

## **Healthy Habits: Managing Springtime Stress**

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I recently asked Linda Christensen, Coordinator of Health Services, to write an article on the prevalence of behaviors in the Spring that indicate high levels of stress. In the following article, she focuses our attention on how to effectively manage this time of the year.

Spring, the time of year when April Showers bring May flowers, winter gives way to sunny skies and warmer weather and Bermuda grass returns to lush shades of green. A time when young people long to don flip-flops and shorts and spend lazy days outside soaking up the sun (with SPF 50, of course). Yet in a school setting, spring is accompanied by second semester demands, pending deadlines and “dreaded” finals. Students find themselves torn between the need to be consistently present in the academic setting and the desire to be outside having long awaited fun. While spring ushers in new beginnings, hope and excitement, in middle school students it is often accompanied with stress, anxiety and frustration.

At Holland Hall, spring for middle school students is in many ways the same as for students across the nation. Developmentally, our students are experiencing similar challenges as other students their age and find themselves faced with end-of-year requirements and associated stressors. Without the advantages associated with a fully developed pre-frontal cortex, the ability to exercise critical thinking, remain committed to long-term goals, and focus on needs versus wants is taxing. Cognizant of the challenges of 4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade students in April and May, our teachers skillfully craft learning experiences that stage higher order thinking and support neurological growth. Still, coping with the demands of studying, homework, projects and finals is difficult for anyone. With that in mind, it behooves us as parents and educators to consider the harmful effects of excess stress on children’s minds and bodies, and to incorporate research supported methods for reducing its potential damage.

Prayer, meditation and exercise are known for their stress relieving benefits. That is why we endeavor in the Middle School to offer and teach these vital strategies to our students. Chapel, P.E. and sports are an integral part of our curriculum and are never more important than in the spring. Providing young people with the opportunity to lower their levels of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, while increasing levels of vital endorphins and neurotransmitters, is a responsibility we take seriously. Teachers and coaches endeavor to enable students to participate in both academic and sports related activities outside as much as possible. The combination of fresh air, sunshine and exercise yields immense physical and mental rewards, and allows students more time to be where they want to be.

Social support, healthy relationships and maintaining of boundaries are also helpful in the fight to maintain a sense of calm in the storm. For young people, a natural consequence of stress is typically to get less sleep, eat more junk food and make unhealthy behavioral choices. That is why it is our duty as parents and educators to set boundaries and provide positive lifestyle examples for these developing young adults.

Without adequate sleep and nutrition, our students are even more susceptible to the negative effects of springtime stress.

Spring in the Middle School truly is a time for hope and new beginnings. With end-of-the-school year festivities coupled with the anticipation of summertime just around the corner, it is imperative that students and adults alike make a concerted effort to manage their time and balance their lifestyles so everyone enjoys, rather than merely survives, the final weeks of school.