

When 'A' Equals Anxiety: Student Tips To Depressurize

(by Maria L. Pascucci © 2007 originally published in *The Buffalo News*)

Veronica Bassano, 16, is a model student. She gets good grades; she's involved in lots of extracurricular activities and has big dreams for the future. She plans to apply to an art school for college. Not just any art school though - her heart is set on the Rhode Island School of Design, the University of Chicago or Yale. She knows she has to master the SAT to get accepted into these prestigious colleges and she's prepared to take them as many times as it takes to get the score she desires.

"I'm not looking for perfection, just good enough, better than good," says the Lancaster Central High School junior whose grades currently range from the mid to high 90s. This ambitious teen is under lots of pressure though - the pressure to get good grades, the pressure to compete for college acceptance and the pressure to live up to her parents', her friends' and her own lofty expectations.

All that pressure can be a little overwhelming. When Veronica gets less than an "A" on a test or an essay, she says she has to coach herself to remain positive. She admits that a few times she's started crying. "I tell myself, 'It's OK, you have to go onto the next class and concentrate.'" Veronica enjoys competition and becomes upset if she's not achieving top grades along with her friends. "I feel like I'm not adequate," she says. "I have friends who are at the top of the class so I feel like I'm not up to where they are. Sometimes, I feel not as intelligent or not as good as I should be."

Rachel Delamater, 17, also a junior at Lancaster in Buffalo, New York, agrees. "The class list comes out and shows who's on the top and you try so hard to be in the top 20," she says. "The top 15, all their averages are at least 100." On occasion, Rachel says she lets anxiety get the best of her. Sometimes when she's studying, she'll say, "I don't get this, I'll never remember this for the test. What about the SATs? I'll never get into college. I'll never be successful."

Stressed-out students

These two teens are not alone. According to the 2005-2006 "State of Our Nation's Youth" report findings that were released by the Horatio Alger Association, 41 percent of high school students said that the pressure to get good grades was a major concern. These numbers have increased by 15 percent since 2001.

"Students in all school districts should always be made to feel that their worth is more than just the numbers that they earn," says Lynn Kawa, guidance counsellor for Sweet Home High School in Amherst, New York. If a student is freaking out about one bad grade on a test, she will work with them. "I would initially listen to the student's concerns about the grade," she says. "I would talk with him or her about the overall impact that one grade may have on the final grade for the course, or the student's overall grade point average. With the next assignment or test brings a chance to improve upon the previous grade."

Not every student stresses over every grade though. Rachel believes that being well-rounded helps her to put grades in perspective. "I'm in clubs and play sports," she says. "If I'm not the top science person I can always say, 'I'm good in English.' And with electives, I can focus more on what I like."

"Not everybody is going to get 4.0s because that's impossible," says Denise Clark Pope, author of the 2001 book [Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students](#). Pope works with Stanford University's School of Education in California and has helped to develop community awareness of student stress through a program called SOS: Stressed Out Students: Helping to Improve Health, School Engagement, and Academic Integrity.

Pope challenges students to think about what makes a human being successful. "If getting a perfect GPA is one of those things," she says, "what's been left off that list like being a kind friend, and being a supportive family member, enjoying life, being healthy and taking the time to take care of your body?"

"My English teacher is always telling students not to worry about grades," says Veronica. "If you become a better reader or a better writer, he'll give you a good grade. We have to show him we want to learn." Her AP American History teacher also encourages students to look at the bigger picture. "He says, 'If you fail a test, it's OK, just keep learning.'" Rachel adds: "It's OK to be happy with 80s sometimes because 80s aren't bad."

Tips to Depressurize

If you have three finals coming up and two essays due, you're undoubtedly stressed. But stressing out to the point of stomachaches or insomnia is definitely not cool.

"Exercise is the best stress reliever," says Veronica. She plays sports and walks her dog in the park with her mom in the winter. "That helps a lot," she says. She says that yoga, Pilates or listening to music are also great but so is anything that works for any individual student. "Take an hour or a half hour or however long your schedule permits and do whatever you want," advises Veronica. "Don't worry about anything. Go talk to your friends, use the computer, and watch TV - anything so you're not focused on grades."

If you have a big test to study for, Veronica recommends taking small breaks at 20-minute intervals. "There's a timer on my microwave that I set for 20 minutes and once it goes off I will stop completely even if I'm in the middle of something and I take a five-minute break," she says. "I'll get up and get a glass of water and then I'll set it for another 20 minutes."

For Rachel, it's all about the music. "When I stress out over homework, I just put on a CD and then I'm good and then I go back to it and I'm like, 'All right, this isn't so bad. I can do this.'" For the love of learning Veronica had the option to take other AP classes besides American History but instead chose to take an art elective. "I decided that if I really want to go for art, I should take a class I'm going to like," she says. "If I had taken more AP classes, I wouldn't have had a lunch and my parents told me I needed lunch for the break."

For the love of learning

Many students overload their schedules with AP classes and compete for top grades to get into the best colleges, believing that the college will make all the difference in determining future success. "There's a huge misconception that you need to go to a top-tier college to be successful in life," says Pope. "College is a match, not a trophy. It's the kid, not the school, that makes the difference."

"Everyone stresses college, college, college," Rachel adds. "If you want to take a year off, everyone's like, 'You can't do that.' If you take time off, you're labeled a bum." Although Rachel plans to attend college, she recognizes that college isn't the answer for everyone. "My mom always says, 'Well, not every one is meant for college.'"

For Rachel, learning is all about personal growth. "Everyone always says, 'You're never going to need this when you grow up,'" she says. "So just take it and it's something extra you can know. On 'Jeopardy,' a question will come up and you can be like, 'I know this!' and it will make you feel better about yourself. It's all an opportunity to learn something new."