



## The Green Hub Project for Teens Life Skills for Teens

# Perfectionism and high-achiever mentality 2018

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At Luck's Yard chiropractic and health care clinic we encounter many young people who struggle with anxiety and stress around studying, revision and taking exams.

After treating many students who showed tension in their spines and musculature from exam stress, I started doing talks in Schools to inspire students to look after their minds and bodies whilst studying. The feedback I got from each School led me to do more research into the connection of stress and exams.

In 2015 together with a local group of professionals we created the 'The Surrey Teen Summit' group, and we now run workshops in Schools and in the community on the subject of mental and physical health, as well as life strategies. We have also run workshops on the benefit of yoga, mindfulness, art, leadership, emotional resilience, study strategies over the past three years.

I am also a parent to two teenagers with completely opposite learning needs and interests so have seen the stresses from the current educational system from different sides. My co-author Tilda is 17 and currently studying a mixture of creative arts and science at College.

Our aim with this article is to help you find simple strategies to support some of the issues that we feel could occur when working too much and too hard is having a negative effect on your health.

In the UK, there has sadly been more focus on improving learning and achieving rather than improving emotional health and well-being, and there is also less time spent on self-awareness and development in Schools, instead the focus is striving for academic success. The trend is finally changing and for that we are grateful!

We believe there could be a better balance to help you to thrive both academically and emotionally. There is clearly a stigma around mental health and wellbeing for teenagers and many appears to be suffering in silence without being able to share what they are going through with those around them.





## Do all teenagers struggle with the same issues?

In every School I have visited in the past ten years, and every workshop I have been part of, (with over 2200 students) the issues teenagers bring up are always the same, whether they are in state or private education; and from the news this seems to be the same for teenagers world-wide.

### These are some of the issues we commonly find in high achievers:

- Stress affecting relationships with others.
- Issues around sleep.
- Stresses related to perfectionism.
- Never feeling content with the quality of their work.
- Lack of confidence and self-belief.
- Scared of what parents will say if they don't succeed. (Some are more worried about this than others).
- Wanting to choose a different career than parent's wishes.
- Nerves and anxiety around achieving the best results in exams.

### But why do high achievers really need help when they are doing better than most academically anyway?

Much has been written over the years about students with learning difficulties such as dyslexia, sensory integration and dyspraxia, but less is currently been discussed to support those who are high achievers. There is almost a stigma around this subject and yet, they we feel that they can struggle mentally just as much as those who feel they cannot succeed at all.

The issues are just a little different. One can wonder why a high achieving student might find life difficult and struggle mentally or emotionally around their work and education. We hope we can help to untangle some of these myths in this article.

### The positives of being a high achiever

High achievers are often early learners and developers. They see connections and links easily and can work on a different level to other students. They are often self-driven and highly motivated. It is also a self-generating circle as if you well in school you can feel more motivated to carry on trying. Whereas those who struggle academically can often learn to give up before they even try.





The positive side of being a successful learner is that you often get more done, and usually to a higher level. Naturally this will help boost both morale and motivation and encourage you to stretch yourself in new areas. You may, as a result, possibly get more opportunities within your school and become more widely recognised for your work.

This recognition could be in the form of mentions in assemblies, commendations or awards. It may also lead to getting into a more selective university degree and later to an exciting and empowering professional career.

### The flip side of being a high achiever

The flip side, which is the side I most often encounter in my teaching and when I speak to young people in schools, is that it could be exhausting being your own 'perfectionist-task-master': the high achievers often have their own barometer of success, and it is often only deemed acceptable for them to achieve 90-100%.

That is what we call the '100% mentality character'. When you know what you can achieve, you will never really be happy with any less than perfection, and you will always therefore strive towards this level. This is often where the issue lies.

When you know what you could achieve, you will never be happy with getting anything less than that, and you may have a sense or a perception that there is also an expectation to keep achieving at this level from teachers, peers, parents and friends. This could ultimately be exhausting to keep up.

The 'I can do it now mindset' is often common in high achievers too, as they never want to let anyone down, so they work hard to do a task immediately but feel as though they can never properly relax, as their work is never really done and never 'completely perfect'.

