

Acknowledging Anxiety

A principal -- who is also a veteran swimmer — suffers an anxiety attack and the experience leads him to reflect on how to help students recognize their anxieties and become more comfortable with the unknown.

by **Alan Stel** (Principal, Penticton Secondary)

Anxiety is real and stress has always existed. Speaking openly about our fears is the first step toward helping us manage them.

Both my parents immigrated to Canada from Holland when they were teenagers after the Second World War. They were loving but not overly indulgent. If we were sick they needed evidence. They were a product of the times. Their families had very little growing up. They worked hard. My mother was one of 11 children. There wasn't much time for complaining nor much tolerance for it. Times have changed, although a lingering part of that generational attitude resides in our common beliefs.

In schools today, educators are speaking more openly about stress and investing more time and energy into understanding and supporting anxiety disorders. I can recall my parents speaking, in hushed tones, about friends and colleagues in our community who had suffered from what they referred to as a nervous breakdown. Back in those days I found this term ambiguous. I can remember asking my mother, "What's a nervous breakdown?" The answer was always vague and unsettling — mostly because it was unlike any other physical ailment that I knew. The pathology was not like the flu or a broken bone or even a ruptured appendix. It was not discussed openly and there was also some shame attached to admitting to

these feelings.

That changed for me this past summer when I participated in a four-kilometer open water swimming race. I have been a swimmer my entire life. I have swum in all kinds of water and all kinds of conditions. I respect water and I love swimming. Before the race I was advised to acclimatize myself to the lake and to my newly-purchased wetsuit. Perhaps it was arrogance or pride but I dismissed the advice. The week before the race I swam the full course. Ten minutes into my swim and breathing hard, I was overwhelmed by a growing sense of agitation. This sensation grew along with an ever-expanding sense of panic. I knew my feeling wasn't a rational reaction. In spite of the buoyancy of my suit, I felt constricted and frightened. Suddenly, the water felt sinister and foreboding. The shore appeared distant and inaccessible. My breathing was laboured and short and I felt like I was gasping and flailing. I remember asking myself, "Why am I doing this?" I thrashed about for what felt like a long time, but in fact it was possibly closer to 30 seconds. As quickly as it arrived my panic subsided along with my breathing. I fell back into the rhythm of the swim and focused on controlling my breathing. I experienced

subsequent "attacks" varying in intensity throughout the duration of my swim. Maybe it was the tightness of the suit, but there was no apparent reason for my reaction. By the time I finished the practice swim I was seriously considering swimming without the wetsuit during the race the following week.

I have experienced this kind of fear before when I was much younger. I remember having night terrors, which from my recollection closely resembled my experience in the lake. Terror defies description and reason. It is triggered by an instinctive primeval fight or flight response to a real or perceived threat.

Stress is often at the core of this response. More often than not, the instinctive reaction is to exit quickly or even to freeze on the spot. People reach a breaking point and feel like they can no longer cope. They feel depleted. Escape is the only option.

A person's predisposition to an anxiety disorder is attributed primarily to genetics and life experiences. Everyone experiences stress. For students it can take the form of concerns about grades and homework to stresses related to family, friendships, and relationships. Bullying and peer pressure can also play a role. Getting one's driver's license, applying for jobs, even dating can generate stress and trigger anxiety.

Our high school counseling department is inundated with these kinds of referrals, and most of the clinical information contained in this message comes directly from the resources that they provide our students.

The good news is that anxiety and stress aren't physically harmful and can be managed in a variety of ways from calm breathing to getting plenty of sleep, eating healthy food, regular exercise, and avoiding drugs and alcohol. Other more specific suggestions come from the AnxietyBC website


<http://www.anxietybc.com/> They challenge students to rethink their worries and negative thoughts, to learning how to recognize when they are anxious and to train themselves how to let thoughts go. They also instruct students on how to be comfortable with the experience of not knowing what's next and how to make uncertainty friendly and familiar. It also recommends using visualization techniques and gradually exposing oneself to things that you fear. Finally, using muscle relaxation techniques, telling yourself helpful things, and teaching oneself to avoid overthinking things enables students to take control of their stresses and anxieties.

Anxiety is insidious. Testing and reporting periods for students can be as anxiety provoking as my swimming ex-

perience was for me. Fortunately, the techniques identified above are just as effective in minor instances as they are in serious crises and for panic attacks. No one is immune to stress.

Anxiety is real and stress has always existed. Speaking openly about our fears is the first step toward helping us manage them. My parents and my grandparents undoubtedly experienced stress. Internalizing their insecurities was critical to their survival in post war Europe and North America where there was little time for reflection. Stress evolves and social emotional survival is as real now for our students as putting food on the table was for 11 children. Understanding the complexities related to anxiety management enables all of us to speak more openly and honestly

about our mental health and prepare us to lead happy balanced lives.

Right up until the moment of the race last summer I employed many of the strategies mentioned above to manage my fear and reduce my anxiety. I wore the wetsuit and exceeded my own expectations. I did not experience a stressful encounter during the race. In fact, I am registered to swim the race again next summer. These techniques really work. There is nothing heroic about denying these feelings and internalizing our fears. Discussing our feelings liberates our anxiety; however, when anxiety becomes unmanageable the modern day shift toward speaking openly and candidly about our anxiety makes seeking professional help the obvious and natural choice. 

Friday Forum February 20

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Breakfast will be available from 8:00 to 8:45 am • Lunch is included

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Registration: <http://bit.ly/1wqLxd9>