

[Transcript] Plain English with Derek Thompson / Why the Cult of Achievement in Schools Is Making People Miserable

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Ben Stollack, and Craig Krolbeck on the Ringer NFL Draft Show,
where we talk about all things NFL Draft,
and, more importantly, how to fix your mediocre team.
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Today's episode is about how we think about success,
and how our school systems might be teaching us
the wrong lessons about achievement.
Last year, two professors at Korea University,
Dirk Bethman, and Robert Rudolph,
were doing a survey of international happiness data,
and they uncovered a bizarre, previously unreported finding.
Rich countries often have sadder adolescents
than middle-income or poor countries.
This finding runs counter to one of the most fundamental rules of economics.
Adults in richer countries tend to have higher subjective well-being
than those in poorer countries.
This is true almost any way you measure it.
It's true across time, as a country gets richer,
its citizens get richer.
It's true across space.
Richer countries tend to be happier than poorer countries.
But Bethman and Rudolph said there's actually a paradox
of wealthy nations hiding behind this obvious fact.
Advanced economies seem to have happier adults,
but less happy teens.
How could that be?
Well, to make a long story short,
Bethman and Rudolph ran a series of regressions,
and they found that the association between high GDP
and low happiness among the youth was decently strong.
But the strongest correlation among countries
was between school competition,
like higher standardized test scores, and teen anxiety.
That is, if you take two countries that are basically the same
in every way you can think of,
they've got the same GDP, same inequality,
life expectancy, air pollution.
The country with the higher test scores
and the more competitive academic environment
will have more anxious and more depressed teenagers.
Now, maybe you could argue

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that this is nothing for us to worry about.
You could say, look, rich countries
have more complex economies.
More complex economies require more rigorous
and intense education.
More rigorous education puts more pressure on kids.
But it also mints smarter and richer kids.
So in this interpretation,
adolescents go through a kind of happiness slingshot
where stress early on pulls back their happiness
in the short term, but then it springs them
toward huge wealth in the long run.
But maybe that happiness slingshot
is not the best way to think about this.
Maybe something has happened to modern education culture,
to our culture of success
that is simply berserk and bad
and causing completely unjustifiable stress
among young people.
We are, as this podcast is documented many times,
in the midst of a huge increase
in teen anxiety and depression.
40 years ago, though,
the most anxious kids in America
were in low-income households.
Anxiety, you could say, was more of a material economic story.
Today, it's flipped.
It's the children of upper middle-class
and high-income families
that are ground zero of the surging anxiety epidemic.
What is going on at our schools
that is making teenagers miserable?
Today's guest is the psychologist
and best-selling author, Dr. Lisa DeMore.
We talk about what went wrong at American schools,
why parents and teachers and colleges
need to change the way we think about success in America,
who we should blame for the rise of teen anxiety,
and who we shouldn't blame.
I'm Derek Thompson.
This is Plain English.
Dr. Lisa DeMore, welcome to the podcast.
Thank you so much for having me.

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So first, tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

So I'm a clinical psychologist.

I've practiced for nearly 30 years.

I specialize in caring for teenagers,

and I also write about teenagers,

write frequently for The New York Times.

I'm the author of three New York Times bestsellers.

I contribute to CBS News.

I do quite a bit for UNICEF,

and I have a podcast to ask Lisa,

The Psychology of Parenting.

That's a busy life.

As a clinician, as a writer, as a talker,

have you seen school anxiety on the rise

in the last few years?

Absolutely, and it's interesting

when we think about the last few years,

a lot has happened in the last few years.

So there's both what happened in the pandemic

and then what we're seeing post-pandemic

in terms of the mood around school.

And who have you seen it rise for?

I just wanna be clear if this conversation

is gonna be disproportionately about children

of the upper middle class and above,

disproportionately about girls versus boys,

give me a sense of the population

that you've seen school anxiety specifically rise for

in the last few years or decades.

So largely when I'm hearing about a ton of anxiety

about school, we're talking about upper middle

and upper class populations.

The anxiety itself takes a lot of different forms.

There are kids who are so anxious,

they are not going to school.

And I will say that school truancy

or chronic absenteeism or whatever you wanna call it,

those numbers are through the roof.

And that's actually a true across a wide range of districts.

But the reasons for that are different

depending on the socioeconomics of the district.