You could therefore be your own fiercest critic and can never really see that you have done a good enough job. Being 'good enough' is something we encounter a lot in our workshops. There is often a high level of anxiety around work, projects, dead-lines or exams as they don't want to let themselves nor their teachers or parents down.

Some high achievers who have never really experienced any academic set back's in their lives may also find failure hard to manage. As this have not been a frequent issue for them they will not have had to learn how to handle this emotionally and intellectually, and this could as a result become something they might actively avoid.

Therefore some high-achievers might stay safely within their own comfort zones and only get involved in the activities they feel they can succeed and thrive in.

Another common emotion that high achievers experience is the 'The Impostor syndrome'. This is a term for when someone is convinced that they don't deserve their achievements and that





they might not be what everyone around them perceives them to be. (Amy Cuddy, Valerie Young). Perfectionists are usually harder on themselves than any other learners and rarely give themselves credit for what they have done.

This could potentially lead to high levels of stress and anxiety surrounding their work which could create unnecessary pressure on the individual. Students are not always taught enough about this area, or perhaps supported in how to understand this, and yet it is a prevalent problem among so many high achievers.

The worry is that if this kind of behaviour is not understood or supported, the young person could bring the 'imposter syndrome' and the feeling of a job never being completed, with them to university and even with them to their future careers.

They might continually strive higher from a perspective of not being good enough, instead of being driven positively for a passion for their jobs. This is a distinction worth taking note of.

This could be extremely exhausting, and might lead to symptoms of being overwhelmed. Our intention with this article is to highlight this behaviour so that you could start exploring and learning about yourself and finding better strategies to feel ok just as you are, and that you are doing a good job right now.

Change can only happen when we first become aware of it, then gradually observe it, and eventually alter the behaviour little by little.

Be patient, it can take time to change, but slowly but surely you can change these thought patterns.

### **What does success mean for teenagers themselves?**

We love finding out what success means to people as it varies so incredibly between each individual. For some people success signifies financial security and growth, but to others it may be academic accolades or professional status, whereas to others it might mean being able to get a job, buy a house, have a car and go on holidays. We are all so different and that is what makes life so interesting.

But what actually really matters in industry and a profession is to be a proactive worker that others would like to work with; to be a person with a high moral code and strong ethics who is reliable, loyal and highly dependable. A successful person in industry might also be someone who is strong, and able to use their abilities to their fullest and brave enough to try new things without worrying if they will achieve it or not.





It could also be someone who is a good team builder who helps others to shine and develop. It is worth mentioning that neither of these qualities are linked to grades but are personal qualities that we can develop throughout our lives.

So, every time you worry about perfection and your grades, remind yourself that building your character and ability to connect with others is just as important in the long run.

### The value of good communication

What we often find is that students have a belief that parents want them to perform academically to the highest standard even if it makes them stressed. They could then easily start building a story in their head that their parents want them to succeed no matter what, and how it might affect their mental and physical health.

This is a very common misconception and could potentially lead to unnecessary misunderstandings. We would love to help you to find a neutral channel of communication so that you can dispel these myths and open up a helpful communication pathway with your parents.

### What are the signs to look out for when you might be overwhelmed?

**These are only a few of the symptoms that can show when you might be overwhelmed or stressed.**

- You are never happy with your work, so you self-criticise and feel as though you can't ever reach a good enough standard, even though your work actually is perfectly fine.
- You focus more on the negative than positive.
- You might feel isolated from your peers.
- You might have controlling behaviour around food, sleep and exercise.
- You might start obsessing over your work and staying up all night just to get it done to a better standard.
- You might be more short tempered and angry for no obvious reason.
- You might be more stomach pain and headaches.
- You might even be stomach complaints before performances/deadlines.





## What can you do to help yourself?

We always recommend that you talk to your` parents first. Could you try to start the conversation and ask them to try to listen without making comments or trying to fix the situation?

Could you encourage them to listen to your wishes, hopes and fears without adding in their own wishes for you? In our workshops we encourage the students to talk to their parents about the potential price of working too hard, and not giving oneself a very valuable physical and brain break. Often we can work hard, but not realise that we are reaching a tipping point which might not serve our physical or mental state in the long run.

