

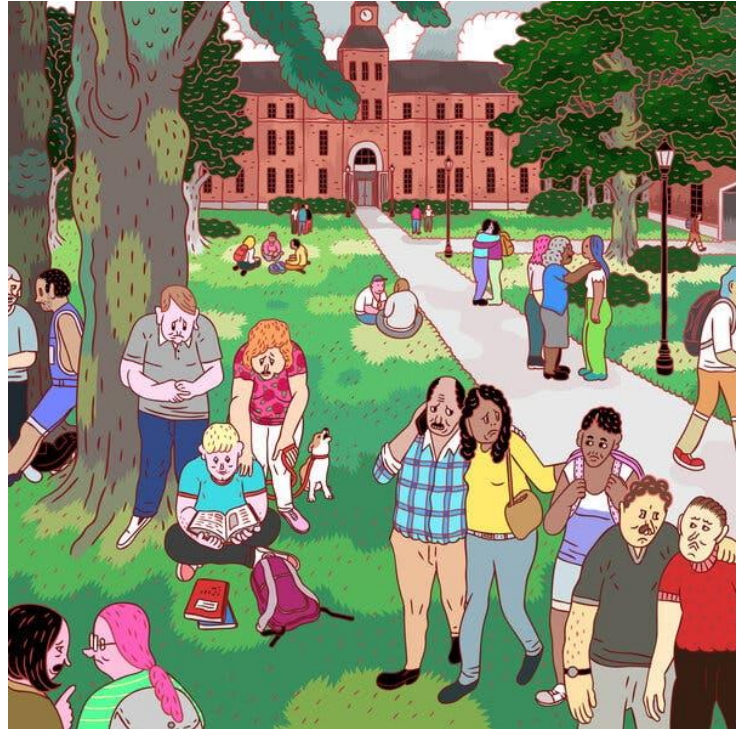
Anxious Parents Are the Ones Who Need Help

Mathilde Ross of The New York Times, April 8, 2024

This month, across the country, a new cohort of students is being accepted into colleges. And, if recent trends continue, the start of the new school year will kick off another record-breaking season for anxiety on campus.

I'm talking about the parents. The kids are mostly fine.

Let me explain. Most emotions, even unpleasant ones, are normal. But the word is out about increasing rates of mental health problems on campus, and that's got parents worrying. Fair enough. The statistics are startling — in 2022, [nearly 14 percent of 18- to 25-year-olds](#) reported having serious thoughts about suicide.



Credit...Jesse Simpson

But parents are allowing their anxiety to take over, and it's not helping anyone, least of all their children. If a child calls home too much, there must be a crisis! And if a child calls too little, there must be a crisis! Either way, the panicked parent picks up the phone and calls the college counseling center to talk to someone like me.

I am a psychiatrist who has worked at a major university's mental health clinic for 16 years. Much of next year's freshman class was born the year before I started working here. Technically, my job is to keep my door open and help students through crises, big and small. But I have also developed a comprehensive approach to the assessment and treatment of anxious parents.

The typical call from a parent begins like this: "I think my son/daughter is suffering from anxiety." My typical reply is: "Anxiety in this setting is usually normal, because major life transitions like living away from home for the first time are commonly associated with elevated anxiety." Parents used to be satisfied with this kind of answer, thanked me, hung

up, called their children and encouraged them to think long-term: “This too shall pass.” And most everyone carried on.

But these days this kind of thinking just convinces parents that I don’t know what I’m talking about. In the circular logic of mental health awareness, a clinician’s reassurance that situational anxiety is most likely normal and time-limited leads a parent to believe that the clinician may be missing a serious mental health condition.

Today’s parents are suffering from anxiety about anxiety, which is actually much more serious than anxiety. It’s self-fulfilling and not easily soothed by logic or evidence, such as the knowledge that most everyone adjusts to college just fine.

Anxiety about anxiety has gotten so bad that some parents actually worry if their student *isn’t* anxious. This puts a lot of pressure on unanxious students — it creates anxiety about anxiety about anxiety. (This happens all the time. Well-meaning parents tell their kid to make an appointment with our office to make sure their adjustment to college is going OK.) If the student says she’s fine, the parents worry that she isn’t being forthright. This is the conundrum of anxiety about anxiety — there’s really no easy way to combat it.

But I do have some advice for parents. The first thing I’d like to say, and I mean it in the kindest possible way, is: Get a grip.

As for your kids, I would like to help you with some age-appropriate remedies. If your child calls during the first weeks of college feeling anxious, consider saying any of the following: You’ll get through this; this is normal; we’ll laugh about this phone call at Thanksgiving. Or, say anything that was helpful to you the last time you started something new. Alternatively, you could say nothing. Just listening really helps. It’s the entire basis of my profession.

If the anxiety is connected to academic performance — for instance, if your child is having difficulty following the professor and thinks everyone in class is smarter — consider saying, “Do the reading.” Several times a semester, a student I’ve counseled tells me he or she discovered the secret to college: Show up for class prepared! This is often whispered rather sheepishly, even though my office is private.

Anxiety about oral presentations is also quite common. You know what I tell students? “Rehearse your speech.” Parents, you can say things like this, too. Practice it: “Son, you wouldn’t believe how helpful practice is.”

I can prepare you for advanced topics, too. Let’s say your child is exhausted and having trouble waking up for class; he thinks he has a medical problem or maybe a sleep disorder. Consider telling him to go to bed earlier. Common sense is still allowed.

What if a roommate is too loud or too quiet, too messy or too neat? Advise your kid to talk to the roommate, to take the conversation to the problem's source.

If your child is worrying about something more serious, like failing out of college: This is quite common in the first few weeks on campus. Truth be told, failing all of one's classes and being expelled as a result, all within the first semester, is essentially impossible and is particularly rare among those students who are worrying about it. The administrative process simply doesn't happen that fast. Besides, you haven't paid enough tuition yet.

I'm making my job sound easy, and it's not. I'm making kids sound simple, and they're not. They are my life's work. Some kids walk through my door in serious pain. But most don't. Most just need a responsible adult to show them the way. And most of what I do can be handled by any adult who has been through a thing or two, which is to say, any parent.

I worry that the current obsession with mental health awareness is disempowering parents from helping their adult children handle ordinary things. People are increasingly fearful that any normal emotion is a sign of something serious. But if you send your adult children to a mental health professional at the first sign of distress, you deprive yourself of the opportunity to strengthen your relationship with them. This is the beginning of their adult relationship with you. Show them the way.

The transition to college is full of excitement and its cousin, anxiety. I enjoy shepherding young people through this rite of passage. Parents should try enjoying it, too.