The other form of anxiety that I'm hearing

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quite a bit about is this sense of they lost time or the behind and there's this need to catch up. And I am hearing the loudest voices of that anxiety come from districts and schools that have traditionally been very high performing, very ambitious students, very ambitious families. And when you say that you've seen this kind of school anxiety change over time, can you give me a sense of the shape that this kind of school anxiety takes? What are kids talking about when they talk about being obsessively stressed about their academic performance or the degree to which they're gonna get into a new college? So it's college, right? I mean, you said the magic word. When kids are worrying about school, the kinds of kids we're talking about, the demographics we're talking about, they're talking about a very small number of incredibly selective colleges that they have their eye trained on, that they feel tremendous pressure to try to gain achievement or gated mission there. And I was actually just yesterday at a district, a public school district, but in a very academic universe, very high performing in many ways. And what the administrators were there were saying is it has gone up so many notches since the pandemic. Kids are now like, I need more APs. I need to add on more than I used to do. And they said something also very striking about what it means for test optional to become such a bigger part of the admissions landscape. Because then what they were saying is, for the kids who actually test well, it actually puts more pressures on their test scores because the only other kids who are going to be submitting scores are also kids who test well. So kids who have in the past felt like they had some real strength to bring to the admissions process or a leg up into the admissions process,

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now feel hamstrung by the thing
that used to feel like their advantage.

When did this happen?

I'm interested in placing this phenomenon in history.

Do you have a sense of a decade or a period of time

where we really started to see lift off

in this new kind of school college anxiety?

So what I would probably locate it around,

I don't think that there's one moment

where it suddenly blew up.

I think it sort of ratcheted up slowly over time.

But I think one of the factors that has driven it

is an awareness of rankings,

schools being aware of rankings,

those rankings being calculated in part

based on how many students they admit

in terms of percentage.

And so then selective colleges doing things

to cultivate a great number of applicants

and drive down their admission rate.

And I think that that has been ratcheting up slowly over time.

And we've suddenly found ourselves in a place,

not suddenly, but it's one of those things

like it happens slowly and then all at once, right?

It's sort of slowly and then all at once,

you can't get into a school just because you're amazing, right?

I mean, it used to be the case

that kids could really set their heart on a place

and feel like they had a decent chance

if they had the resources around them and within them

to make an incredible application to put forward.

Rationally now, no one should suggest

to a high school student, however spectacular

and gifted and privileged that young person is,

that they can know that they will get

into the college of their choice.

There was an amazing paper called The Rug Rat Race,

which was published by Gary Raimi and Valerie Raimi,

economist at the University of California, San Diego,

that I've leaned on when thinking about

when this cult of achievement really saw a lift off.

And they placed it in the 1990s

looking at time use data among parents.

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They found that starting in the middle of the 1990s, you suddenly saw this huge increase in the time that especially college educated parents spent with their older teenagers. Spent with them, it seems, because they were extremely anxious about them getting into college and were hovering over them constantly to make sure that they were checking the 1,000 boxes necessary to have a perfect resume to get into college. They say in the abstract, quote, finding no empirical support for standard explanations such as selection or income effects, we argue instead that increased competition for college admissions may be an important factor, end quote. So we're gonna talk a little bit about school culture itself in a second, but it seems that we should probably just hold on to college here a bit.

I remember when I got into Northwestern, the acceptance rate was about 28, 29%.

I graduated in 2008, not so long ago, or at least maybe I'm lying to myself, not so long ago, I feel like.

Now I believe the admissions rate at Northwestern is around 10% or under.

I mean, the degree to which these schools have become more competitive without increasing the number of seats has created this stunning amount of status anxiety not just among students, but also among their parents to ensure that they feel like they are reproducing their status the next generation.

Do you feel like this sort of increase in the desire to obtain status combined with the fixed number of elite college seats is really just a huge, huge driver of the school anxiety that we're seeing right now?

I think so.

I think I would frame it a little differently.

Less about status, more about scarcity.

I think that parents are terribly worried about what the future holds for their young people.

