

# Opinion: Students are pushing themselves to unhealthy limits. Here's how teachers can help

Once during an exam on the Civil War, one of my 11th graders burst into tears, fearful of what a low grade on the test might do to her future. "I'll never get into college now," she told me, as I tried to console her. "I might as well give up now. What's the point?"

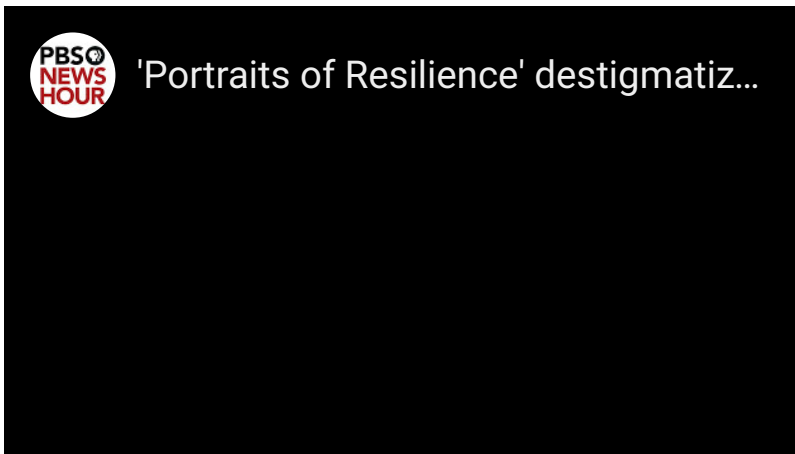


Another time, when presented with irrefutable proof of her having lifted portions of her research paper, an otherwise strong student started crying hysterically: "I know it was really, really wrong, but this anxiety I feel to be perfect, it's overriding my normal behavior and better judgment." She told me that in an attempt to balance her AP classes, sports and social life, she had become stressed and saw no other way to earn a good grade.

I've heard countless similar stories from colleagues who teach at all types of schools. Students push themselves daily to unhealthy and unsustainable limits, often to get ahead, seek approval or both.

This behavior is having a harmful impact on student stress, depression and anxiety—including for those already enrolled in top colleges and

universities. In extreme cases, as I learned from watching a recent PBS NewsHour segment about [students who attend MIT](#), this may lead to thoughts or actions of self-harm.



All of us feel sympathy for students who experience anguish and who make poor decisions. I don't understand all the underlying causes of complex and difficult emotions, but I have done my best to reach out to experts for ways to help my students learn from setbacks and then move on.

## **1. Give frequent low-stakes assessments**

Failure on big tests suggests to anxious students that growth is unattainable, and that it's easier to give up. To combat that thinking, I favor frequent low-stakes assessments, where a few bad performances don't devastate an individual's overall grade.

A few years ago, I spoke with Mark A. McDaniel, co-author of "Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning," and co-director of the Center for Integrative Research on Cognition, Learning, and Education (CIRCLE) at Washington University in St. Louis. McDaniel told me that frequent low-stakes assessments signal to anxious, grade-worried

students that, "we're not testing, we're helping you learn."

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It's also important to remember that just like adults, who sometimes experience bad days in the so-called "real world," a student who has a headache, who is hurting from the loss of a friend or loved one, or is dealing with any other outside struggle, might not perform at optimum levels during an exam. We need to hold students accountable for their learning, but we also need to show compassion.

## **2. Allow for full-credit retakes**

If teachers must give high-stakes assessments, outside of state-mandated tests, allow for full-credit retakes.

I learned as much from Rick Wormeli, author of my favorite book on education, "Fair Isn't Always Equal: Assessment & Grading in the Differentiated Classroom."

When I first interviewed him in 2013, he said something that profoundly changed my teaching:

*A kid doesn't do any assignment, no matter how large, and I just give him a zero? One, he remains incompetent. Is that really the legacy I want to carry forward? Incompetence, but be able to tell all my colleagues in the larger society, "Oh, I caught him. He couldn't get past me with missing a deadline, let me tell you."*

*Or is it, "Hey, you screwed up, child. Let me walk side by side with you and develop the competence and the wisdom that comes from doing something a second and third time around, where you'll get your act together." Both of those are greater gifts in the long run, than simply labeling a child for a failed deadline.*

This approach certainly involves more work, but it's worth it. When students know their teachers care about them and their learning, their anxiety diminishes.

### **3. Promote healthy amounts of stress**

All of this isn't to say that teachers should demonize stress and anxiety. I shared an email conversation last year with Jessica Lahey, author of "The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed."

***"If two kids of similar intelligence show up at my classroom door, the kid who is comfortable with frustration and confusion will learn more." — Jessica Lahey***

Humans learn best when we struggle a bit to apply our knowledge to new contexts, according to Lahey, or work to figure out how to apply knowledge to a problem of a slightly higher level of difficulty than we've encountered before. If two kids of similar intelligence show up at my classroom door, Lahey went on to say, the kid who is comfortable with frustration and confusion, and consequently more able to take a moment to think rather than give up, will learn more — it's that simple.

With that insight in mind, I often tell students how stress in healthy amounts helps me rethink ideas, meet deadlines and improve upon my work. I want my students to feel comfortable being a little uncomfortable, which reinforces risk-taking as an important part of successful, lifelong learning.

When it comes to student mental health issues, there is no single magic solution. But that doesn't mean teachers can't make immediate and long-term changes to offer students relief. In this respect, I'm trying my best.

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