

• • • FREEING BOYS FROM ANXIETY



Why do some boys in high school become moody, irritable, and prone to angry outbursts? How can parents tell if their poor behaviour – often saved for parents at home – is just a passing hormonal phase or a sign of something more? This article looks at the hostility in hallways that some boys can bring home, especially boys who are sensitive and prone to anxiety. In my response to a worried parent, I provide suggestions about how we can help mentor a boy's passage to manhood by openly discussing worry and anxiety. In the process we may be able to offer ideas that can help boys cope with the inevitable stresses of maturation in our culture.

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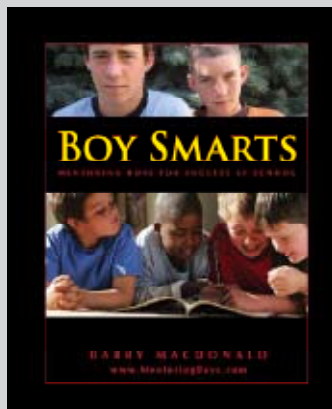
Hello Barry,

Recently, our thirteen year-old son slammed his bedroom door shouting at me "Leave me alone!" I listened to him complain about school and how everybody was a jerk. In the privacy of his room he used strong language that isn't usually spoken in our home. I know that the past four months of starting Grade Eight have been difficult for him, but where did all his frustration and anger come from?

Thankfully, over the recent Christmas break he settled back to the boy that we usually see – quiet, gentle and reasonably happy. We have a good family life and we are close. But I'd sure love to know what happened last fall at school. Why did he become so reactive and irritable? What triggered his anger?

You need to know that Mark has mostly been a shy and quiet boy. Intense anger is uncommon for him. Kindergarten was a difficult transition, with separation tears, but he eventually settled in and did well throughout his elementary years. His classroom teachers would often comment about his quiet nature, mentioning that he rarely offered ideas in class without prompt.

For a couple of years he seemed to enjoy Cubs, but he stopped going when the leader left and the new leader provided more time to play floor-hockey. Much like my husband, our younger son loved playing floor-hockey, but Mark would no longer have anything to do with it. I guess he's more shy like me. It also worries me that more recently he has become obsessed with



Adolescence can especially be a stressful time for boys

bulking up in our basement with all the weightlifting equipment.

Should I contact his teachers to talk about his angry outbursts at home if they come back? We have been cautions to not over-stress Mark, knowing that he does better with a more structured and routine family life. I wonder if he needs anger management? At times I feel helpless with him. Maybe I need the counselling? What can my husband and I do to support him?

Suzanne - Toronto

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Dear Suzanne,

We all know that adolescence can especially be a stressful time for boys, as the pressures and expectations increase at home, at school, and in their social lives. When you saw Mark slam his bedroom door, shouting, "Leave me alone!," you must have found it hard to discern whether he is simply frustrated with normal life pressures, or whether he is wrestling with deeper concerns such as anxiety or depression.



Many parents have discovered that in the loving safety of their home, teenage torment seeps out – or explodes! – as irritability and anger. When males consistently present this way, counsellors and medical

professionals often suspect underlying depression; however, given your son's positive response to family time over the holidays, I hesitate to suggest a problem with depression. Your comments about Mark's approach to life indicate that he has a sensitive nature and may be prone to anxiety. Boys who are sensitive have "spider senses".

He likely needs additional support to make sense of his inner turbulence so that he can acquire coping skills to meet the demands of school life, and beyond. While many teenage boys are embarrassed by their nervousness and hide their true feeling through a stoic mask of what they believe should be presented, Mark, like many boys, is at risk of internalizing his struggle – believing that he is a screw-up – and thus developing a serious problem with anxiety.

Sometimes parents and teachers can overlook a boy's cry for help, writing it off as "boys will be boys." As we recall our own adolescent angst, we

For those of you not familiar with my term "**spider senses**" to describe acute sensitivity among boys, you may want to refer to the MentoringBoys.com article called "**Spider Senses in Boys**" for a description.

Boys can internalize their struggles & develop distorted views of themselves

Societal attitudes have fostered a silent crisis among males and boys learn to withhold their frustrations.



might also be inclined to presume that Mark will somehow get through it as many of us did, but we would all be wise to acknowledge that we never experienced the age as Mark experiences it. Youth today live have much greater exposure to disturbing information, over-stimulation, increased expectations, and accelerated rate of change than we experienced. Boys who are sensitive can pulsate with anxiety in a harsh world where Rambo rules.

In *Boy Smarts – Mentoring Boys for Success at School*, I show how parents and teachers must keep in mind that despite a boy's veneer of aloofness, boys can and do worry about many things. They may worry about their changing bodies, and about whether their muscles – especially their penis – are big enough. They may worry about how to respond to an offer of marijuana, which some youth argue is soon to become legal anyway. They may worry about receiving homophobic taunts such as fagboy, or racist taunts, such as raghead if they belong to a non-dominant ethno-cultural tradition. They may worry about achievement at school or about their parents breaking up.

Ultimately they worry about not fitting in.

