

## **The Adolescent Mind & Burnout Culture Program Facilitator Guide**

Name of Program: The Adolescent Brain & Burnout Culture

Target Audience: Adolescents

Time of Year to Implement: Beginning of new school year

Strategy for Implementation: Presentation with a video and discussion

Relevant Learning Goal:

Goal 3: Interpersonal Intelligence

Goal 4: Intrapersonal Intelligence

Lesson Outcomes/Objective: Students will discuss the importance of the stage of brain development they are in, how vulnerable they are to severe stress and burnout, the impact of burnout, and how they and school personnel can help to reduce the amount of stress and burnout teens experience. They should be able to apply the knowledge they gain through what is discussed to exploring ways to reduce their own stress, and they should feel more heard and understood by school personnel.

Purpose: Adolescents are in the stage of brain development that involved their prefrontal cortex, which impacts their executive functioning, planning, time management, ability to prioritize appropriately, make good decisions, and difficulty inhibiting impulsivity. This development is influenced by their educational, social, and mental/emotional experiences. Due to such a significant part of their brain still developing, they are vulnerable to mental health conditions, stress, and burnout. Mental health and stress feed into feelings of burnout, so if adolescents do not know how to cope with all of these things in positive ways, they may get caught in a burnout cycle. Burnout culture has grown in the United States, and is especially prevalent in adolescents and young adults because of the increasingly overwhelming expectations that society places on these age groups. The purpose of this program is to educate adolescents on the stage of brain development they are in, the prevalence of burnout in adolescents, and that they are part of a burnout culture that they have limited control over. The purpose is also to open a discussion about societal expectations placed on adolescents and what adolescents, parents/caregivers, and school personnel can do to better support students through coping with burnout and stress.

Planning and Preparation: This program requires no physical materials. You will need to be prepared to go into the program and conversation with an open mind and a willingness to learn from the adolescents. The aim is to listen to the students and for them to feel heard, so you should also be prepared for them to be tentative to share since they may not be used to adults acting on this type of information from them.

Introduction (slides 1-6; about 20 minutes)

- Introduce the topic and go over the table of contents.

- Play video on adolescent brain development (14 minutes).
- Discuss how the adolescent brain responds and reacts to stress
  - Since the adolescent brain is still developing, teens respond differently to stress than adults do. With the brain developing, they are more apt to develop stress-related mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, among others. It may be helpful for teens to learn to recognize possible triggers for their stress and to practice effective coping techniques for dealing with stress. Both triggers and effective coping techniques will look different for every individual, so it will take time for each individual to figure out what is happening with and what will work best for them.
- Discuss elements of the adolescent brain that impact their handling of stress and burnout
  - Mental illness in adolescence: Changes in the brain along with physical, emotional, and social changes all happening at the same time may explain why so many mental illnesses emerge during adolescence. These can include potentially stress-related conditions such as depression and anxiety as well as conditions such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and eating disorders.
  - Adolescent sleep: Research has shown that melatonin works differently in adolescents than it does children and adults. For adolescents, melatonin levels stay high later into the night and drop later in the morning, often leading to teens not getting enough sleep. Without enough sleep, it is harder to pay attention, control impulses, and do well at school (time management, planning, motivation, and so on). Getting good sleep at night can also help support mental health and stress management.
  - The resilient adolescent brain: Despite the natural stresses and challenges that come with adolescence, most teens become healthy adults. Some changes in the brain during this important developmental phase actually helps support the development of resilience long-term.

Body of the Program (slides 7-10; about 15 minutes)

- Go over the statistics related to adolescent burnout compared to adult burnout.
- Discuss the five stages of adolescent burnout. This should be very interactive.
  - Stage 1: Honeymoon
    - This phase occurs at the start of something new—a new school year, new semester, etc. It is characterized by feelings of enthusiasm, high energy and commitment levels, productivity, creativity, and willingness to take on responsibility. During this stage, people often feel a drive to prove themselves.
  - Stage 2: Onset of Stress
    - Things don't always go smoothly, so our initial optimism and enthusiasm wanes as we have difficult days. We may also experience a sense of stagnation as our efforts feel less and less

rewarded. At this stage, the coping strategies we utilize are very important. If we use positive coping strategies, we may be able to reduce our stress and continue getting satisfaction from the work we're doing. If we use negative coping strategies, such as neglecting our own needs in order to work harder or longer, we can develop stress symptoms such as irritability, trouble concentrating, anxiety, social withdrawal, poor sleep, and headaches.

- Stage 3: Chronic Stress
  - When stress persists, our lives can become more limited because we spend more and more time worried about work and pull ourselves away from our personal priorities. Life, therefore, feels much less rich and fulfilling, which also increases stress levels. Chronic stress can bring with it feelings of failure and powerlessness. If these feelings and chronic stress get coupled with a lack of acknowledgement for our efforts, we can begin to feel inadequate, incompetent, and unvalued. In this stage, we are likely to experience persistent exhaustion, resentment, and cynicism. In ourselves or others we may notice increased withdrawal, avoidance, or increased reliance on substances.
- Stage 4: Burnout
  - This stage is often characterized by feelings of apathy, despair, and disillusionment. Things can seem hopeless and we may experience persistent doubts about ourselves or constant worry. Physical symptoms, such as headaches and gastrointestinal problems, may also become frequent at this stage. We may begin to see changes in our own behavior, such as isolation or acting out of character.
- Stage 5: Habitual Burnout
  - This stage brings severe emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion, as well as depression and anxiety. Your ability to work will be significantly impacted and you will be needing help and support.

#### Wrap Up (slides 11-13; about 10-15 minutes)

- Define burnout culture
  - A culture that facilitates a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion via prolonged stress caused by people feeling pressured to always say yes, to organize their lives around work, and to hide or ignore their true needs
- Go over the societal expectation for an adolescent's daily schedule.
- Open up a discussion based on the three questions. Take note of their responses; they hold value!
  - How can we encourage teens to take better care of themselves (practice self-care, improve time management, and so on)?

- How can parents/caregivers help support teens?
- How can school faculty and staff help support teens?

Closing (slide 14; about 1-2 minutes)

- Thank everyone for their participation and insights.
- Open the floor to any questions anyone may have.
- Encourage adolescents to investigate their stress triggers and explore coping techniques to find ones that work best for them.

## References

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