

For Parents, Educators and Mental Health Professionals Who Care About Teens

In This Issue:

1
TEENS &
STATUS
ANXIETY

*Think concerns
about status are
too abstract to
care about?
Read on...*

2
SCHOOL
BREAKS:
NOT JUST
ONE BIG
VACATION

*How to avoid
some of the
“down” that
comes with
“down time”*

3
ASK
MICHAEL...

*When your teen
is caught
cheating....*

*Should I have
sex with him to
keep the
relationship?*



FEATURE ARTICLE

Teens and Status Anxiety

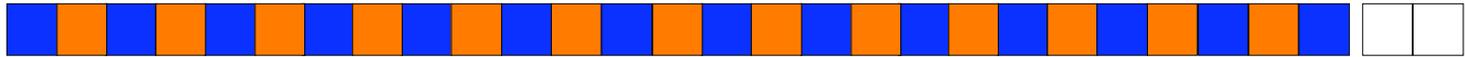
Status anxiety, something so universal that it rarely gets mentioned directly, is a kind of deep anxiety and suffering about what others think of us; it’s about whether we’re judged a success or a failure. Status anxiety is an intensive and pervasive worry about whether the world loves you. Author Alain De Botton notes that “we see ourselves as fortunate only when we have as much as, or more than, those we have grown up with, work alongside, have as friends or *identify with in the public realm.*”

Thanks to the Internet, television, film, radio and mass-market books, teens now have virtually the *entire world* to identify with, when it comes to figuring out whether they’re a winner or loser. It is exceedingly easy now—perhaps more than any other time in history—to see who is judged “successful” and what kinds of goodies are awarded to those people.

The job of a teenager is, especially in

high school, to develop a unique identity. Teens can’t help but care deeply about status because status is about the value accorded to their identity in the world. In my travels across the United States, I have found that many American high school students, especially those in the independent school world, almost regardless of geographic location, socioeconomic status, cultural and ethnic background now feel that they have the *right* to be rich, to have high-profile publicity, celebrity looks and high status jobs. Who can blame our teens? Their mindsets are partly the expression of belief that everyone has equal opportunity to acquire status in America. And the desire to be rich, look great and have high status matters so much to teens because they are in a period of life where they desperately need the approval (and love) of the wider world. As De Botton wrote, “the desire to be successful, to be accorded respect, to

(Continued on page 2...)



Teens and Status Anxiety *(continued from page 1)*



to be noticed and to have what is noticed is hard to escape.”

I’m not saying that having a “good” life through the acquisition of status rewards should or can be avoided. But parents ask me all the time whether the problems of adolescents are unique in the U.S., for example: drugs, binge drinking, Internet addiction and issues of sexuality. They’re not unique--well, not exactly. But it’s worth noting that these problems are starting to become more common in other countries as consumerism becomes a part of those cultural and national psyches. In addition, globalization and the Internet are exporting American culture and values throughout the world.

The roads to misery are legion: violence, poverty, racism, homophobia, sexism, depression and other mental illnesses, the loss of loved ones and so on. These are sometimes unalterable tragedies, through which we become aware of power and powerlessness. It is not hard to suffer or feel miserable if you experience these in your lifetime. But the misery caused by the anxiety over status is something changeable through awareness of its causes alone. The suffering over status is not something necessary, even though it is ubiquitous. Part of the beauty (and difficulty) of parenting teens is that we are still close enough to help them understand that there is more than one way of being “successful” at life. ☒

“...we are still close enough to help them understand that there is more than one way of being ‘successful’ at life.”

School Breaks: Not Just One Big Vacation

Spring Break. Summer. Ski Week. The “Holidays.” Does the mere mention of those phrases get you relaxed...or induce anxiety? While most students and parents alike often celebrate and enjoy “time off” during the year to be with family or friends, one recognized part of “breaks” and vacations is that they often times increase the stress on students and families alike. Students who are struggling academically or personally often go through small or large crises on the “eve” of breaks, as they sense that their usual level of structure and support is waning--that is, school is out. While most students say they're thrilled about having *any* kind of break, even the most well adjusted student can feel the loss of structure and change of time out of school. This can be especially acute during the long Summer break and multi-week Winter break.

sources of comfort and/or sources of extreme stress. Families can unwittingly put tremendous pressure on their members when breaks have to be “all things to all people:” fun, exciting, new, relaxing, restorative *and* productive, time to catch up on homework/exams not completed or to process the intensity of the preceding school time.

Traveling, more concentrated time with family, focus on eating and spending money: all of these things can be a part of the holidays and breaks, and they can be

If you can, consider having plenty of “down time” where everything isn’t scheduled. Have you ever said to your challenging teen, “I can’t believe you’re in such a bad mood during the break! Don’t ruin this for us!” Your teen really doesn’t want to “ruin” the time off—but they may really need your help figuring out why everything isn’t just perfect during their down time. Give yourself a real break during the time your children are out of school...but also try to listen to their sources of tension and hurt as they work over in their own minds and hearts what their previous stretch in school has been like. ☒



Parents and Teens Ask Michael...

Dear Michael,

I am seeking advice on how to handle our dealings with our 17 1/2 year-old daughter in regards to her getting caught cheating on her final. I received a call from the Dean today about her having to appear before some kind of school organization that handles these kinds of violations of the student rules. I'm trying hard to keep this in perspective, but I'm upset and trying to help steer this to some positive outcome. What do you think?