And I think, of course, nobody wants to send

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a young person out into the world thinking they have less a shot of succeeding than the parents themselves did. And as we have so many things around us that feel uncertain or worrisome, I think that what parents can pay attention to is where you're going to college, right? I mean, I think it just becomes something to focus on, something to lean on the kid in that moment about when there's so many free-floating anxieties and so much uncertainty. And so I think that that sense of the world is less predictable. We cannot be sure that you're gonna have a better life than we were able to give you as a family. So let's focus on where you go to college. Let's use that, even though we know it's actually not true, but let's focus on that as the thing that's gonna launch you into a happy adulthood. And then as adults become increasingly aware of the level of scarcity they're dealing with and their kids are dealing with, then I think, of course, you're gonna see more involvement. The other thing that I would say as someone who has a daughter who's in college and who watched her go through the college application process in the fall of 2021 is it's a really complicated process, actually. When I did it in the fall of 1987, it was me and my typewriter filling out forms one by one. It was inefficient, but it was simple, actually. The Common App, you have to have like a PhD to work the Common App. It is unbelievably complex. And a lot rides on that. And so I have, as someone who has gone through it recently, more empathy for the level of involvement that the parents bring in and a broader awareness that some of it may be pressure, but a lot of it is actually support that the young person is trying to fill out these, this very tricky application. And it's hard.

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And so then you love your kid
and you're there to try to be useful
and sort it through with them.
And one thing I was not prepared for,
and I actually really didn't do the book of the work,
is how much work the college application process
creates for the family.
And it's not like we were doing anything unusually extensive
by way of support.
It's just a lot of work.
It seems really important to me to think about the fact
that colleges are sending a signal to parents and to students.
It says there's a lot of work.
There's a lot of boxes that have to be checked
and a lot of files that have to be uploaded
to apply to college because we believe
that we have to see the quote, full person who you are.
So you see schools now for a variety of reasons, I think,
turning away from the SAT, ACT,
and saying, no, we want to base our application process
on a more well-rounded sense of who these students are.
But one of my fears about that,
and I'm not even a huge SAT defender,
but it's when you know that college is largely
about passing one test, you'll cram for that one test.
And that might make for a few sleepless weeks.
But when that same school says your assessment
is based on an infinitude of talents,
that's a classic suggestion for ambitious students
to spend 100 hours a week cultivating as many resume
stuff as possible, and then for their parents
to spend 100 hours a week trying to funnel
that young lifetime of accomplishments into a common app.
Am I making sense here?
It seems like there's a toxic message
that might be sent from colleges,
even if it comes from a good place,
when they are simply forcing students to be excellent
at so many different things and saying,
we need to see this kind of Renaissance man excellence
before accepting you into our establishment.
I think that's true.
I mean, I think that moving away from testing, which

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has the upside of probably making schools more accessible to students who did not have access to these schools, and I hope we're bringing a much broader range of students to schools that can be life-changing for them. But anytime you change the system, kids who were good at the old system now have to figure out the new system. And these are kids who are midway through high school with commitments, with things they have tried to be ambitious about. And yes, I mean, there's no question in my mind, if colleges widen the lens of what we're going to look at, these earnest kids who really care and who take it seriously, and also who run in packs and are very aware of what their peers are doing, will feel pressed to expand even further what they bring forward. And then they run into the reality, which is they've done all this stuff for college, right? There's all this conversation about like, I'm doing it for college, I'm doing it for college. I think adults often confirm or promote the idea that, yes, all you're doing all these things will help you with college. And then very often they get up to the brink of admissions or post admissions, and adults have to say, you know, it's all kind of random. It's all kind of random. Like, you actually don't have that much say. And I feel like it's such a bait and switch for high school seniors where we're like, do all this stuff. It'll help you for college. And then we're like, we're not, we're not. But we wait until it doesn't go well to say that. It's also got to be so psychologically discombobulating to have oriented your life around this moment of college admissions, only to hear at the pearly white gates that it's actually a crapshoot. What you thought was a linear meritocracy is just a roll of the dice. That's got to be a very psychologically discombobulating moment for these young people to go through. I want to talk about some of your writing, your research around school culture as it exists today.

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I had a really interesting conversation with Richard Reeves, who wrote a book about how boys are falling behind at school, not just in the US, but all over the world.

In 2019, in the New York Times, you wrote an essay called Why Girls Beat Boys at School and Lose to Them at the Office.

And it includes this observation, I think, is very germane to our purposes.

You write, quote, from elementary school through college, girls are more disciplined about their schoolwork than boys. They study harder and get better grades.

Girls consistently outperform boys academically.

And yet men nonetheless hold a staggering 95% of the top positions in the largest public companies.

What if those same habits that propel girls to the top of their class, their hyper conscientiousness about homework, for example, also hold them back in the workforce?

Lisa, unpack this a bit.

What do you mean?

OK, so first thing that I have to say and that I also say elsewhere in that essay is there are a lot of cultural forces way beyond what girls and women can control that keep them out of the C-suite.

