

Columbia therapist helps students with test anxiety

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By Luke Broadwater

Performance anxiety is a common stumbling block for athletes, musicians and others in high-pressure positions.

In the world of increasingly important standardized tests, Columbia therapist Betty Caldwell says, the same anxiety is gripping local high school students.

"Test anxiety can cause students to freeze up and shut down emotionally," Caldwell said. "The new SAT is increasing stress. More and more students are taking AP (Advanced Placement) classes. The competition for college is very tough."

To respond to what she calls "test stress," Caldwell last week began giving classes after school at Centennial High School for students who suffer from the anxiety attacks.

The classes are open to any student in the county who signs up for them, and are offered as part of a nonprofit foundation in collaboration with the school system.

Approximately 33 percent of students suffer from pre-test anxiety, said Caldwell, who is an adjunct professor at Howard Community College.

"Studies show that test anxiety interferes with the ability of an estimated one out of three students to perform their best on tests, even though they know the material," Caldwell said.

Even the college board, maker of the all-important SAT, admits to the stress its tests can cause.

"Pressure to get high marks can increase a student's anxiety over grades and make tests a nerve-wracking experience," says the College Board, which administers the SAT, on its Web site.

To help calm the "test-time jitters," the College Board suggests taking practice tests, avoiding cramming, eating healthy, getting to the test site early and simply relaxing.

Caldwell describes her course as sessions in "skills development" that will help students learn the techniques the college board suggests and others, she said.

"It's really a skills-development course, so their reactions to stress just don't get in the way," Caldwell said.

Positive outlook is key

Caldwell has seen test stress plague students for years, but recently began to notice an uptick in the trend, she said.

"Ten years ago, I saw students with test anxiety," she said. "I saw a number of kids who were paralyzed by it. We didn't know how to deal with it. I'd like to give them an approach."

The first step for a student to overcome test stress is believing he or she can beat it, Caldwell said.

"People need to know they can master it, they don't need to be pushed around by it," she said. "People should concentrate on everything that gives them confidence in preparing for the test."

Centennial Parent-Teacher-Student Association president Jonathan Cooper said he thinks Caldwell's program is needed at the schools.

"As a parent I know, like all of us, kids have lots of stresses in their lives," Cooper said. "I think tests bring on stress. There's certainly more standardized testing in the lives of teens."

Cooper said he hoped to invite Caldwell to meet with the PTSA at a later time.

"I've invited her to come and update us about her program," he said. "It's certainly a subject matter that parents would find welcoming. If it helps our teens relieve some of the stress, I think that would be a positive."

Caldwell hopes her course can do just that, she said.

"I would encourage people to think of this as how to achieve stressless tests. It's about their ability to enjoy stressless tests," Caldwell said.

The cost for the five classes is \$165.00. For questions, call Betty Caldwell at 410-740-4659 or e-mail her at Bcaldwell@comcast.net.