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### Research Stressay

Look out for the beast with untamed hair, gnawed fingernails, and disheveled expressions. This creature is known as a stressed high school student, and if caution is not taken, many other students could suffer the same torturous fate. Schools are drilling the need for success and setting high standards for students aspiring higher education. The minds of these students are being poisoned with the thought that if they are not perfect, a college will deny their enrollment, and their futures will be doomed. Students find themselves taking many college level classes, participating in extracurricular activities, and involving themselves in community programs to the extent that they leave no time to simply be a carefree teenager. Schools and students need to work together to find stress solutions such as less rigorous schedules or even an entire gap year to ensure a successful future education; otherwise, students will suffer.

With a pinch of extra-curricular activities, a dash of honors courses, and a hand full of college-level classes cooked together for two semesters, students are left with the recipe

for a stress soufflé. There's no denying that "a little stress is a good thing" (Neighmond). It has been proven that moderate levels of stress push a person to a higher level of performance (Sanders). Some students see the deadline as motivation to get work done on time to earn the passing grade. Along with class work deadlines, having volunteer work requirements for programs such as the National Honors Society keeps students busy and teaches them time management. In a way, having multiple assignments and due dates forces successful students to be organized students.

When a student aspires to take a higher level class as an academic challenge, there is really no harm done. Being ambitious is an unquestionably admirable quality found in today's goal-seeking youth. However, when students are taking a schedule full of challenging classes simply to boost their GPA; it brings destructive stress into the equation (Sanders). Only seeing class as a way to get the ideal number sucks the enjoyment out of a student's education. Instead of taking on challenging courses because they feel passionate about learning the subject, they only see the large, horrifying textbooks and mountains of assignments they have no interest in. Another problem with having so many burdensome obligations is that it's harder for students to juggle their personal interests along with all of the assignments they're buried under.

While students are trying to balance all their tasks, their bodies are working just as hard to keep up with them. In a simple summary, the body's sympathetic autonomic

nervous system responds to times of high stress by keeping the body “on guard” and “unable to relax” until the stress is over (Collingwood). Heart rates soar, and hands become clammy because the body is trying its hardest to aid a person through the stressful situation. The nature of the situation differs for each person. Some people get stressed when they’re unable to answer a question on the test, and others become stressed at simple things like turning in a late assignment. Once the stressful or eventful period is over, the parasympathetic autonomic nervous system kicks in to decrease a person’s heart rate and relax the blood vessels to bring the body back to a calm state (Collingwood). School lasts for multiple months and involves continuous projects and lessons in several different subjects. When the school work load reaches the point where it triggers a physical reaction from the sympathetic autonomic nervous system, that is when it becomes a problem.

The long periods of stress cause a person’s body to remain tensed for dangerous amounts of time (Collingwood). When the body is unable to let the parasympathetic autonomic nervous system kick in and remains this way for too long, serious mental and physical damage begins to occur (Collingwood). A person under great stress is at a higher risk of cardiovascular diseases due to a person changes in diet. Other symptoms include high blood pressure, muscle pain, and a weakened immune system leaving you more vulnerable to infections (Collingwood). While teenagers are experiencing hormonal changes, adding stress can aggravate skin problems. Depression, headaches and exhaustion are also side effects of stress (Collingwood). Although not every stressed student

experiences the most extreme conditions such as heart problems or weakened immune systems, complaints about headaches, skin problems, and muscle tension are common from today's stressed teens. The equation only gets more complex with these symptoms because students are now stressed about grades and stressed about their stress symptoms. Students are engaging in the vicious self-destructive cycle of stress and sacrificing their peace of mind all for that perfect grade.

Nearly half of students say they suffer from school-related stress (Neighmond). Colleen, a sixteen year old high school student, maintains a grade point average above a 4.0 and takes many college level courses. Colleen began suffering many violent migraines, irritability towards her peers, and constant exhaustion. With the support of her family, Colleen decided to “[dial] down on academics” (Neighmond). Although she remained in honors courses, she lessened the amount and maintained a manageable workload that allowed her time to focus on her personal hobbies (Neighmond). After decreasing the level of stress that Colleen experienced from school, she was able to say farewell to her migraines and had a noticeably better mood. Along with being pain-free and happy, Colleen also felt like she had twice as much energy as before (Neighmond). More students should learn from Colleen's actions and realize that “the pressure doesn't have to be so extreme” and accept that “every performance doesn't have to be perfect” (Van Der Kleut).