So we've talked about those a lot.

I'm just bringing across a new one that I has not, I think, been at the center of our thinking.

And so one of the things I have observed as someone who cares for teenagers clinically is that girls are as a group, and of course, broad strokes, doesn't apply to every kid, often very, very, very diligent and frankly inefficient students, that they will work way harder than they need to to get maybe an A. They will go for the top top A, even if the grade report only registers an A.

It doesn't show what number is behind it.

Whereas in contrast, boys is a group, and their parents will attest to this often, and their teachers will attest to this, are vastly more tactical about school.

They actually, this is just speculation, they game more than girls do, and I

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think that gaming mentality often helps them in school.
And what I mean by this, and I quoted in the piece,
is that one of my friends was like, oh yeah, my sons,
they mastered the art of the 89.5.
They was the absolutely straight,
the absolutely they have to do to get a grade that's
going to round up to an A. So the argument I make in this essay
is that boys use school, again, broad strokes,
I know this is not every kid, to actually figure out
how far they can get on their brains,
and then what degree of extra effort is required.
And in the process, I think build a lot of confidence
in their skill set.
Whereas girls, if we do not interfere
with their very diligent approach to school,
come to rely very, very heavily on their capacity for work,
and they often show an extraordinary capacity for work.
But they don't figure out what they
could do if they hardly try, because they never hardly try.
That is absolutely fascinating.
And my life is n equals 1, and it's not representative.
And you're talking about averages, not
universal traits of boys versus girls.
You've made that clear.
I just want to make it abundantly clear to anyone
who says, well, my girl has mastered the art of the 89.5,
and my boy is up at 2 AM finishing his English homework.
You just reminded me.
I have a friend who I know listens to this show.
I won't call him out by name, but he
was the master of the 92.5.
That was the cutoff between A minus and A in our school.
And me and my other friends were just
astonished at the degree to which he seemed to find a way
to like, to the very minute, did not work 60 seconds longer
than that, which was necessary to get a 92.5 in every class.
And so was a straight A student.
There was no question about it, but spent so much of his time.
Like, it seemed like spent as little of his time
possible as was necessary in order to notch that grade.
Absolutely fascinating.
It is interesting that if school is,
and I think I'm using your language here,

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a confidence factory for our sons,
but a competence factory for our daughters,
how do we change that?
How could parents and teachers stop
praising inefficient overwork even when that's
resulting in good grades?
So first of all, parents and teachers
have to resolve to do this.
And we tend not to.
And I would say even in a coed setting,
in an all-gender setting, I think
often teachers can feel like they're
sort of riding the boys to do the work.
They're not going to interfere with the incredibly
disciplined girls.
They're going to let them do their thing.
So one of the things that I think is really essential
is that the adults who are around any student,
we can actually drop gender here,
any student who develops a fantastic work ethic
and then starts to be what I will call hyper conscientious,
working harder than is necessary in terms
of the mastery they need or the grade
that they are looking for.
It's critical that we start saying to them, OK, look,
you have showed us you've got to work ethic, that is fantastic.
The next evolution in your work as a student
is to become strategic, to figure out
when you need to floor it, when you can coast, right?
And this gets back to kids taking a lot of APs,
kids who load up their plates.
There's still more on their plates than should be,
but one small area where we can bring some relief
is to help them be tactical and help them not overwork.
Now, I will tell you, I did this as a mother.
I have two daughters, and I was that hyper conscientious,
wanted perfect grades all the time student,
and I was doing this work when my older daughter was
in the seventh grade, and she a very conscientious student.
And I started to really push her to say, look,
what do you have in this class?
How much do you like this class?
If you feel like you've got the grades you want,

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and you can just sort of calculate from here, certainly I encourage that.

And so what I will say is, it was still very demanding for her through high school, but I actually sat there and watched my daughter, my hyper conscientious daughter calculate, she would say like, mom, I need a 74 on my next physics test in order to keep my A.

Okay, true confessions.

I regarded this with equal measure, pride, and horror.

It was really one of those things I was like, right?

I think, so I think it's a lot of the parents getting past themselves or past how they themselves did school, and really being much more realistic about the demands on young people, about them needing to find a through line to try to get some sleep in the midst of all of this, and watching out for when they are doing more than is necessary.

Right, you mentioned sleep, and I do want to double back

and establish some to be sure's, like to be sure,

I think excellence is a virtue, to be sure.

