It's Better to Be Imperfect

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Perfection is unattainable. According to Dr. Allan Schwartz, "The degree to which an individual believes they have failed to reach that perfection, is the degree to which they experience low self esteem, self hatred and depression."[1] Perfection is expressed through body image and stereotypes in the media, friend groups, scoring well in school, and radiating confidence. One major problem with being a perfectionist is never being satisfied and never being happy with yourself. Due to societal factors, youth experience stress and storm to achieve a state of mind that is unobtainable.

The statement, "the minute you walk through the high school doors, everything counts," is repeated in my hometown is far too many times to count. The first test of high school, every club that you join, every person who you network with, every class that you attend, all counts for college admission. This theory is preached to students from the time they finish eighth grade through the time that they graduate high school. Youth are pressured to do as much as they can as best they can, which leads to overwhelming stress and breakdowns.

According to recent surveys published by the American Psychological Association, teenagers experience more stress than adults. Starting at a younger age, teenagers are exposed to mental stress which can cause high blood pressure, a weakened immune system, obesity, heart problems, etc. On a ten point scale, youth reported a constant stress level of a 5.8, while adults only reported a 5.1[2]. A level of 3.6 is determined to be healthy, but levels continue to rise.[3] The steep increase in stress levels among youth is concerning because stress can lead to greater

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[1] Schwartz, A. (2011, June 13). Depression and the Pressure to Conform

[2] Bethune, S. (2014, February 11). Teen Stress Rivals that of Adults.
[3] Sifferlin, A. (2013, February 7). The Most Stressed-Out Generation? Young Adults.

problems such as severe depression, anxiety, and in extreme circumstances, suicide. Psychology Today reports that college students are five to eight times more likely to suffer from depressive symptoms as were teenagers 50 to 60 years ago. [4] Surely during that time period, youth faced similar pressures to be perfect, so why now is it so much more likely to become depressed?

Stress among high school students is mainly caused by succeeding in classes, figuring out what to do following school, and getting accepted into college. However, once in college, students find different forms of stress. After adjusting to the transition of college, a major stress factor, students often find some relief. However, they still juggle changing sleep patterns, new eating habits, an increased workload and added responsibilities. Whether they now have to do laundry or go grocery shopping, youth take on more adult tasks. Many students also take on part time or full time jobs to aid them in paying for college. In this, they have their classes, extracurriculars, professional development and leadership, as well as their jobs. They take on so many roles and must, at the same time, establish who they are as a person.

Forming a new identity or re-establishing an existing one is a crucial developmental task for young people. Identity development is a priority to adolescents. They experiment with different roles and some jump between social groups. In high school especially, students must determine with whom they want to be associated. As they try on new masks, they can decide which image and which social group best fits them. From the punks, to the preps, to the populars, and everyone in between, everybody finds a place. In college, many students will start fresh and create a new image for themselves. By joining a new community, they are able to step back and reevaluate what is important. As a result, students grow up a lot during their first year at college.

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[4] Hales, E. (2014, July 21). Understanding and responding to the increase in teen depression.

Another developmental stage for youth that can cause anxiety is intimacy. According to Erik Erikson, the goal for adolescents is to find intimacy in their relationships. The task is referred to as intimacy versus isolation. Youth experiment with different types of relationships and determine who they most like to spend time with. Students develop romantic interests and can explore different sexualities. The end result, according to Erikson, should all be the same-intimacy. Youth who fail to find relationships and build lasting friendships will remain isolated and alone. Most perceptions of successful relationships trickle into society through the media.

Some critics point to the media as the cause of youth depression, claiming that it creates unrealistic standards[5]. The media impractically defines beauty and warps teenager's perception of how they should look. Famous stars like Kylie Jenner and Kim Kardashian create standards for girls that shouldn't exist. Celebrities go to unhealthy measures to look a certain way. When the media features these people and calls them "beautiful," teenagers begin thinking that they should embody this person in order to feel beautiful themselves. Children as young as five years old express dissatisfaction with their bodies.[6] Their self consciousness only increases with time. Girls try to change themselves to look like the stars, and boys get the false impression that they should look for girls with these features. When girls are unable to achieve a certain look, or can't afford a certain lip care product, they experience negative thoughts about themselves and their image. According to a survey published by Dove, women report that their conception of beauty is shaped by women in the public domain and social media.[7] A major issue is that social media is always present; it's relentless. It causes youth to take their school problems home with them and take their home problems to school. There is no escape.