The conversation that might ensue could potentially help take away the perceived fear that you will only be loved and appreciated for your academic achievements. Miscommunication could potentially build up the belief that you are not loved unless you perform to your highest ability.

These issues could build and build in one's mind and could be avoided from healthy and non-confrontational conversations. A good place to start the dialogue is in the car, when one is not sitting opposite one another.

## Helping you to find the best academic institution for you:

It is helpful to realise that we are all individuals with our own different strengths and abilities. Some of us may not cope with the pressures of external high expectation and others might do better with a more hands-off approach.

Some of us might not be best suited to go to the most prestigious universities, rather one that is more full time and interactive, which has a more active pastoral care and support. It is important to emphasise that all of these are fine.

It would not be because you are lazy, or fearful of the pressure, but your nervous system will serve you better in a calmer environment. The more you are able to think for yourself and learn through experiences with your own self-reflection, the better you can decide which future academic environment will suit your personality and learning style best.

The number of young people I have met who have felt immeasurably happier after not getting it right initially but then eventually finding the place to learn, is also common. It is hard to know in advance, and sometimes we just have to change academic institution for a variety of reasons, and this is just part of life, not a failure.

It is a learning experience. Most parents don't want to see their teens make any mistakes, and potentially miss a year, but occasionally the extra year out, or gap year can be the link for finding ones natural talent and passion.







It certainly did for me as I did not study chiropractic with my college grades but spent a year abroad and then studied science on my return in order to apply to my chiropractic degree. Had I not waited I might have pursued a career in something I was not meant to do and have been so happy doing each day for the past 28 years.

I also wanted to add that many of my nieces and nephews have had gaps years and then found their direction after doing other things. We are in such a hurry in the UK to get it 'right' when sometimes we need to try different things in order to find what we really are good at and enjoy doing.

### Is being the best the solution for life?

It is worth considering what being at the top of the league table in everything could lead to in the long term. Does it actually translate into future 'successes'?

While we absolutely value hard work and dedication in society, it is worth considering other aspects of what might be worthwhile attributes for future professional life. In my own experience, being a good team player, team builder or even a good colleague has taken me further than just having straight A's and being at the top of the class.

Learning to fail and to understand others around us and being a good fellow friend, can teach us more than just being at the top. These qualities are essential in professional life, as you rarely work alone without colleagues.

To always be the best could also potentially be lonely as everyone else is below you, and you could feel under constant pressure to maintain your 'position' on the top of the league table.

Discussing these issues at home can help with understanding the value of team building and empowering others as well as nurturing true and healthy relationships built on trust and loyalty. And that to enjoy the journey of learning could be just as important as getting to the goal. Being and feeling good enough is a good place to be for mental health and well-being.

### But what if I fail.....?

We now know that the process of learning where we study actively and deeply (which means with intention), when we reach out of our comfort zone, possibly fall again but then reconstruct what we did, can actually make us smarter and develop stronger neural connections?

Neuroscientists have found that learning from our failures can make us smarter. And when we look back at why we didn't get it, and how it could have happened, we then learn the subject better. Failure can also be seen as feedback. It can be a way to look at something in a different and new way.





What are your parent's thoughts and feelings about failure? Could they share experiences from their own life where failure made them stronger and more resilient? We encourage you to talk to them about their challenges they have had in life and how they dealt with them

Learning to fail can equally help us see what actually is important in life, and what really matters in the long run. The book 'The talent code' by Daniel Coyle is a book which covers this topic specifically. Looking at failure this way can make you braver to go out of your comfort zone and try new things that you feared before.

### The value of non-competitive activities:

- Could you try activities that are non-competitive and simply for fun. This could be sports, music and drama to mention a few, but the point is to just enjoy it and not being competitive. This is one of the most nurturing exercises for high achievers to learn to do, and just doing it for the fun of it. It can help to calm your brain activity, give it some essential breathing space and rest.
- It is so essential to have time to be bored, do creative and non-competitive activities that gives their brain a break, to breathe, to rest and just to have fun. Otherwise the brain is constantly being active and on a high alert mode in a 'sympathetic state', which could at some point create either burn out of exhaustion.
- Doing jigsaws and doodling are good mindfulness practices that can give the brain a well-earned rest and break. We jokingly call this ice-cream time. You cannot possibly just work and work and still expect your brain to be alert and ready to take in information. It needs to consolidate it to preserve it.
- Did you know that the brain also consolidates learning during rest and sleep. I have seen this on numerous occasions when high achievers with intensive schedules have been overwhelmed and by simply setting of some rest time, could find a space to breathe and feel better again.

