molly was a liar, yet the evidence was clear. Jane found unfinished homework shoved deep inside Molly’s backpack. The track coach emailed to say Molly had missed several weeks of practice. A family friend called to tell Jane that Molly had posted on Instagram about going to her boyfriend’s house after school to smoke pot and had boasted online about being sexually active.

It’s a devastating day when parents learn their child’s behavior is not what they thought. “I raised her to be honest and hard working. I model good values!” Jane told her therapist. “What went wrong? Why didn’t I see this coming? I’m going to ground her for a month and take away her cell phone!”

That is a typical parental response to this kind of news. But Jane’s therapist advised her to slow down and refrain from acting in anger. The therapist suggested that Jane try reflective listening to help her daughter feel safe enough to share what was really going on.

Jane’s therapist explained that most kids who lie are not bad kids. Nor are they kids who’ve had poor parenting. They are mostly good kids who’ve gotten backed into a corner they don’t know how to get out of. They’re lying to cover up something that’s painful or is difficult to face. This happens to adults, too, but teens are still learning how to make difficult decisions, navigate their own mistakes, and problem-solve their way out of tight corners with honesty.

Jane practiced reflective listening with her counselor and then set up a time to talk with her daughter about her unacceptable behaviors. Jane made sure not to start the conversation with anger or pre-judgment. Instead of labeling Molly “a liar,” Jane reminded herself that her daughter was a good kid who had made some bad choices. The big underlying questions were “Why?” and what Molly needed to do to change her behaviors and show her mother she could be trusted again.

The conversation was a bit bumpy at first. Molly became defensive right away, but Jane held firm to listening carefully and reflectively. Once Molly understood that her mother would listen to her side of things, the tears began to fall and she spilled everything.

Molly said she had always felt in the shadow of her older sister Teresa, an honor student and top athlete, who was now in her freshman year at a top Ivy League school. Molly had struggled with math all her life and had always relied on her sister to help with her homework. With Teresa’s help and a lot of hard work, she had done OK in her math classes, but this year was different. Without her sister’s support, and with a couple of tough teachers, Molly’s grades in math and other subjects had been slipping badly.

The worse Molly’s grades got, the more overwhelmed and ashamed she felt, until everything began to snowball. So she lied to her mother and pretended everything was fine. Then Molly starting going home with her boyfriend to smoke pot, intending to do homework but never quite getting around to it. One thing led to another and before long Molly was stuck in a situation she could not handle.

Using her newfound reflective listening skills, Jane was able to hear what her daughter had been unable to share with her. She acknowledged her daughter’s struggles and told Molly she could see how much she missed her big sister and how much she had relied on Teresa’s support. They talked about a plan to get her caught up and Jane helped Molly make an appointment with a professional tutor.

For her part, Molly understood that lying had been a bad choice and determined that she would talk to...
... Teenage Anxiety cont’d

Parents often respond with harsh punishment, which only deepens the anxiety and contributes to poor self-esteem. It’s a spiral that can lead to kids dropping out of school, self-harm, or use of drugs and alcohol, hurting their options for college and derailing their lives and future. It is also difficult for school counselors and administrators to know what to do. They are left wondering whether to provide greater supports or push teens to face their anxieties.

The underlying causes discussed in the New York Times article will be a surprise to no one. We all feel the effects of the growing tension in our country and in the world along with the impact of technology and social media. This is a summary of the factors Denizet-Lewis lists in the article:

1. **Childhood trauma**: Growing up with violence or crime in the neighborhood; in a home that is abusive, chaotic or violent; facing the possibility of deportation of parents or the entire family; or experiencing a natural disaster are major contributors to childhood anxiety.

2. **Perfectionism**: Increased sense of competition and the need to out-perform others to get into college. This pressure seems to be internally driven as opposed to parent-driven, as reported in the past.

3. **Fear of terrorism**: With recent shootings in our country and around the world, teens are reporting they are afraid to go to public places—even the movies.

4. **Social media**: Stephanie Eken, a psychiatrist interviewed for the Times article, when asked about other common sources of worry among highly anxious kids, named social media as a factor. Eken noted that anxious teenagers from all backgrounds are relentlessly comparing themselves with their peers, “and the results are almost uniformly distressing.” Other research shows that social media is a major distraction and tool of avoidance for many teens, which only increases their anxiety.

5. **Manage technology**: Every family needs to decide how to manage and set limits on computer and smartphone usage. This is by far one of the most important things you need to address as a parent. Determine your boundaries and set them firmly with your kids. This is probably the most difficult thing of all. It means being committed and vigilant. And yes, it means you must model healthy use of technology. A good source for learning how to manage Internet usage for your children of all ages is **Common Sense Media**.

Now that we are waking up to a new awareness of anxiety in children and teens, it is time to pay attention and act. These anxious children and teens are not going to “just get over it.” They need understanding, support, new skills—and firm boundaries. *More about that in another issue!*  

... Dealing with a Lie cont’d her mom when pressures started building up. As Jane and Molly re-established a trusting relationship, they began to plan a special trip to visit Teresa at college so the sisters could spend some time together.

Parents who jump in with lectures and punishments before knowing the whole story are likely to build a barrier with their child. The child may become more distant and may be more likely to get into deeper trouble. By choosing reflective listening, Jane was able to start a dialogue that opened the door to helping her daughter work toward a solution.

Jane still made it clear that lying was never acceptable, and she knows that continuing to develop strong reflective listening skills will help her parent Molly through the many challenges of adolescence.
Far West Family Services

The Forecaster is published quarterly by Far West Family Services, your Employee Assistance Program. Copies of this newsletter are also available via email. We appreciate your feedback and comments about our newsletter.

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To learn more about your benefits through Far West, or to schedule an appointment with one of our therapists, call our office during business hours, 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. Sessions are available from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Monday through Friday; some Saturday sessions are also available.

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Need additional resources?

HELPGUIDE.ORG
The best mental health resources on the web, in collaboration with Harvard Medical School Health Publications. Answers to your questions about depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, insomnia, parenting, etc. Excellent self-evaluation guides and step-by-step programs for dealing with life’s challenges.

Community Resources
Links to organizations in Washington state for information on adoption, gay and lesbian issues, financial and legal resources, county resources, drug and alcohol treatment centers, youth violence, domestic violence, and more.