I think the most important thing is to let your daughter take the lead on this, so that she can restore her sense of integrity and feel that she is "making things right." That means nobody else can do it for her. I can understand your wish to "steer" this well for her, but the strongest support you can give is to help her brainstorm the situation and try to come up with her own sense of what needs to be repaired. When someone cheats on an exam, relationships get strained and trust gets broken. How does one respond to breaches of trust, and allow for mistakes but still take responsibility? What does it mean to cheat? What does it mean to "make things right?" To me, the most positive outcome would be for your daughter to have to deeply struggle with the choices she made, to think back on what happened and actually recognize that she had choices, and to try to figure out why she didn't listen to her own voice which probably told her that even though she might need to cut corners, it probably wasn't a good idea, in the long run, to cheat. I bet that voice was there—why didn't she listen to herself? What got in the way?

I think that if you and others support her in thinking and feeling through these questions, she'll know what to do, and will probably come to some of the same conclusions you want her to...but it will be much more powerful if she can find them for herself, rather than being told.



Hey Michael,
I am almost 16 and currently dating

someone in my grade. In the beginning he said he liked me and I told him we should be friends, but afterwards, I realized I should just go ahead and try a new relationship. It's now been 8 weeks since he asked me to be his girlfriend and I'm getting scared and wondering if I'm paranoid or something. Lately he talks to me less on the phone and texts me a lot less. He admits he's "in the mood" a lot less often, and I wonder if there is someone else who is fulfilling those "needs" (you know, sex!). I don't know if I want to have sex with him or not. You know that book, "He's Just Not That Into You"? I'm wondering if that's *our* story now and I should be more open about having sex or something. I'm confused. I don't really feel ready to have sex but how would I know, anyway? Ugh.

That's a short question but a lot in it! I basically think that in general, girls give themselves away—their time, attention, caring, and their sexuality—far too easily. It's usually because they feel pressured to have a boyfriend (or girlfriend) or to feel accepted by others, valued by them and somehow like they "belong." See, this is where I probably sound more like a parent/dad rather than a neutral counselor, huh? Don't worry; I won't give you the "all guys want is sex" speech. I don't think that's true. I think guys want to "belong" and feel valued and appreciated, too, but they're also super conscious of status and of appearing "lame" because they don't have a girlfriend or aren't hooking up. I think sex is usually more pleasurable for the guy at this age just because he is usually less conflicted about it and often more able to separate out being sexual from having strong, intense, loving, bonding-kinds-of-feelings. In my experience, girls usually think that if they have sex with their boyfriends, their boyfriends will appreciate, love and care about them more. But in fact the research on sexual relationships at these ages (14-18) says that relationships usually end earlier the sooner the couple has sex (intercourse) or does other sexual stuff, even if both people think the stuff they do is "no big deal." Try never to trade sex for a "relationship" or to "keep" a guy. It never works for very long, if at all. So, my personal opinion is that being sexual is something you should do only if you really want it and feel ready. That means you have to listen to yourself and only be sexual if you actually feel great being close to the person, and it feels "emotionally" right, and



We receive far more letters than we can ever answer...so please don't take it personally if you don't get a personal response. All submissions for "Ask Michael" should go to: Michael@practicalhelpforparents.com

(Continued on page 4...)



Practical Help for Parents

5665 College Avenue
Suite 340C
Oakland, CA 94618

Phone:
(510) 433-2959

E-Mail:
Michael@
practicalhelpforparents.com

Because There's No
Such Thing as Too
Much Support.

We're on the Web!
Visit us at:
www.PracticalHelpforParents.com

Parents and Teens Ask Michael *(Continued from page 3)*

you feel SAFE, cared about, and ready...and then only if your partner can talk about sexual stuff (for example, safe sex or when to stop...which is ANYTIME you want to, no matter what went on the previous day or minute before) and is totally respectful of you and any boundaries you set. There is a big difference, I think, between being nervous to take a chance at something new and being scared to move deeper into a relationship by being sexual with someone. Of course, you're going to be scared of things you haven't done before, but I just don't think you have to "push" yourself to do things about sex just to "get past the fear" or something. It's not a good enough reason. So, what does all this mean? It means: trust yourself. Want what you want. If you want attention and effort, ask for that—not sex. If you want someone's attention and effort and they don't give it, and they don't seem to think that's a problem, what does your stomach tell you? It should say: yuck. When your stomach says,

"yuck" I think you already know the right answer. IF your stomach says, "oh my gosh, I'm so nervous and happy and excited but scared" then you might want to move ahead (at your own pace) with whatever you're contemplating, be it school, drama, sports or a relationship. The important thing is to take a step back, stop pressuring yourself to decide by any so-called deadline, and take a view of the big picture based on how you feel. If things just don't "add up" then they don't. If things feel easy, light, right, balanced, warm, hopeful, happy, exciting, loving, solid, "worth it," then you're probably headed in the right direction. If things feel ultra-messy, hard, dark, worrisome, nerve-wracking, so complex your head/stomach hurts, scary (without the exciting, curious part) and like you're kind of feeling hopeless or dying for the person to do something they're not, you're probably headed in the wrong direction. ❌

About Our Organization...

Founded by adolescent specialist Michael Y. Simon, MFT, a high school counseling director, noted speaker/educator and psychotherapist in private practice, Practical Help for Parents provides real-life solutions as you parent, support and understand the teens and pre-teens in your life. PHFP offers informative, entertaining, research-based

workshops for students and parents, keynotes and presentations to high school and middle school parents, teachers and administrators; access to online Practical Help Tips, articles, web resources and; program development and consultation to mental health professionals, policymakers and schools/school districts. ❌

Practical Help for Parents

5665 College Avenue
Suite 340C
Oakland, CA 94618