### The value of self-care:

One of the biggest feed-back I get from my workshops is the need to do more self-care and look after ourselves.

And looking after yourself should be number one priority. The body works a little like a pressure cooker, and if you don't give it a break, the body could then react externally or internally in some way. What we recommend is that you reflect on what relaxing activity you could do where you completely empty your brain from outside pressures, and find time to just be.







What this could be is different for everyone. For some it is drama in a different group from School, for others it is doing jigsaws or even art like doodling. For some it might be writing in your bullet journal, singing and dancing, but it must not be competitive. For others it might be having a cranial work, deep tissue massage or reflexology.

It is important that it is relaxing and fun. I promise it will not make you less smart or you will not lose out on opportunities in life by taking a breather, but you will come back rested and more focused as a result of it. It will also make you a more rounded person.

Creating time to unwind and destress is incredibly important in order to maintain a healthy and productive lifestyle: it reduces stress and tension and can allow for some well-deserved healing.

### What can you do before an exam?

Pre-exam nerves can be highly common for most students, but some of the most affected are the high-achievers who sometimes will focus more on what they don't know and the few percent they might not achieve.

**The stressful thoughts can circulate around in one's head and spin and spin out of order.**

One technique that can help is to look around you and see your friends in your class and who might be actually struggling too, or who are stressed in order to pass the subject.

See how you could help to give them support and encouragement. When you put your focus outside yourself you will figuratively 'get out of your own head', and in doing give your brain a break from the rumination. It also gives you a healthy perspective on what really matters in life. Being kind and considerate can raise your own dopamine levels that can help you feel better about yourself.

**Kindness is a scientific way to make your-self feel better too. (The popularity illusion).**

Long term measures to reduce stress could be increasing your aerobic exercise to three times a week on a regular basis. Mindfulness meditation and yoga are scientifically proven activities that can reduce the cortisol and stress reactions in our bodies too. Taking a walk in nature and being with your best and most supportive friends face to face is also incredibly healing.

### What to do when all else fails?

If you find that you need more help we strongly recommend that you seek professional advice. In the NHS you can look for CAHMS or the Surrey Youth Services, and you will often have counsellors at your school. In the private sector look for a registered counsellor, psychologist or an educational coach who are known for working with teenagers.





Finding a good therapist with whom you can safely reflect on who you are and how you work can be paramount to developing a strong sense of feeling good inside. I would go as far as wishing that this support should be normal practice to all young people when they grow up and develop. Getting mentoring and coaching should be standard practice for everyone growing up and that should reduce much of the anxieties we now see in society. You are smart and strong if you look for help as it will make you more resilient.

### Finally:

These are just some thoughts to reflect on. Finding a better life balance now is such an investment for the long term emotional and physical health. It helps you to listen to your own bodies and minds, and to make better decisions for yourself, because ultimately nobody can do that for you.

If we can also find a way to have a dialogue with our families, which is open and non-judgemental, we can learn to be open to different paths and outcomes by having talked about them in a safe way.

For further reading we can recommend these books we have added below.

## Remember, you are enough!

**Tone Tellefsen Hughes and Tilda Hughes**

### References:

The Popularity illusion by Mitch Prinstein, Frazzled by Ruby Wax, Finding your Element by Ken Robinson, Blame my brain by Nicola Morgan, Brain Storm by D. Siegel, The Talent Code by Daniel Coyle, The Big Leap by Gay Hendricks, Mindset by Carol Dweck, Presence and Daring Greatly by Brenne Brown, also on TED talks, Grit by Angela Duckworth

**Recommended Apps:** Forest, Headspace, Insight timer, Brain wave, Calm, Andrew Johnsson apps on sleep, stress and anxiety.

