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I have been asked to talk about how to help get your son through Years 11 and 12.

What I discuss next is based on my experience working at Christ Church as well as commonly recommended strategies. If you have any burning questions please ask them.

Arguably the most stressful time in a person's life is Year 11 and 12. There is so much pressure based on these 2 years of schooling. The current system tends to create high levels of anxiety rather than support mental health. On top of this your boys are experiencing puberty which means Mr Grumpy rears his head and is typically only peaceful and polite when he wants something. Added to this is peer pressure, relationships, the impact of social media, body image, sexual identity, drugs and alcohol. Unfortunately, the prevalence of mental health issues are also at its highest in this age group with around 1 in 6, and suicide is the biggest cause of loss of life in those aged between 15 and 24. A stressful time, that doesn't need to be.

What can you do to help?

First of all, establish what you are anxious about and consider whether you are projecting this onto your son. You need to manage your own anxiety/fears before being able to help.

Remember what it was like for you. Share the experience with your boy, even if it was not that difficult for you, try to pick something that you found challenging (e.g. I was bad at maths but I got through it). Adolescent boys generally don't want advice especially from their parents. Just acknowledge it is a difficult time and ask "Is there any way we could help you?" In terms of the social side of things your son will likely go to his peers or a close friend for advice. Don't feel rejected this is common at this age. Being there when needed is the key. If your son feels comfortable he will seek your guidance, love and support when required.

Discuss a plan post school. You don't need to know exactly what they want to do but it's important that they have a goal or target to work towards e.g. going to uni, getting into a particular course. Reduce talk about getting a particular ATAR score unless it is required (e.g. medicine). It's not ideal and can create high levels of stress for two years. The boys are already comparing themselves to their peers and put enough stress on themselves.

Accessing university has also changed significantly. So many pathways are now available. Year 11 does not count for university admission, passing school yes, university no, this is Year 12. The aim for Year 11 is to pass as many subjects as possible, improve organisation and preparation for sitting up to six, 3 hours exams. Your son may have recently got a nasty shock with his Year 11 mid-term exams, this is normal. The boys have never sat this many exams before it's a big jump. This is particularly the case for those students who have coasted through on their intellect alone without working on their preparation and organisation. They will learn and will improve – something we see consistently.

**We will now focus on anxiety which is a significant struggle for many.**

Preventing stress and anxiety is the key. If you prevent, reduce and manage anxiety you greatly reduce the risk of depression.

Limiting and stopping catastrophising is also important. Teach your sons to use perspective when faced with a challenge. Reduce negative self-talk (e.g. I'm not good enough, it's too hard) and focus on encouraging them to find the evidence to dispel the belief.

Avoid trivialising achievements and not being proud of a good outcome. For example, getting 90% on a test but focusing on the 10 % wrong. Parents have a strong role/influence here to stop this.

Setting realistic expectations (small achievable goals based on previous performance) and once they reach the goal, set a few more. Parents need to play an active role here. Consider where your son sits and discuss this with your son so everyone is on the same page.

For some it will be important to accept that your son may not reach/work to his potential in a school setting.

### **Planning and organisation**

Establishing and setting a consistent study routine is critical. Discipline is the key: aim for 1 to 1.5 hours per night of study.

Quality study, no procrastination-no music. Ideally it should be a quiet place, remove all distractions and have a timer set. Rest after 30/45 minutes and get back into it.

It is important for your son to have some down time (yes seeing friends, some gaming, whatever they tend to do for down time). Kids are so busy these days, think what it was like when you were at school. I encourage the use of free time on Friday afternoon for a couple of hours, Saturday after sport, allow a Sunday sleep in then back into study.

**The following topics discussed are essential for all boys regardless of age.**

### **Sleep**

- Adequate amount of sleep (minimum 8 to 9 hours per night)
- No gaming/phones that stimulate at least an 1 hour before bed
- A dark, cool room will aid sleep, body temperature has to drop to encourage sleep, once again no phone
- Lack of sleep has a strong correlation with mental health issues
- Hand the devices in before bed. This strategy is used in boarding and it works well.

If your son raises ongoing concerns about sleep then see the GP. A prescription of Melatonin may be beneficial in some cases. This hormone responsible for regulating sleep is not addictive and has been helpful for a number of boys.

## Exercise

Exercise at least 30 minutes an hour per day. We know that exercise releases endorphins and serotonin which is the neurotransmitter involved in the regulation of sleep, mood and appetite (and that exercise is as effective as antidepressants). This is extremely important. Exercise might include weights, running, swimming, surfing, walking and riding a bike.

## Diet

There is a good body of evidence to suggest that a healthy dietary pattern, such as the Mediterranean diet, promotes brain and mental health (in terms of inflammation in the brain and gut). Certain vitamins have also been shown to be beneficial including magnesium, zinc, omega 3 and B vitamins.

## Socialisation

Socialising is extremely important given the boys age and stage of development. Boys need to learn how to manage social issues and learn to make good choices. Trust is critical, as is respect. What we find is if boys respect their parent's rules and beliefs they are less likely to engage in risky behaviour. Ensure you set clear boundaries regarding contacting you about their whereabouts, about how they are getting home, who they are with. The same goes for their use of the phone/social media.

## Relationships and breakdowns

Research has demonstrated that the first breakup "has a significant emotional impact" often greater than those in adulthood. Individuals tend to be far more invested at this age (different emotion infatuation not love) and put everything into and are consumed by the relationship with less to fall back on. Teens are being overwhelmed by the endorphins and hormones that are involved and because they aren't used to the experience they can be completely crushed when it breaks down. Parents of adolescents need to understand that breaking up with someone is quite devastating because for them that is their whole life at that time. Research suggests children who have goals and interests outside of their first relationships are more likely to recover from a painful high school breakup without developing depression.

## We will now be focusing on how to manage an angry teenager

Young adolescent boys are still developing their ability to control their emotions, frustration and aggression. Around the age of 25 males are capable of doing this. When your son gets angry or frustrated his brain releases the stress hormone cortisol which then makes its way to the frontal lobe of the brain. The frontal lobe is responsible for problem solving, impulse control, and emotional regulation. During times of stress your son's ability to use these important functions are extremely poor. Therefore, the best approach is to allow your son to go and have some time out/tantrum, once settled then go and have a mature discussion. Don't make the mistake of having yelling contests ("falling into the escalation trap") or following your son around the house as it will just extend the amount of time his brain does not function properly.

## Mental health- when should you be concerned?

The main signs to watch closely are changes in behaviour and mood including if your son is:

- becoming withdrawn
- not seeing his friends
- stops playing sport or previously enjoyed activities
- does not want to come to school
- has a loss of appetite
- is sleeping too much or too little
- is preoccupied with body image and eating

Is he aggressive or lashing out for no significant reason? If a combination of these symptoms are present for a period longer than two weeks then please seek support in the form of your GP, external supports and us. The GP is typically your first point of contact for issues occurring outside of school as they can create a mental health plan which allows 10 sessions partly covered by medicare with either a psychologist or clinical psychologist. If significant mental health issues are diagnosed then a referral to a psychiatrist (who has the ability to prescribe medication) may be required.

Your son can access the School psychologists. Email is the best so we can arrange a suitable time.

Keeping your HOH and Tutor in the loop is very important so please go to them first. Referrals to the psychologist/counsellor are encouraged after discussions with HOH and Tutors.