School systems need to realize that students “can’t do everything” (Van Der Kleut par. 7). Pushing a student to take honors courses up to their breaking point makes education become “about survival” (Van Der Kleut). Many teachers are beginning to give punishments for unfinished homework, which puts excellent students in detention because they were too busy doing their calculus homework to finish their physics assignment (Van Der Kleut). Detentions are definitely not the goal of a student in advanced courses. With the threat of punishment looming over their heads, students feel the need to turn to cheating because getting the grade is more important than learning the material (Van Der Kleut). In fact, a study done in 2010 revealed that eighty-five percent of students in the top 25 percent of their high school class admitted to cheating at some point during school (Van Der Kleut). Even when students get ready to take tests that they don’t have the answers for, it’s typical that just enough material is memorized to be able to pass.

The ruthless, stress-fueled urge that students feel to climb to the top is destroying the purpose of education. The top ten may no longer represent the ten best students in school, but more accurately depicts the ten most stress-driven, competitive achievers (Van Der Kleut). Education should be about increasing personal knowledge, not about allowing a number to define a student’s future. Daunting advertisements about the ideal ACT or SAT score posted down school hallways initiate anxiety in intelligent students who are cursed with being poor test takers. The honor roll is another source of anxiety. Rewarding the best students for their undeniable hard work is a wonderful idea, but at the same time it

can bring shame to the students who weren't able to get flawless report cards (Gorlinski). So much stress can be produced from being categorized as having mostly A grades instead of all A grades. Students put so much importance in reaching their academic goals that instead of being proud of the B they earned, they only see failure because it isn't an A (Gorlinski).

Students will labor themselves over reaching their next goal, only to reach retirement and question "where [the] time went" (Gorlinski). They don't realize that they are "losing today for the sake of tomorrow" (Gorlinski). A student can waste away their prime years without even realizing they've done it. It's easy to get lost in the "demanding curriculum, longer homework sessions, and high stakes testing" (Wallace). Forty percent of parents shared that they noticed side effects of school stress in their children (Wallace). Friedman, who is the mother of thirteen year old Rachel, is devastated when her daughter gets upset about receiving a 98 instead of a 100 percent grade. Friedman tries to reassure Rachel that she is doing very well, and that Rachel should be proud of her accomplishments, but it's no use. Rachel feels that she needs to get the absolute best grade possible, and many students share this feeling because they believe they need to excel for "competitive college admissions" in their future (Wallace).

In truth, colleges don't necessarily determine a student's fate, and this is a fact that more students need to believe. If a class or two slip by with less than an A grade, and

normal level classes are taken instead of honors, students will still find a school that fits and accepts them. No matter where they enroll, a student's education experience will mostly be determined by their attitude towards the school. A student's life will not be compromised if a big ten school doesn't rate them a ten, so struggling with an overbearing school schedule isn't worth it. Furthermore, the sacrifice of sanity doesn't end after the acceptance letter is sent; it is only carried through into the student's college education. High school is only the beginning of the challenging path that overeager students have paved for themselves.

College is not guaranteed to be a walk in the park for anyone. Even for the students with many scholarships and high school achievements, the average price at a four-year university is a stinging "\$23,712 per year" (Wood). Another scary statistic to add to that is the fact that "nearly thirty percent of all students who enter college don't return their sophomore year" (Wood). College is an expensive place to dabble. Much of this problem comes from students being sent off to college when they simply "aren't ready" for it (Wood). A very straightforward comparison of sending a student to college prematurely is "sending a kid who's not hungry to an all-you-can-eat buffet" (Wood). Eventually every student will be ready to continue their education, but some are burnt out after four strenuous years of taking advanced placement courses. Some students would benefit from feeling a reward after high school before they venture off to college.

