



Canada's

Outstanding Principals

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We thank all those who contributed to this issue. Please note, however, that the opinions and views expressed are those of the individual contributors and are not necessarily those of CPCO. Similarly, the acceptance of advertising does not imply CPCO endorsement.

Publications Mail Agreement No. 40035635

ON THE COVER

Canada's Outstanding Principals
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TEENAGE ANXIETY

An Introduction for Ontario's Educators

Many of us feel overwhelmed by anxiety at some time or other. This is usually because there is just too much to do in our over-busy lives. It should come as no surprise that teens are just as prone to this feeling as the adults around them. They experience distress, which may be expressed in lack of sleep, inability to concentrate, nervousness, etc. As with most mental disorders, it is commonly believed that anxiety disorders are biologically based and genetically predisposed. At the same time, all the anxiety disorders are affected by environmental and personality factors. In other words, some people are more resilient to negative stress than others are.

Put colloquially, one can say that anxiety is fostered by the constant internal warning that the individual can never be sure of anything. Anxiety thrives on uncertainty and it is resistant to logic. This places the individual in a never-ending state of vigilance, characterized by the feeling that something is about to happen (psychologists call this arousal), and that they will have to respond with either *fight* or *flight*. The decision as to whether to approach (*fight*) or to withdraw (*flight*) is based on a myriad of factors, including intelligence, experience, setting, morality, ethics etc. These factors come together neurologically to do their work in the brain's prefrontal cortex. However, this part of the brain is still developing in most teens, meaning that making good choices is a complicated and confusing process for them. It is really no surprise that insecurity, uncertainty and anxiety so frequently characterize this time of life.

To make matters worse, we adults contribute to teenage insecurity in an entirely avoidable way. To clarify this, think of the following analogy: an 11-year-old girl gets her period suddenly

without any advanced notice or instruction. She has never felt this sort of pain before, and when it does not go away, she thinks that something is terribly wrong with her. Then she starts to bleed. This magnifies her terror, and she may well believe that she is dying. To prevent this cruel eventuality, we inform our daughters about menstruation well in advance. We cannot remove the pain but we can and we do, remove the fear.

Ironically, however, while we believe we are preparing our teens properly and responsibly for puberty, we often leave out the most important change of all. We leave out the part about the changes that will occur in their brain. To put it most plainly, we fail to tell them that they will literally *lose their minds* as their brain undergoes the transition from that of a child to that of an adult. They will no longer have their major connection with the world; and that is vastly more frightening than menstruation or any of those other changes that we do tell them about. We fail to do this because we ourselves were not told and because we ourselves, even at the level of secondary educators and medical professions do not adequately comprehend this important change. Inevitably, our sons and daughters often respond to this brain change by believing that something is terribly wrong with them.

To make matters worse, we adults often confirm that belief by telling them that something is wrong with them and reinforce that message by taking them to a psychologist or psychiatrist.

And it continues to get worse, because we have inculcated them all their lives in the belief that when something is wrong with them, there are drugs available to make them feel better. Is it any wonder that so many teens turn to the use of alcohol and other drugs at this time of life in order to *medicate* their anxiety?



STRESS!

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

It is Friday morning and already my mind is turning to the upcoming weekend. Today should be a good day as I have planned a brief meeting with the school council chair this morning and will conclude a Teacher Performance Appraisal observation this afternoon. The intramural athletic program continues at lunch hour and I look forward to being with the students. Tonight will be a quiet night with my spouse; an evening to unwind and relax with a glass of wine.

As I near the school, a fire truck comes up behind me and passes. Off to another false alarm I suspect. As I turn the corner to approach the school, I see the fire truck is at the school; my heart rate quickens, blood pressure increases. Questions are coming to mind; the cell phone rings and it's my secretary. My body experiences that feeling of fight or flight. I feel the tension in my body - STRESS! It will not be the day I planned.

How often do your best plans go awry due to circumstances beyond your control? How do you react in these situations? Do you label these feelings as stress?

STRESS! We hear this word so often today. Everyone seems quick to use this word to describe how they are feeling at any given time. Why is that? Is it overused or is our world really experiencing increased anxiety?

There is no doubt that the work day has expanded its boundaries due to the advances in technology. Everyone is connected 24/7 and seems to utilize technology continuously. Leisure time has shrunk. People use what leisure time they have to plan their next meeting; laptops even find their way on vacations. Personal time as we once knew it has taken on a different dimension. The family icons of today are working couples picking up their children on their way home to dinners prepared by caterers or fast food chefs. Relationships seem more easily broken as divorce rates increase and the notion of job security is being threatened on many fronts. It is easy to see why people feel more anxious or vulnerable. Even the therapist might say, "Just snap out of it," as he slaps his patient. This appeared in a newspaper cartoon with the caption: *Time-saving single-visit psychotherapy.*

Modern life seems to be full of hassles, deadlines, demands and frustrations. Stress has become a way of life. In small doses, it can help you perform under pressure and motivate you to do your best. However, if you are constantly running in emergency mode, your mind and body pay the price and it is time to take action.