I think schools should be stressful

because people should care about their grades,

and to be sure, and I know you agree with this

because I might be mildly plagiarizing you here,

stress is good, from more to the point it's inevitable

and finding ways to harness emotions

that are inevitable is good.

But I think optimizing for those virtues

can squeeze out other behaviors that are essential.

It's almost like, you know, maybe you can help me

like coin the concept here, but it's like,

it's important to teach something like

minimum viability excellence, right?

Like, what is viable to be excellent

in a way that doesn't incur the cost

of squeezing out other behaviors

that are really critical for wellbeing?

You mentioned the watch word, it's sleep.

Let's finally talk about sleep specifically.

I'll just give you the floor here

because we had a pre-interview where you said

you think this is a skeleton key to this whole situation

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of student stress and teenage anxiety.
Where does sleep fit in the picture?
So where sleep fits into the picture
is that it's kind of boring as a topic.
And so I think we often go looking for other explanations
and other things to consider.
But what we know from the scientific side
is that sleep is the glue that holds human beings together.
We know that teenagers, high schoolers need
about nine hours of sleep a night.
That's the biological requirement,
which is way more than most people think.
And we know they're averaging around seven.
And we also know that when we chart rising
mental health concerns and worsening sleep,
those charts basically lay perfectly
on top of one another.
They match almost perfectly.
So for me, when I think about what do young people need,
one way to construct it that actually simplifies this is,
well, they need nine hours of sleep.
What gets in the way of the nine hours of sleep?
And then really trying to address that question
because it's a variety of things
depending on the kid you're talking about.
For some, their plate may be over full.
For some, they may be up on their phone all night.
For some, they may have two jobs to help support their family
in addition to caring for,
trying to stay on top of their schoolwork.
But it becomes a path.
And what you said about stress and optimizing,
here's a way to think about it.
One of the best metaphors for thinking about stress
as a growth giving phenomenon
in terms of intellectual capacity
or emotional capacity is to really liken it
to strength training, like physical strength training.
That when we go to the gym and we intend to build muscle,
you actually have to lift weights that are not pleasant.
It doesn't feel good.
If it feels good, you're doing it wrong, right?
So we know, and that's that idea of excellence and pressing

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and pushing and doing something beyond one's comfort zone.
But in strength training,
the only way it really works is if it's coupled with rest,
if it's coupled with the capacity to recover.
If you just work out in the gym,
lift on the same muscles day after day,
you will get burnout, you will get injury.
We know you don't do that.
So when we think about young people
and we think about growth and achievement,
we should really think about it in the same way,
which is we actually want school to be demanding.
We don't want the work to be easy.
We don't want them doing volumes of work
that they could just dash off
and it doesn't actually build their capacity.
But in order for that to be optimally growth-giving,
it has to be coupled with the capacity to recover.
And one of the easiest ways to index recovery in young people
is how much are they sleeping?
Are you looking for a perfect match? Don't worry,
it's not about online dating, it's about online business.
A perfect match? Shopify.
On the global revolutionary All in One Commerce platform,
you create your online shop by hand.
Shopify covers all sales channels, new target groups,
more possibilities, just sell.
Test Shopify free of charge
and bring your business idea to the world successfully.
You pointed me in our back and forth before the show to a 2017 study
that was really, really interesting.
This is called, for those playing along at home,
adolescent sleep duration, variability,
and peak levels of achievement and mental health.
And it found that the optimal level of sleep time
for peak academic performance,
this is correlative,
so it's not necessarily causal,
but the sleep time that was associated with peak academic performance
was seven hours and 30 minutes.
The amount of sleep that was associated with peak well-being
was, to your very point, nine hours.
An hour and a half difference every single night.

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And the trade-off was worse for well-being than it was for GPA, which is to say, if you get that extra hour and a half of sleep, you lose a little bit of GPA or it's associated with a small step back in GPA, but a larger step up in well-being. I thought this was a usefully complex finding that pointed to the idea that there really may be, for many people, a bit of a trade-off here, that we all know that there have been nights in our life where if we went to sleep at 11 at PM, we would have felt better in the morning, just in terms of our physiological self. But also, if we went to bed at 11 PM, we would have been effed for the test the following day because we were only 50% through our studying. Like, there is this trade-off. So maybe speak to the degree to which, when you're talking to clients, whether it's students or parents, how you coach people through this very real trade-off. So it's interesting, because one of the better ways to do it actually is in a classroom with a bunch of kids. Because one thing that happens, especially in high schools that have a lot of ambitious kids, is there's a phrase that gets thrown around, I don't love it, which is the stress Olympics, where kids seem to be competing with one another about how little sleep they got, right? So it takes on a life of its own among the students. And who knows if they're actually calculating very accurately, but there can be sort of like, you slept five hours, I slept four, right? And so they can egg each other on in bad habits. Again, I'm not gonna lay this at the feet of teenagers. We created the systems around them that have required or landed them in this spot. But one of my favorite things to do, and I often get to be in schools and be with high schoolers, is I ask students like, how many hours are you sleeping?