Note that a boy's anxieties over such matters are not particularly obvious. Today's macho culture seems pumped on steroids. While girls are encouraged to relieve their stress by sharing their problems with others, boys are ashamed to disclose and commonly internalize their stress. They are taught to turn their uncomfortable feelings into anger – which we all know contributes to the number of men felled by accidents, suicides, and heart attacks. The male ritual of using alcohol and drugs to manage and conceal strong feelings only adds to the damage.

Societal attitudes have fostered a silent crisis among males and boys learn that to reach manhood they must be strong without fail. In a cultural climate that associates masculinity with bravado, lassitude, or the over-ripe masculinity as seen, for example, on "Lenny vs. Spenny, boys learn to avoid their feelings and toughen up. They must be strong, controlling – and disconnected.

Emotional weakness must be rejected and even obliterated. It's just not masculine enough.

As early as Kindergarten, many boys discover that gender rules are already in place. When boys notice that a particular game is popular among girls, they often forbid the playing of this game. Their inner turmoil may expressed through stomachaches, bed-wetting, and separation anxiety. Sensitive boys like Mark learn that empathy, caring for others, and listening to their own inner struggle is often not tolerated in our culture, and that survival as males requires anxious vigilance.

Boys often cover their anxieties with a convincing veneer of detachment

Then, fresh from their Elementary School cocoon, they jostle for belonging in their new and larger social setting in Grade Eight – even casual communication between boys pulsates with verbal brutality aimed to keep everyone in a gender straitjacket:

Don't be a chicken
Buck up
Get over it
Don't back down
Be a man
Don't be a wuss
Get some balls
What a fag



When adolescent boys look for adult male models, they also see a drive for dominance associated with an idealized by muscular body shape – the image of a young man with a well developed chest, arm and shoulder muscles along with a “six-pack” abdomen. Size matters among these young adolescent boys. Mark, who likely believes that it's weak and unmanly to admit feelings of worry and despair, may be compensating through his recent interest in weightlifting. He may have bought into the notion that its easier to acknowledge physical symptoms – a torn muscle for example – than to talk about his nervousness.

This desire to measure up – along with peer pressure, boredom, and adversity – can lead boys to experiment with harmful substances. Many older adolescent boys tell me that they would have benefited from more talk about addiction issues in Grade 8, when their Grade Five promise to not use drugs became a distant memory.

The academic success many boys experienced during their intermediate years also becomes a distant memory as they discover among their peers it's no longer so cool to do well in school, where the smart boys are referred to as suck-ups.

Not surprisingly, in our classrooms boys also cover their anxieties with a convincing veneer of detachment and isolation. It would be easy to conclude that since these boys look all right, they must be all right. We need, however, to consider that their disconnection is likely a mask for worry and fear.

Eventually, this mask has men believing themselves that they are not susceptible to mental health concerns such as depression or anxiety. Many of the men and adolescent boys I meet in my consulting office describe symptoms of anxiety without realizing they even have any. For the most part they believe that they just have to tough it through and eventually life will get better. At times, the traits associated with traditional masculinity seem

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Unsupported, anxiety can lead to problems with learning



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beneficial – traits such as being action-oriented, strong and willing to protect those in danger, along with an often helpful ability to compartmentalize and be relatively objective, however, I have consistently observed these males make few connections between their mental health and physical symptoms such as headaches, digestive problems and chronic pain.

Unsupported, anxiety can and does lead to problems with schoolwork, family life, friendships, and general health, and also increases the risk of self-medicating with alcohol or other substances. Undiagnosed, males may also become at risk for depression and suicide. The greatest evidence of male vulnerability is in suicide statistics. Among Canadians of all ages, four of every five suicides are male.

It is important that you and especially your husband talk with Mark to discuss how men who flash quickly to irritation or anger often overlook, and thus do not deal with, their anxiety.

Mark needs to learn that worry typically consists of a series of distressing thoughts about possible negative future events and often come in the form of “what if” questions that can sometimes lead to further escalation: “What if I get called on today to give the answer? Why won’t those guys just leave me alone? What if the teacher is not beside the changeroom next time? Where can I eat lunch to avoid them? How can I get to my locker and down the hallway before they get there?”

Talk to determine the level of anxiety -

Mark also needs to tell the difference between reasonable anxiety – a test that he didn’t study for enough – and the unreasonable – worry that comes from nowhere. Once he can determine his level of anxiety about different events in life he can be mindful of what he says to himself about his worry and make healthier choices to manage anxiety.

To open up this discussion with Mark I have compiled a list of examples of typical anxiety as well as a list of “over-the-top” anxiety that is characteristic of an anxiety disorder. If he is open enough, take time to discuss the following list with Mark and have him indicate on a scale of 1 to 10 where he sees himself.

Typical Anxiety					Over-the-Top-Anxiety				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

You will teach your son that **strong men** are capable of managing **strong emotions**



It is only human to feel stressed, troubled, and at times, highly anxious.