Stress is a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upset your balance in some way. When you sense danger whether real or imagined, the body's defenses kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the *fight or flight* reaction or stress response. This response is the evolutionary way your body protects you. It helps you to stay focused and alert. In



emergency situations, stress can save your life, giving you extra strength to defend yourself. It also helps you rise to meet challenges. It keeps you on your toes during presentation work and sharpens your concentration. However, beyond a certain point, stress ceases being helpful and can cause damage to your health, your mood, your productivity, your relationships and your quality of life.

Prolonged stress can cause physical changes like chronic muscle tension, which in turn can lead to headaches or other physical problems. Under the influence of prolonged psychological stress, these physical effects may continue for a sustained period of time causing imbalance of functioning in the body that in turn can lower your body's defenses and make you more vulnerable to disease.

Signs and Symptoms

The following are signs and symptoms of psychological stress that you should watch for, keeping in mind that not everyone experiences the same symptoms.

Emotional symptoms can include anger, anxiety, depression, irritability, feelings of fear and in some cases isolation of self from relationships and routines. Distractibility, lack of concentration and indecision are some of the cognitive symptoms, which are commonly experienced. Physically, people can experience trouble sleeping, eating difficulties and lack of energy.

Your ability to tolerate stress depends on several factors, including the quality of your relationships, your general outlook on life, your emotional intelligence and genetics. In general, there are aspects of your character and life situation that can mediate your stress tolerance level.

INFORMATION BOMBARDMENT

Rising Above the Digital Onslaught

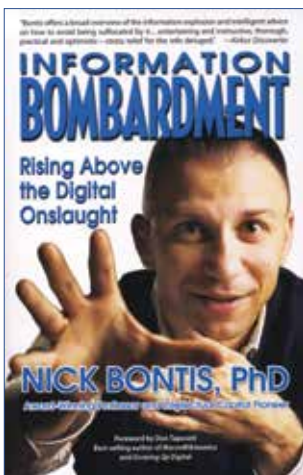
Nick Bontis Ph.D.

Dr. Bontis is the Thursday evening keynote speaker at CPCO's annual conference on April 26 - 27, 2012.

His book, Information Bombardment will be available for purchase following his presentation.

Read the excerpt below to get a flavor of what Nick Bontis will bring to his high energy presentation.

This excerpt from chapter 1 is reproduced with permission.



THE DAY WAS ABSOLUTELY PERFECT. My family and I arrived on the island of Santorini in the middle of the Aegean Sea. If you have never been to this little piece of paradise, I encourage you to do so if you get the chance. Sculpted out of one of the earth's largest-known volcanoes more than 3,500 years ago, Santorini is a small archipelago off the coast of Greece. Layers upon layers of different-color lava rock form ledges of terrain filled with

cascading villas leading downward to the ocean. The glistening views from the whitewashed-stone terraces are spectacular, and the sunsets over the volcanic caldera are breathtaking. It has always been one of my most favorite places in the world.

My wife and I, as well as our three children, were making our annual summer escape to the island. But the day wasn't to be as perfect as I thought. Despite having physically escaped Ontario, there was still a chunk of me that couldn't leave. I hadn't checked my e-mail in over forty-eight hours, and I was about to go crazy. All those important messages and pieces of information that I fictionalized in my head were simply sitting in my inbox unattended. But there was another problem: on this exquisite Greek island, amidst the lavish beaches and gentle breeze, I couldn't get any reception on my BlackBerry. How was I going to find out what I was missing without connectivity? I needed information, and I had been cut off. I was severed from the digital world!

"Daddy, come play soccer with me," Charlie, my older son, begged, tapping on my leg.

"Hold on," I replied. "Give me just a second. I'm trying to get some stock market quotes off my phone."

"Let's search for seashells, Daddy," came another request from Dino, my younger son.

"Can my dolly swim with us?" piped in my daughter, Tia Maria.

"Nick," my wife Stacy called from a few yards away, "what are you doing? Let's take a walk down the beach and catch the sunset."

"Just a second, everybody," I said, trying to buy some time. "I think I am getting a signal. I will be done soon."

I missed the sunset, regarded as one of the most romantic in the world. I missed an opportunity to play soccer, collect seashells and swim in the water. I lost these precious moments with my family on one of the most beautiful islands in the world. For what? For the endless search of knowledge. Or, better yet, for the need to quench my incessant addiction to information. I was held hostage by digital chains. I was craving my data fix as if it were air, food and water, yet in the process I failed to balance the most important things in my life.

Think back to the apex of the industrial era circa the mid-1960s. Steel workers at Dofasco, one of my hometown's largest employers, would go to the factory when the whistle blew. At day's end, the whistle would blow again, signaling them to go home. At night the workers would spend time with their families and then enjoy some leisurely pursuits. But when does the whistle blow today? Honestly, the whistle blows only if we shut off our smartphones. Most of us have more attentive relationships with our BlackBerrys than we do with our spouses and friends.

"Good morning, my love. Do you have any e-mails or alerts for me this morning? How's your battery, sweetheart? Are you feeling well connected?"