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And I'll throw out different,
who's sleeping less than five,
who's sleeping six, seven, eight.
And often there are a couple of kids in the room
who are pulling down nine hours.
And often those kids are actually getting
very good grades and everybody knows it.
And so one of the fun things,
so what I'm talking about is the kids
who have figured out how to thread this needle, right?
They do exist in schools,
but they fly a little low
because they don't seem to be winning
in the stress Olympics, right?
They're actually getting a decent night's sleep.
And so one of the most delightful things to do,
and I would encourage schools and educators to do this,
is to shine a spotlight on those kids
and they tell us how you do this.
How are you pulling this off?
Because there are kids who have figured it out.
What they tend to say is that they are getting
schoolwork done all through the school day.
These are kids who actually,
instead of going to lunch,
which this is its own problem, right?
They eat their lunch quietly
while they slam through a bunch of work.
Then they're doing it in the car.
They're doing it on the bus.
They've become very, very strategic.
They also often bluntly are kids who focus better
when they are doing their homework.
They are not interrupting themselves
as many times as we know kids do.
They are often having some fun,
but they are kids who have figured this out.
And I think part of how we help young people
is to showcase that they do have classmates
who we can admire and who we might actually celebrate
in a different kind of way altogether
than the stress Olympics winning,
who have started to figure this out.

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But another thing I hear from young people,
and again, I think this may be more said than true,
but they say it is there's sleep, school,
and your social life, and you only get two.
And that's terrible.
It's terrible that they,
I think there's still kids find ways to have fun,
but just I also think there's some truth to them saying,
like, you got to make choices.
And these are the things that,
and they of course will sacrifice sleep
because of course they want to do well in school
and of course they want to see their friends.
I can add another S to that sequence,
sleep, school, social life, and social media.
I mean, we know the kids are spending
four or five hours a day on their phones,
maybe for many it's even more,
that activity simply has to mathematically
displace something else.
You can't be in REM while also scrolling Instagram.
You cannot be doing your homework
while also scrolling Instagram.
And so yeah, sleep, school, social life, social media,
you only get two and a half.
This is a part of why in my many conversations
in past episodes, my writing for the Atlantic,
when I've pointed to the social media dimension,
and I really want to get your take on it in just a second,
I've consistently said this is not just about direct effects
that might be very real,
like negative social comparison of young teenage girls
that are seeing other people online
and feeling like their bodies are being graded by strangers.
It's also a displacement effect.
What is social media displacing?
If it's only displacing watching TV alone,
well, maybe the effect of social media isn't that great.
But if it's displacing social life,
if it's displacing sleep,
if it's displacing homework time,
which then creates stress with your parents
because your grades are lower,

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and now that forces, it creates an entire new dynamic, well, then clearly the effect of social media is larger than that, which we can simply see by looking at screen time alone. Tell me about how you think about this extremely charged question of smartphone, social media, and teenage anxiety. So it's a big one, it's messy. But I think that when it comes to kids in technology and kids in their devices, there are a couple of things that we should be worried about and that I would want parents to train their attention on. So first of all, like you say, we do not want kids' relationship with technology to get in the way of things that we know are essential for healthy development. Okay, sleep. In person time with their friends, at least, and certainly hopefully some terrific adults in their lives as well, physical activity, being of use, right? Having meaningful things that one does that contribute to the world beyond you. And then studying with focus, right? That we have a lot of research showing that kids are toggling back and forth, back and forth, in a way that slows them down, introduces error. Those are all problematic. So one thing we want to try to do is really create very strong boundaries around these things that are essential for healthy development. The other thing, and I feel like this is such a radical thing to say, but it's really not, none of us should have tech in our bedrooms, especially overnight. We have buckets of studies showing that having technology in the bedroom, even if you are not touching it, undermines the quality of sleep. We have exactly zero studies