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[5] Pittman, T. (2015, April 04). Young Girls Explain Why Beauty Standards are so Impossible.
[6] ibid
[7] Katz, Brigit. (2015, April 03). New Study Shows Impact of Social Media on Beauty Standards.

In addition to the unrealistic body images that teenagers struggle to conform to, there are stereotypes that they feel they must live up to. In most television programs, the lead "masculine" man is a top executive in a top corporation, a doctor, or lawyer, thus setting the precedent that if men do not have a top, high paying job, they are not masculine. [8] The stereotypes are even worse for women. "Feminine" women are thin, buxom, strong but not muscular, and dependant. One noticeable difference between masculine and feminine stereotypes is that masculinity revolves around success and femininity revolves around attractiveness and beauty. There are also ideal relationship standards set by the media for both for friends and intimate relationships that aren't accurate. Young people who are inexperienced may create high standards that they are unable to live up to, thus causing hopelessness. Commercials also subconsciously persuade watchers to conform to a certain look. If teenagers are unable to accomplish this, they feel like an outsider.

In high school, many students struggle with conformity pressure. It is not okay to be different. Students must constantly change their style, hair, clothes, etc. in order to keep up with the in-crowd. However, as students attempt to conform, the norm continuously evolves. Youth rely on those around them and on their environment to make decisions about who they are. They crave peer attention and value what their peers think of them. Peer pressure and influence, consumerism, and popularity all dictate how teenagers interact day to day. There are many dangers that are caused by each of these factors. Perhaps one of the most prevalent consequences is groupthink. Groupthink discourages individuality. Nobody wants to raise their hand to offer a differing opinion from the rest of the group. Once teenagers fall victim to groupthink, they stop making their own decisions, they focus too much on what others think, and they allow the media

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[8] Schwartz, A. (2011, June 13). Depression and the Pressure to Conform

to control who they are and what they look like.[9] When decisions and judgements are based on what others think, there is no sense of individuality and people lose sense of who they are. According to everybody else, there is always something you can do better.

Teenagers do not know how to correctly handle stress. Psychologists are concerned that teens are unaware of the impacts of stress due to the fact that they are more likely to report that stress has little or no impact on their body or physical health. [10] 54% of youth claim that they see no difference in their health when they are stressed versus when they are not. However, as people mature they realize that there are mental and physical harms that stress creates, as 61% of adults report that it does make a difference. Stress certainly impacts physical health, which is why exercise is labelled as the number one stress reliever. However, 37% of adults and 20% of youth do not exercise. [11] As youth struggle to find outlets to reduce their stress, more complex issues are brewing such as depression, anxiety, and even suicide.

Unfortunately, suicide is becoming more and more common. As stress builds and teenagers can not find relief, they crumble. Doctors recommend that stressed out youth exercise, sleep, talk to people, find a balance, and find other ways to enjoy themselves. It is necessary that youth treat the symptoms of stress before they have to deal with more complex mental health issues. Schools need to acknowledge that students are struggling with the courseload, the pressures of succeeding, and the expectation that students play multiple roles. The images and stereotypes of both men and women in the media need to be redefined in order for the average person to have self confidence and for them to believe in their own capabilities. There should not

[9] Kehl, K. (2008). Conformity Attacking Today's Youth.
[10] Allecia, J. (2014, February 11). Teens More Stressed Out Than Adults, Survey Shows
[11] Bethune, S. (2014, February 11). Teen Stress Rivals that of Adults.

be one mold for society that everybody is expected to conform to and those who do not, should

not be considered outcasts. Most of all, it needs to be made clear to youth and to society that

perfection does not exist. It is unattainable. Maybe then, there would be less stress on young

people to work towards an unachievable goal. Maybe then, youth could accept themselves as

who they are and reduce the likelihood that they become depressed. After all, it is better to be

imperfect.

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