How much is too much when it comes to anxiety in students?
(particularly with regard to school work)

High levels of anxiety in students (and their parents) is becoming an increasingly concerning issue. While some anxiety is important in motivating students to get their work done, too much anxiety can lead to school failure, students feeling defeated and sometimes serious mental health issues such as depression and anxiety disorders.

It may surprise some parents that one of the most frequently expressed statements from the students we work with is the strong need and desire to please their parents and not disappoint them. This may be hard to believe as you battle with them to do the simplest of chores or focus on their study but nevertheless it is expressed by almost all the students in one way or another.

Many students with high anxiety and stress levels believe they are not able to meet their parents expectations. They fear for their future and letting the family down, yet at the same time feel powerless to do better. It is normal to have some fear and worry and we need to not treat every worry in student's lives as a big problem. This could do more harm than good. However, it is important to seek professional help if the anxiety is ongoing and interferes with their daily lives.

The more they worry the less able they are to do their best.

Some warning signs of high anxiety/depression:

- avoiding school work
- spending too much time on school work- becoming perfectionistic.
- fear of failure in students who normally do well.
- losing interest in things they usually enjoy.
- lower results than usual.
- increasing irritability-being constantly grumpy, moodiness.
- frequent tiredness- over sleeping or not sleeping.
- withdrawing- isolating themselves from family and friends.
- being ultra sensitive to criticism.
- changing eating habits.
- sudden weight loss or gain.
- self harming.
- spending too much time on technology.
- any noticeable change of behaviour that lasts longer than a few days.
- physical signs- sweating, shaking, headaches, general aches and pains, stomach aches, nausea, diarrhoea and feeling miserable.
Ways to help your child/young person:

- Let them know that you will always love them whatever their results. (you may need often say this)
- **Encourage their efforts** - this will get them trying harder.
- Try to manage your own anxiety! Anxiety can be “contagious”. Your own anxiety will affect how your children feel.
- Set **small achievable goals** - don't ask a student who with some effort usually gets around 70% to get to 90% - they will feel defeated and could well give up rather than trying harder. Instead encourage them and gently challenge them to improve their score by a few marks next time. But be warned - every assessment task is different, requires different skills and may be marked on different criteria - so comparing marks over time can be misleading.
- Try to keep the **communication** going with your child - persist in trying to find out what is happening in their lives.
- Let them know you understand that high marks cannot be achieved by the vast majority of students. 90% or higher is exceptionally high and rarely achieved. Tests are designed to be difficult and challenging. As one student recently said to me "I want my parents to know I am much more than just my results".
- Help them lead a balanced life.
- **Regular exercise** (at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise most days such as fast walking) is known to increase brain cell growth, improve concentration and learning and reduce stress levels (as well as all the other health benefits).
- Try to encourage a **good sleep routine**. Almost all of us need about **8 hours of sleep per day**. A good sleep routine - regular sleep times - is one of the most important factors in helping students with keeping good mental health, learning and behaviour.
- Keep a watchful eye on their use of technology in all its forms. Use of the internet is vital for school work these days but for many it can also be highly distracting.
- Assist students to **plan ahead** with their assessments and not leave it till “the last minute”.
- Encourage **brief regular breaks** when studying (eg a 5 minutes every 40 minutes of work).
- Ensure that students have "**down time**" - rest, relaxation, unstructured fun times.
- Positive fun times with friends and family.
- Encourage them to find their own **interests and talents** in areas beyond the school curriculum.

**WHERE TO GET HELP**

**School Counsellors**-
At Bonnyrigg High School there are 2 fully qualified psychologists:-
- Lin McClintock (Wednesdays and Thursdays) and
- Melissa Trapolini (Mondays and Fridays)

Phone the school for an appointment- ph 98231186 or 98231184

**Beyond School**
- GP - Talk to you family doctor and perhaps ask for a referral to a private psychologist.
- Fairfield Liverpool Youth Health Team (free service) Phone: 97941750
- Community Health Centres: Fairfield (97941739), Liverpool (98284844), Mt Pritchard (96011931)
- Headspace Liverpool - Phone for an appointment- 8785 3200
Help Lines for Young people
- Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800
- eHeadspace 1800 650 890 (or online chat)

Websites
- eHeadspace eheadspace.org.au/
- Reach out reachout.com
- Youth Beyond Blue youthbeyondblue.com

APPS (no cost)
- Smiling Mind
- Breathe
- Worry Time (Reach out)

Further Information and support for parents:
- Beyond Blue Phone Phone: 1300 22 4636 (or online)
- Black Dog Institute (website for fact sheets on mental health)
- Transcultural Mental Health-Phone: 98403767 (for advice in your own language)
- Lifeline Phone 131 114 (24 hours)
- Parent Line 132055 (Monday to Saturday 9am-4.30pm)

Lin McClintock and Melissa Trapolini
School Counsellors at Bonnyrigg High School
Registered psychologists.