

Talk of Arizona

Winter 2015

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Trying times for teens

Cases of teen anxiety have doubled in the last 30 years, study shows

By Hannah Johnston

Difficulty breathing.
Tightness in the chest.
As the schoolwork mounts, there is nothing to do . . . but turn to television.

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"My problem was procrastinating. I got anxious whenever I thought about everything I had to do," said Alli Golisch, a sophomore at Arizona State University. "It felt like there was Saran Wrap inside me holding everything together."

Feelings of anxiety like this are becoming more and more common as students are becoming more and more involved with different activities.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, about 8 percent of teens have an anxiety disorder, with symptoms sometimes emerging as young as 6.

And according to the Nuffield Foundation, which gives grants to those doing research relating to teens and families, teen anxiety has

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doubled in the last 30 years, with 2 in 30 boys and 2 in 10 girls saying they had anxiety compared to 1 in 30 boys and 1 in 10 girls 30 years ago.

Two in 30 boys and 2 in 10 girls saying they had anxiety, the Nuffield Foundation found.

"For me college has been my biggest motivation to stay so involved and take so much on," said Taylor Bond, a senior at Higley High School in Gilbert. "College admissions are getting so much tougher; you need to stand out."

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines anxiety as, "a future-oriented mood state associated with preparation for possible, upcoming negative event," meaning that anxiety is the mind set of worrying about things that will happen in the future.

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Lisa Strohman, founder and director of The Technology Wellness Center in Scottsdale, works with teenagers who have anxiety and are also dependent on technology.

Even a few minutes of silence makes teen patients uncomfortable — this is uncharted territory.

When Strohman first meets with a student who is experiencing some form of anxiety they will sit down and go over the students' day-to-day schedule and examine if they are doing anything redundant.

Then Strohman said she looks at their technology use, she looks to see if they are constantly on some form of social media, in front of the TV, or playing video games.

"When I recognize they are online a lot, we will have three minutes where we sit in

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silence," Strohm said. "And it's really uncomfortable for them because they have never done that before."

The reason for this "downtime" is so that the student, who is normally doing a lot of different things at once and is constantly filling his or her time, is doing nothing for a brief period of time. Strohm said that once she gets the teens comfortable with the silence during their sessions, she tells them to take it home and do the same thing outside of her clinic, where they log off for a moment and have downtime.

Students will normally have four sessions with Strohm about their anxiety, but Strohm said that they will sometimes call and schedule one-time sessions if the feelings of anxiety appear again.

Strohm had a student come in who was taking an AP history class, along with

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with participating in an assortment of clubs and charities. The student was having anxiety attacks to the point of pulling her hair out.

"She was involved with so much, we had to look at what she was doing and take some of them out of the picture," Strohm said. "Then we introduced downtime to her, because she hadn't given herself that before."

This student started seeing improvements in her anxiety when she started giving herself time to relax, instead of constantly filling her time with school or using her free time as a time to catch up with technology.

Strohm defines downtime as a time when the teenager is not doing anything, and they are completely logged off from technology.

Escaping technology and having time for herself is what helps keep Bond calm and free of anxiety.

"I have a few hours every week where I don't

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do anything," Bond said. "And for part of that, my phone is turned off and in another room."

During this downtime Bond said she listens to music, reads a book for fun instead of for school, and makes sure that she isn't constantly checking her phone.

While Bond said she realizes that logging off from technology every once in a while is a positive thing, she does realize that when she is not consciously not using technology she is online a lot.

"I'm always on my phone. I'm probably online in some sort around three hours a day," Bond said.

For Golisch instead of tuning technology out she used it as her escape from all of the activities she was involved with in high school.

Golisch was involved in more than 15 clubs in

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high school ranging from being president of the Gay Straight Alliance, the secretary of the National Honors Society and captain of varsity cheerleading, all while taking Advanced Placement classes.

"I had a really hard time balancing it all," Golisch said. "I took a lot of naps and my parents thought it was depression, so I had to go to therapy."

In therapy Golisch spoke about all of the things she was juggling and how she would procrastinate on them. She then spoke about how she would feel tightness in her chest when she thought about everything she had to do.

"Even just talking about the anxiety was helpful, and after every session I would be all excited to get my homework done," Golisch said. "But then I would go home, sit down, and

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start watching television again. It was only a temporary fix."

Her therapist realized that it was not depression that Golisch was dealing with; it was anxiety because of everything she was involved in.

Golisch said her therapist told her when the anxiety would happen to pretend that there was a balloon inside her stomach, and to breathe deeply as if to blow it up. While it would help at the time, Golisch said the feelings of anxiety would come back.

When the anxiety would get bad, instead of doing everything that she had to do Golisch said she would turn to television.

"I would watch a lot of TV because it was easy to pretend that that was all that existed," Golisch said. "It was only a temporary fix though, because I would still have to do

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everything after watching TV, and the anxiety would come back.

"I would literally watching anything and everything, crime shows or reality TV," Golisch said. "I just didn't want to do my work."

Strohm said turning to technology instead of facing what is in front of them is some that many teenagers are doing to escape their anxiety.

"They start retreating," Strohm said. "It's very comforting for them to go online and get exchanges that they can control."

Instead of retreating and trying to avoid her schoolwork, Bond turns to her mom to talk to about her stress.

"There are times where I want to rip my hair out and scream, but my mom has helped me balance everything," Bond said. "She is the person I go to when I get stressed."

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Joann Keller, a counselor at Gilbert High School, has also started seeing students have anxiety not only when they are constantly using technology but also when their technology gets taken away from them.

"Most recently the anxiety I have seen has to do with social media. Parents see that they are too connected so they take the technology away and then we see the students get anxious because they can't use that technology anymore," Keller said.

Nearly two years after graduating from high school Golisch said she has learned to manage her procrastination and use it to her advantage.

"I'll procrastinate on my big assignments by getting all my small ones done first, so it's a lot better than turning to television," Golisch said. "I'm still working on finding that happy balance of being involved but not too involved."