Students who participate in a “gap year” between high school and college often feel substantial benefits (Wood). A gap year allows a student to take some “much-needed downtime” (Wood). Truthfully, with all the hard work put into their 4.0 grade point averages, the students deserve a break to some degree. This may seem like an excuse for a student to slack off and “become lazy”, but the purpose of a gap year is truly the opposite of that (Purnell). The gap year may be a break from the traditional classroom, but it is still a year full of “future-focused” activities as long as it is done correctly.

Many parents fear supporting the gap year because it is easy for a student to fall in love with the less stressful lifestyle. Parents will envision their students getting lost as they explore all the possibilities of the future and become fearful that they’ll never find their way to the gap year finish line (Wood). In today’s advanced society, it is hard to make a decent living without higher education. That being said, it is very appropriate for a parent to worry that their child may be “doomed to remain degree-less forever” if they take one year off (Wood). The stress for perfect academics is spreading from the students in the classrooms to the parents who are worried about their child’s future. However, parents who have faith in their student’s motivations should not fear a gap year failure. This failure is usually only the case if a gap year is taken “for the wrong reasons” (Purnell).

Students are wrong in thinking that taking a gap year is equivalent to a year vacation. A gap year still takes work and motivation for it to be successful. Occasionally, a



student will feel discouraged when they're participating in a gap year while they watch their friends and classmates move to college before them (Purnell). Seeing all their friends progress on into college can cause a student to feel like they're left behind and it's easy to lose focus on the goals of a gap year when this happens. Another gap year flaw that can occur happens when a student is holding out for their dream college but not putting in the proper effort to make themselves attractive to that school (Purnell). It's important that gap year students gear their activities toward their specific major and communicate with their dream college about what things could help them earn an acceptance letter.

Students who properly plan their year to ensure that they still apply to college and never "drop off the college radar" (Wood). A gap year isn't a justification to run away from higher education for a year, it's a chance to lessen stress and focus on a student's approach to college. Applying your senior even though you're participating in a gap year is a wise choice that gives students a "safety net" if their gap year plans fall through (Purnell). Not having any acceptance letters or any gap year plans would be devastating to an ambitious student. Not only does application provide a backup plan, but it also sets up plans for the future. Many colleges have the option of deferred admission allowing students to put down a deposit to enroll the following year (Purnell). Asking for deferred admission guarantees that there is a school waiting to enroll the student in whichever major they have decided at the end of your gap year.

While participating in a gap year, successful students will spend their time volunteering, interning, job-shadowing, and working in a career-related field. Executing a gap year this way allows a student to feel reassured that when they go to college they are beginning a career that they will be happy with (Wood). A gap year is a chance for students to figure out what they want to do with the rest of their lives before they have to choose. Going through high school only stressing about getting impeccable grades doesn't allow students the chance to really dive into all the subjects available to them. A student may take multiple advanced placement math courses because they look good on a transcript when really they would have blossomed and found their passion in biology. The gap year allows students to regain their lost opportunity at finding their academic direction. This is the main focus of the gap year, and although few have wandered off the path, others were led straight to the major of their dream.

According to the College Board, students who have successfully carried out their gap year are "better prepared" for college which means "higher completion rates" (Wood). With this data supporting the use of a gap year for students, it makes it an even more enticing solution for school stress. The gap year brings clarity to the hectic transition from high school to college and brings confidence to a college student's class schedule (Purnell). Where there is confidence, there is no worry. Although a gap year may not be right for everyone, it is definitely something that stressed high school students should consider

before they sign up for college. It is of the utmost importance that a student learns which solutions will soothe their school stress problems.

Too often students pile on stressors and feel lost in their studies with no hope for improvement. Thankfully, this specific cause of stress can be controlled and there is hope for the stressed student population. Reaching the healthy balance between taking on a challenge and knowing where the limit is should be what all schools should strive to teach to each of their students. Schools and families need to understand that students cannot be characterized by their grade point average or how demanding their schedule is. Education needs to be about increasing personal knowledge and less about reaching a standard. Not every student is meant to be in advanced placement classes, and it is time that all ambitious students realize this fact. Whether it's trading in a college level course for a simpler honors course, or deciding to participate in a gap year, there are many solutions to relieve school stress on students. Students can feel assured that as long as they give their all in what they are capable of, they will find a college and a future that suits them.

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