

## Teen health: Depression, anxiety and social phobias rising in kids, educators say

By Sharon Noguchi [snoguchi@mercurynews.com](mailto:snoguchi@mercurynews.com)

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A popular and accomplished Los Altos High student received a parent's text message at school last year, to come home to talk about her grades. The student and star athlete had earned all A's -- except one D. She asked to be excused from English class to go to the bathroom, but she never returned. She had collapsed, suffering a disabling emotional breakdown.

The student, who didn't want to be identified because of the stigma of mental illness, is not alone. Across the Bay Area, educators are seeing more and more students suffering from depression, anxiety and social phobia. The acuity of mental illness among students has sharpened, they say, and it's striking ever younger children, though many quietly bear the stress for years before snapping.



*School counselor Judy Prothro makes a point during a meeting of the LETS Club, or Let's Erase The Stigma Club, at Los Altos H.S. in Los Altos,*

"I was very good at putting up a facade," said the Los Altos High student, now a senior, who later was diagnosed with major depression and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, a diagnosis that her parents resisted for six months and that many who knew her couldn't believe. "I was raised on how to sell myself, which buttons to press, which phrases to drop," she added, until one day "everything just shattered."

The increasing stress isn't just afflicting children of Silicon Valley's affluent and educated, who attend top schools among driven, college-bound peers. Though not yet reflected in lagging and incomplete national statistics, the trend appears to cut across social class,

income level, ethnicity and academic ability.

"We see all demographics," said Gloria Dirkmaat, special education director in the San Mateo Union High School District.

Overfelt High on San Jose's East Side has seen a spike in student panic attacks. Anxiety disorder rose this past fall among teens in Palo Alto and Menlo Park.

"We are seeing children who are coming in with greater needs around mental health, and also seeing them at an earlier age," said Judith Cameron of the San Ramon Valley Unified School District.

Not all schools have reported an increase in mental illness. But not every school has staff attentive to each student's well-being, nor do they have therapists and psychologists at hand.

That is changing. Since a rash of student suicides at Palo Alto high schools four years ago, the district has trained teachers, put in place safeguards, offered more counseling and now is



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training all students in how to intervene with those who may threaten to kill themselves.

San Ramon Valley schools added a counselor at every secondary school this academic year to deal with mental health. And a Morgan Hill school beefed up therapists for depression among fourth- and fifth-graders. Two years ago, the San Mateo Union district created two classes for students with social phobias. It runs two more classes for those with anxiety or depression, in addition to two classes for students with more complicated emotional problems. They're all full, Dirkmaat said.

What's behind the rise is uncertain. Theories include economic distress, dysfunctional families, absent and preoccupied busy parents, technology obsession, social media and extraordinary pressure on kids to excel.

"They're not expected to be great; they're expected to be stupendous," said Cristy Dawson, assistant principal at Los Altos High, about the ultracompetitive college-going culture. "This valley is all about getting ahead."

Sometimes, anxiety grows into phobias. "Kids are so depressed or anxious, they're not getting out of bed; they're becoming agoraphobic," afraid to appear in public, said Helen Hsu, a supervisor at the city of Fremont's Youth and Family Services, which provides therapists to several schools.



*Sarah Merrick, 18, makes a point as Kusha Gupta, 14, looks on during a meeting of the LETS Club, or Let's Erase The Stigma Club, at Los Altos H.S. in*

A former Aragon High student, now 18, left the San Mateo school as a freshman because he had become increasingly afraid to attend school. Two years in boarding schools didn't help. He returned to the district and enrolled in Haven, a class for students with fears like his.

"I stepped through the door, and it was a bit like my heart would stop," said the student, who also asked not to be identified, about his first day at Haven. But thanks to the program, he graduated, got a retail job and enrolled this semester at College of San Mateo.

some parents from seeking help.

The stigma surrounding mental illness discourages

"I've had parents refuse to sign permission for counseling for one boy," said Hsu, whose agency conducted a training for Fremont Unified home-health teachers. "They were afraid it would negatively affect his college application."

Statistics from the National Institute of Mental Health indicate that the incidence of teen mental illness was stable for 10 years through the early 2000s, the latest data available. Those surveys show that 25 percent of teens have suffered anxiety at some time in their lives, 11.2 percent major depression and 2.4 percent agoraphobia.

But mental health professionals and educators say those statistics are out of sync with what they observe.

"I see an incredible rise in the stress in families," said Barbara Neal, principal at Morgan Hill's Nordstrom Elementary School.

The high-pressure run-up to college claims many victims.

"There's a consistent urgency that you have to be the best," said Los Altos High School junior Borna Barzan, 16, who co-leads a school club called Let's Erase the Stigma to teach fellow students about mental health.

But Brenda Carrillo, student services coordinator in Palo Alto Unified, said it's important not to blame academic pressure for depression.

"A mental health condition doesn't necessarily come from high expectations," she said.

With support from the school, the Los Altos student has brought her depression under control. She noted that students face pressures from peers and social media -- such as the must-look Facebook page where seniors' college acceptances are posted, whether they want it or not -- but also from within. While overloading themselves with advanced-placement classes and extracurricular activities, "everyone really focuses on the future, like college and jobs," she said.

"But no one's looking at themselves and asking, 'Am I happy?'"

Contact Sharon Noguchi at 408-271-3775. Follow her at [Twitter.com/noguchionk12](https://twitter.com/noguchionk12).

Resources on student mental health

Santa Clara County Mobile Crisis Intervention: 877-41-CRISIS

Santa Clara County Mental Health call center: 800-704-0900

Family & Children Services of Silicon Valley: 650-543-5434 [www.fcservices.org](http://www.fcservices.org)

Alum Rock Counseling Center: [www.alumrockcc.org](http://www.alumrockcc.org)

Connect With Kids ([www.ConnectwithKids.com](http://www.ConnectwithKids.com) or 888-598-KIDS) has resources on children's mental health, including a five-part video, "Warning Signs," on mental health for home viewing and parent-outreach events.

For information on chapters of Let's Erase The Stigma, a youth group that addresses mental health, go to [www.lets.org](http://www.lets.org).