

> ADMISSIONS

High school graduates on pins and needles

As acceptance letters arrive, anxiety can run high. Here's how to manage the stress

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Nervous hallway chatter about acceptances. Anxious minutes waiting for the day's mail. Moments of elation and gut-wrenching rejection.

'Tis the season of suspense in high schools across Ontario as university and college admissions get underway.

The jitters are palpable during what's likely the most nail-biting time of the year for graduating post-secondary students, says Joanne Brown, president of the Ontario School Counsellors Association.

"This time of the year is more stressful because some students have started to receive offers, while some have not, which creates a lot of anxiety," she says.

But that doesn't mean the stress can't be managed.

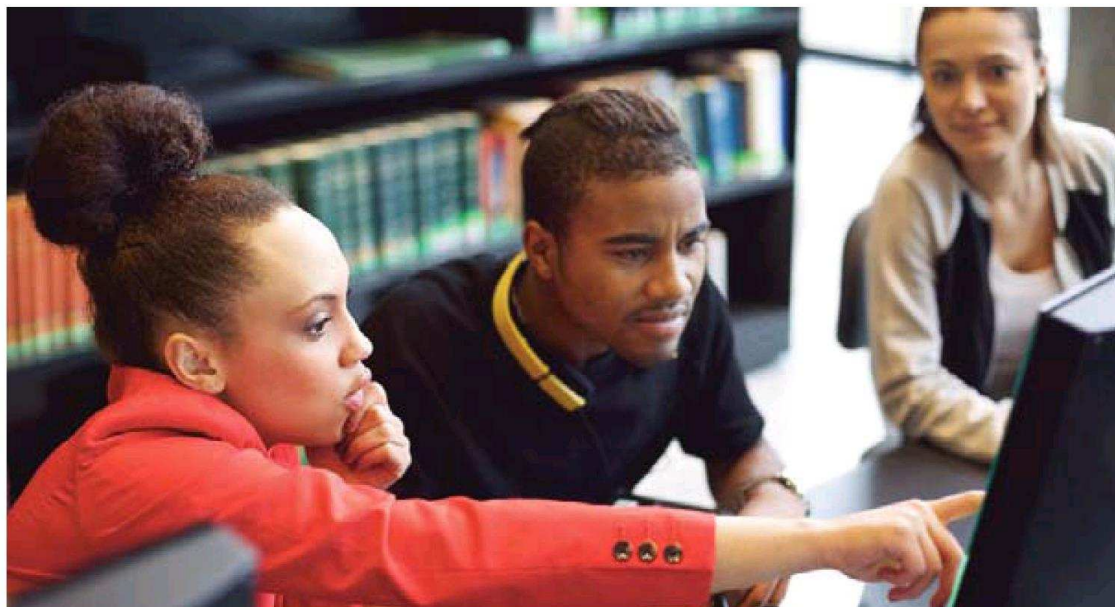
Guidance offices are open, Brown says, with trained counsellors ready to help weigh pros and cons of different schools, phone offices to inquire about bursary options and talk over students' fears of leaving social circles they've grown attached to over the last four years.

One way to neutralize concerns? Learn as much as possible about prospective schools. That means looking closely at program courses and following top-choice schools on Twitter to get a sense of post-secondary culture beyond the lecture hall.

"Visit the campus," Brown advises. "There's a lot to be said from a vibe. If you plan to spend a chunk of your life there, you need to make sure you feel comfortable on the campus."

If a graduating student is set on commuting to university, for example, "spend a morning to get on that bus or that subway," Brown suggests, "and figure out how long it's going to take to get you there."

"All these pieces help to reduce some of the unknowns and help you make your decisions more easily," she says.



SHUTTERSTOCK

To ease post-secondary school jitters, learn as much as you can about the school, including looking to Twitter to get a feel for campus culture.

Those worried about adjusting emotionally to post-secondary life can also look into mental-wellness resources and free counselling.

Some universities have a "therapy dogs" program, for example, that brings canines to campus.

"It's pet therapy made available just before exams," Brown explains, "so students can spend an hour or so with a dog, which can really help to reduce anxiety."

High school administrators are well aware of the pressures students face, says Toronto psychologist Ken McCallion.

McCallion notes some Toronto District School Board staff have introduced relaxation and mindfulness exercises, as well as yoga, to help young people de-stress.

"An increasing number of high schools are offering meditation and relaxation training," he says.

Making decisions tends to alleviate stress, too.

McCallion recommends creating a "visual timeline" of steps leading up to day one of class, and having a frank talk about life goals with family.

That open communication with a parent or guardian is crucial, says Tali Shenfield, a GTA psychologist who works with teens.

"It's important for a parent or another caring adult to be available and willing to sit and talk with the adolescent. It's better for the adult to listen than to talk," she says, as students often need a sounding board to help them process what's really worrying them.

If the academic rigours of a post-secondary program are worrisome, a study buddy or study group can help.

Students identified with a learning disability should seek out the post-secondary institution's special ser-

vices, suggests Shenfield, to understand what accommodations might be available.

"They can arrange for anything from tutoring to specific accommodations during exams such as extra time and small-room testing," she says.

Exams are weighted more heavily in post-secondary institutions than in high school, so it may be well worth taking advantage of such services.

For anyone who may feel awkward about making special requests, McCallion offers a different perspective. "Sameness is not fairness. Give yourself fairness instead," he says.

Students who suspect they may have a learning disorder can contact a registered school psychologist for testing or the government-funded Mobile Assessment Team, which lets post-secondary students access as-

essment services. Diagnoses do not appear on academic records.

All in all, Shenfield says, stress is not always a bad thing, as mild stress can keep people focused or help them lay out their priorities.

"But it's important to recognize when it gets out of hand and overwhelms the teenager," she says. "When they start underperforming on exams, these are signs that the stress is too much and something needs to be done."

For more information on education planning for parents and graduating students, visit the Ontario School Counsellors' Association website for its What's Next Guide.

Teens and post-secondary students with anxiety can also call the toll-free counselling service Kids Help Phone (1-800-668-6868) or Good2Talk (1-866-925-5454), a hotline geared to Ontario post-secondary students.