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showing that it's good for you
to have tech in your bedroom overnight.
And so it's interesting,
because I often feel like I'm bringing across
much more curious and much more kind of,
humble interest in how teenagers are using tech.
I mean, I can sound like I'm kind of loose
about the whole thing.
And then I also feel like on the other side,
I'm like the most draconian person I encounter
where I'm like, except for,
it should never be in the bedroom.
And I will say,
this is a lot easier to implement as a family
if you do it when your kids are young,
if you do it at the point of them gaining access
to technology or to devices that they call their own,
it's a tough one to walk back.
Let's talk about solutions.
And I feel like there's a couple of different locations
in this story where we can talk about solutions.
We can talk about school culture,
like what teachers can do.
We can talk about what parents can do.
We can talk about how colleges can change.
And then finally, maybe we can talk a little bit
about student culture.
Do those sound like okay,
buckets through which to go through our solution checklist?
Okay, let's start with schools.
There's a teacher listening to this.
There's a school administrator,
a principal listening to this conversation
who says, you know what?
Dr. D'Amour is absolutely right.
I've absolutely seen this culture of achievement,
not just a culture of success, but a cult of success.
Take over our school.
Our students are so wiggled out about college and A's.
Their parents are calling our teachers at all hours
the night saying, my student, why did my kid get a 91
and they should have gotten a 93.
It's gotten berserk.

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We need to find some way back from the precipice.
What do you say to this school?
Well, let me just say this.
They're already saying this.
I am hearing this everywhere I go.
They are the first to say,
this has just gone to a place that it does not belong.
So what we say to schools is,
do your best to educate families
that the high school students in all likelihood
cannot get into the same super selective schools
the parents got into.
Lay that out early and often
and try to disabuse parents of that understanding
because a lot of parents,
if they don't hang out in the college admissions world,
don't really understand how dramatically it has changed.
The other thing schools can do,
and this isn't a very large solution,
but it actually isn't nothing.
One of the things I introduce in my most recent book,
The Emotional Lies of Teenagers,
is the idea that high school especially is like a buffet
where we require students to eat everything on the buffet.
As adults, we go to the buffet, we get what we like,
we come back to the table, we eat it.
And with high schoolers, we're like,
there it is, go fill your plate with all of it.
And what I like about this metaphor
is it neutralizes the fact
that kids are not going to like all of it.
And one of the things that I encounter,
and this may be especially in the girl culture,
but I know there are boys who are like this too,
is that not only are kids consuming a great deal,
they also feel compelled at times to pretend
like they enjoy it all.
Or that they like what this teacher is serving.
And that's unnecessary, right?
That's an added layer of work to fake it, right?
Like to choke down something while pretending you like it.
And so what is, I hope helpful about this metaphor
is that it depersonalizes the fact

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that not every kid's going to like
whatever teacher is serving.

And what I hope is it encourages teachers to say to a kid,
look, if this is, let's say it's broccoli
that somebody doesn't like.

If this, if my class is your broccoli, that's fine.

I'm going to show you exactly how many bites you have to eat
to get an A, if that's what you're looking for,

or get mastery at the level you need,

if that's what you're looking for.

But I'm not going to ask you to take on helping extra servings.

I'm not even going to ask you to like eat as much
as everyone else is eating.

I'm going to work with you on how little you need.

Those kinds of things added up over time, over classes,

I think can take the stress down a little.

One more point on the degree to which being in high school

is essentially orienting yourself toward the moment

that you receive a letter from a particular college.

Alan Kruger has this early 2000 study

where he found along with other economists

that where you apply to college, the set of schools

you apply to is more predictive of your future earnings

in the random school that selects you.

I don't know if that study has attempted to be replicated.

I hope it replicates because I've talked about that study

a lot and I would love it to replicate.

If it does replicate, which let's just assume it does,

it's a lovely idea that the habits you build, which

are not outcome dependent, are more predictive of the person

you're going to become than the outcome that randomly happens

when at those pearly white gates of college admissions,

a dice is rolled and it turns out you're going to school A

over school B. That seems like something

that I wish was more easily impressed upon students.

Let's go to parents.

What do you tell parents to fix this cult of hyperachievement?

So I think what parents, what I would recommend parents do

if they have an ambitious student or the parents

have high hopes for their student is that first of all,

we have research showing that you want to actually make sure

you're in alignment.

