

Mount Sinai AHC Presents Seminar on Teen Stress

BY LISA HUFFINES

Joyce Cohen of the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center's Advisory Board set the scene at the November 18 seminar "High School... High Stress: Helping Your Adolescent Navigate Stress," with an interesting twist: If there were such a thing as a teen parents' hotline, it might offer options like, "Press one for several long, silent minutes of frustration," or "Find someone else to press two" if you've lost all confidence in your competence as a parent. It was a fitting preamble to the panel discussion, co-sponsored by the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center and NYC-PIA, which recognized that teen stress is a whole-family issue.

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The panel consisted of Winthrop Adkins, Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Education at Columbia University's Teachers College and founder and president of the Institute for Life Coping Skills; and three representatives of the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center: Anne Nucci-Sack, chief medical officer and medical director; senior social worker and supervisor Nora Helfgott; and child and adolescent psychiatrist Celia Blumenthal. The Center's director Dr. Angela Diaz moderated.

No wonder adolescence is stressful, Dr. Diaz pointed out. In addition to the issues their parents wrestled with (sex, drugs, college), today's teens worry about war, terrorists, HIV, Internet safety and privacy, as well as an extremely uncertain economy and job market. Dr. Diaz introduced the four panelists, each of whom spoke to a particular facet of the adolescent experience.

Physical Stress Symptoms

Dr. Nucci-Sack spoke about physical symptoms. Stress, she said, is "a demand for adaptation — usually to changes in one's own life." Certainly, changes abound in adolescence. In addition to the obvious physical changes, brain circuitry is changing.

Perceptions of the world are increasingly intense and emotional, yet the reasoning pathways that will modulate these perceptions in adulthood have not yet developed fully. Teens are breaking away from parental control, and that alters the whole family dynamic — even without attendant divorce, remarriage, new siblings, death or illness in the family, all of which are quite common as well. Many kids change schools during adolescence, which means new friends and a new social landscape that may include dating, sex and substance abuse.

So adolescence is indeed all about adapting and stress. Yet, said Dr. Nucci-Sack, only a small percentage of teens can articulate their concerns or ask for help. Some present somatic symptoms instead, from headaches to muscle aches, excess perspiration or heart palpitations. Chronic recurrent abdominal pain is perhaps the most common complaint studied. Abdominal pain accounts for 10 percent of all pediatric hospital outpatient first visits, Dr. Nucci-Sack said. The good news, she added, is that there is no underlying pathological reason for the pain in 95 percent of these cases, although the pain is real. Dr. Nucci-Sack advised parents to investigate all possible physical causes, but simultaneously explore stress and seek relief through exercise, relaxation techniques, improved sleep and eating habits, and counseling.

Art and Emotional Expression

Nora Helfgott, LCSW, titled her talk, "The Inner World of the Adolescent." Presenting artwork created by teenagers, she identified themes that occur within parent-child relationships as well as the therapeutic relationship. One student's piece revealed the powerful and intense emotions that can be experienced and expressed toward authority figures, said Ms. Helfgott, adding that adolescents' shifting identities are often colored by ambivalence as they explore and nurture aspects of their developing selves. Another drawing emphasized a young man's contemplation of power, danger and protection, while one young adolescent's collage symbolized dreams, belief and hope, despite

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past experiences of hardship, trauma and loss. Regarding communication, Ms. Helfgott said talking to adolescents can be “like shooting hoops—the words don’t always go in, but you get better with practice.” Finally, she shared the wise sentiment of Dr. Donald Winnicott, who stated decades ago, “The only ‘cure’ for adolescence is time.”

Building Lines of Communication

Dr. Celia Blumenthal also sounded the “It’s Only Temporary” theme. Even the more dramatic teen reactions, both to their new bodies and to life stresses (physical symptoms, social withdrawal, unrestrained anger, plummeting grades), may turn out in the end to be no big deal, she said. Of course, this doesn’t mean parents can disengage and wait for adolescence to pass. She cited studies that show teenagers who eat dinner with their families three times a week experience greater school success (even in college) and less substance abuse than teenagers who don’t. Building a strong, communicative relationship with kids when they are children, and maintaining it through adolescence, is the key to warding off trouble. It isn’t the actual dinner that’s important, Dr. Blumenthal said, adding, “Do anything together. Watch *Gossip Girl!*” Make their lives physically consistent, with steady exercise, sleep and diet. Encourage interests in expression, through the arts or any other project that has a communicative function. Maintain a steady presence in their lives, and “don’t get so pulled into their drama that you can’t step back and provide a perspective.”

Blumenthal warned against keeping computers in children’s bedrooms, because it allows teens to isolate themselves. And, she said, fight the urge to criticize. “Children will grow into the space that is provided for them,” she said, “so don’t pen them in with negative expectations or fears. Believe in them.”

Life Stages for Parent and Child

Dr. Adkins pointed out that teens and their parents are at very different life stages and are coping with quite different developmental tasks. He placed teen stress into this dynamic family context. The human race has shown amazing consistencies across time and cultures

in the stages of life we pass through, he said. At each stage, we are working on a certain set of developmental tasks. For teens, body change is a big one; how and when an adolescent grows and matures impacts social roles, sexual identity and peer relationships. Other important developmental tasks of the teen years are separation from parents and early career identity. Adolescence is characterized by a heightened sense of fairness, and a very present-oriented sense of time. To the average teen, the future seems very far away.

Adults in their 40s and 50s are dealing with different issues, notably, a very different time sense: the future, for them, is no longer infinite. Career pyramids are narrowing and possibilities are looking limited. “Parents are asking: ‘Is this it? Do I want all this?’” Adkins said. “At the same time your kid is testing your limits. It can be quite a meeting.” Parents who are not developing and moving forward themselves can become part of the problem in their teen’s development. Overprotective and over demanding parents, he has found, often fit this category.

Counseling, Dr. Adkins said, can facilitate communication between the two generations. He said he’s also a big believer in the weekly “family conference.” Putting issues “on the family agenda” is a good way to minimize heat-of-the-moment confrontations and defer discussion to a calmer time.

Finally, he advised, learn to talk to your teen like a counselor. Counselors are trained listeners; good ones have mastered the arts of paraphrase, reflection of feeling, and questioning, all excellent skills for parents of teens. If you can pick out the main idea in an angry rant and paraphrase it accurately, you are likely to get your child to expand on what is angering him or her. If you can reflect the underlying feelings in the rant, your child will feel you have listened and understood, and may begin really talking about the precursors. Asking open-ended questions that cannot be answered yes or no, (i.e. “How did you feel after it happened?”), elicits your teen’s thoughts and feelings and is a skill any parent of an adolescent would find helpful in opening up dialogue. ●