When we see the greatest stress among young people,

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it's when they and their parents don't line up.
And often it's that their parents have more ambitions
for the young person than the young person does.
So first step is see where you are
and you've got to negotiate with the teenager.
Like you can't make teenagers do things.
And the more you try to make them do things,
usually the worse it gets.
So parents need to know where their kid is
and where they are and try to find some alignment.
Then I think the next thing is parents
need to actually catch the whole thing in realistic terms.
I will tell you exactly what I said
to my very competent, ambitious daughter
as she was going through the college process.
I said, we'd like for you to go to college.
Your dad and I got to go to college.
We'd like for you to go to college.
We truly, truly do not care where you go to college.
We know that when you get there,
you will make the most of the opportunity
and that is all we care about.
And also, if you want to apply
to these highly selective colleges, we won't stop you,
but let's be clear, we should then also go down
and buy ourselves a lottery ticket
because the odds are pretty much the same.
So we really tried to lower the heat
around trying to achieve something
that is basically an odds game
where the kids have next to no control.
And then the other thing that we said
is control the controllables.
The stuff that you have say on,
do what you can on that stuff.
A huge amount of this is out of your control.
We need to be honest with high schoolers about that.
We need to not wait until the end of high school
to tell them that.
Say, control the controllables.
Then whatever the outcome is,
you will feel better about it,
knowing that you did what you could

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on the things you could control.
Let's talk about college.
There's no question that a bit of math
is behind college anxiety.
The fact that it's so many schools
and in particular among some of the most selective schools.
In the last 20 or 30 years,
the number of applicants have in many cases doubled
or tripled while the number of incoming students
has essentially stayed the same,
which means mathematically
that the acceptance rate has declined by three.
What would you encourage colleges to do
other than, and I support this particular prescription,
increase the number of seats in many, many colleges?
You know, it's not,
I don't often talk to colleges, right?
Colleges are not often in my clientele.
And when I am talking to them,
what we're talking about is mental health,
which is very deeply connected to this conversation,
which is that there have been for students
so much pressure on building their muscles
as a stellar applicant
that I think what colleges are now running up against
is they have students who arrive on campus
who actually are quite delayed in self-care,
emotion regulation,
the capacity to be resilient in the face of distress.
And so, you know, I think it's a big job
to try to link up these two universes
of like high, high, high demand on students,
and then also very, very high levels
of mental health concern among students.
But I think we all know that they are connected.
So that's a big question, right?
That colleges are increasingly interrogating,
like how do we bring in a population of students
who are actually prepared to thrive when they get here?
Or how do we bring in a college,
a population of students who don't find college
to be a lot easier than high school was, right?
We're hearing that too.

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So there's, you know, we've created conditions that we're now seeing the unintended consequences of those conditions. And I think it's a tricky situation. Now, students, I saved teenagers for last because I don't want to look like I'm blaming them. But at the same time, I think that we probably underrate the degree to which young people can restructure their emotional and psychological experience. So you mentioned that we should try to stamp out the stress Olympics, you know, I slept six hours. Well, I slept four and a half. What else would you encourage young people to do? Well, I think one thing that I always go out of my way to say to teenagers, and I think adults should do this, is to be very clear with them that once you get to about age 25 or 26, no one knows where you went to college unless you bring it up. This, I think as adults, we know, I think as soon as we got into that part of our life, we started to have very deep friendships. And I remember this, I remember being a graduate student and I had this great friend, Catherine, who was in the English department, and we were swimming together, you know, I was with her all the time doing master's swimming. And then one day I was like, I have no idea where she went to college, right? And it really dawned on me. Like I'd sort of cross some new into new time of life. And then I thought, why didn't anybody tell me this? That it just sort of evaporates at a point. And I promise you, you can tell this to, otherwise very savvy, very worldly teenagers, they are shocked to hear it. And the reason they're shocked to hear it is because they've been told entirely the opposite. They've been given the impression that where they go to college is somehow tattooed on them somewhere and is known for life. So that's just a simple thing we can do

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to take it down a few notches.

That this is not, you know,
going to brand you indefinitely.

This is gonna be something you do for four years
and then it's gonna be followed by a bunch of other years.

That helps.

I think the more that we can say and say it
because it's true, it is going to be much more
about finding a college that fits you
and is going to serve your needs
than it is going to be about trying to get into a place
that may or may not accept you no matter what you do.

We need to say it and say it and keep saying it.

And they need to know that we believe it.

That's wonderful.

Dr. Lisa DeMore, thank you so much.

Thank you.

Thank you for listening.

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