Anxiety Scale

Typical Anxiety

1 2 3 4 5 6

Over-the-Top-Anxiety

7 8 9 10

A. Occasional worry about circumstantial events, such as a test or friendship problem, that may leave you upset

Constant, chronic and unsubstantiated worry that causes significant distress, disturbs your social life and interferes with learning

Typical Anxiety

1 2 3 4 5 6

Over-the-Top-Anxiety

7 8 9 10

B. Feeling self-consciousness in uncomfortable social situations

Avoidance of common social situations for fear of being judged, embarrassed or humiliated

Typical Anxiety

1 2 3 4 5 6

Over-the-Top-Anxiety

7 8 9 10

C. Random case of "nerves" or sweating over an important event such as talking in front of the class

Repeated, random panic attacks or persistent worry/anticipation of another panic attack & feelings of terror or impending doom

Typical Anxiety

1 2 3 4 5 6

Over-the-Top-Anxiety

7 8 9 10

D. Realistic fear of a threatening object, place or situation

Irrational fear or avoidance of an object, place or situation that poses little or no threat of danger

Typical Anxiety

1 2 3 4 5 6

Over-the-Top-Anxiety

7 8 9 10

E. Wanting to be sure that you are healthy, safe, and harassment-free

Performing uncontrollable, repetitive actions, such as washing your hands repeatedly or checking things over and over

Typical Anxiety

1 2 3 4 5 6

Over-the-Top-Anxiety

7 8 9 10

F. Anxiety, sadness or difficulty sleeping immediately following a traumatic event

Ongoing and recurring nightmares, flashbacks or emotional numbing relating to a traumatic event in your life that occurred several months or years ago

Boys need us to look beyond their masks of irritation & bravado

I often find that boys – and lots of men – initially prefer to quantify their feelings with a number scale. Perhaps this liberates them from the question many dislike: “How are you feeling?” In their own time boys then frequently elaborate and expand on their experience. This strategy will also help you both maintain perspective, and hopefully develop different strategies for different kinds of anxiety.



Note that not all boys struggle with anxiety in the same way that Mark does. I recall one 15-year-old boy who struggled with making friends and reverberated with anxiety, which he tried to overcome by being loud and forcing himself into people's conversations, much to the disdain of his schoolmates.

Talk with Mark about your own experience with worry and anxiety, as a mother and especially as a father, to help him normalize and better understand the way that unbridled worry can absorb us. You might also discuss with him the different ways that people express anxiety at his school: the girl with perfect make-up; the boy who always shouts out the answer; or, the teacher who turns red when an overly confident youth challenges her in front of the class. Know that as he becomes more proficient at identifying the varied ways that anxiety can present itself, he will become more mindful of his own anxiety and ability to navigate and manage escalating thoughts and emotions.

What is needed is a healthy feeling and expression of anxiety so that anxiety will loosen its grip: feeling the energy of worry, separating out the feelings and thoughts, and most important of all, calmly deciding how to manage life's ups and downs, perhaps with help...

Stress Busters...

In addition to helping Mark to talk and find new ways to look at life problems you might also consider exploring with him the varied healthy ways that you and his father manage everyday stress. Here are a couple of stress busters I typically recommend to get you started with this discussion:

1. Get your body moving. Exercise is a proven stress reliever. When feeling tense, angry, or anxious, turn off the T.V. or computer and get active – bike, run, swim, walk the dog, or any activity, especially outdoor pursuits. Movement helps the brain to process emotions.
2. Be mindful about how you breathe. Take some slow, calming breaths. Close your mouth and breathe in through your nose and exhale out slowly through your mouth. Breathe in slowly to the count of 4, 5, or 6 and slowly out to the count of 8, 9, or 10. Long and slow exhalations really help to get the stress out of the body.



Not all boys struggle with anxiety in the same way...

We can also emphasize positive aspects of being male



Learning how to manage stress and anxiety is a journey that takes time and practice.

3. Use imagination to take a trip in your mind's eye to a peaceful place where you can relax and have fun. You will need a quiet place to do this exercise. Think of a favourite place you have visited in the past – a special beach, a hiking trail in the woods, or a vacation you enjoyed. Imagine being there again. As you leave your tension behind for a few minutes you will feel calm and relaxed.

4. Listen to relaxing music, read a good book, or even watch an uplifting movie. Notice how your body feels less wound up like a pretzel and more relaxed like a noodle. Do you smile and feel happier inside? Do you feel stronger, maybe refreshed, and even more energetic?

5. Get enough rest and eat healthy food. When we are tired from lack of sleep or not eating properly, it is much harder to face problems.

6. Get away from your worry and do something for other people. Experience has taught me that this helps to take our minds off our own problems and stirs up a good feeling of satisfaction when we make a constructive difference in the life of another.

In your email, I noticed a reference to your younger son as being more like his father, preferring to play floor hockey, and Mark being more like you, shy. While I don't want to read too much into this, Mark may additionally benefit with a frank discussion about genetic predisposition, and how there may be a pattern of heightened anxiety, linking his tendency to worry with your own – if that is in fact true for you – and perhaps to your own father or perhaps your brother, his grandfather and uncle. You may even be able to encourage a male relative that your son admires to discuss his own anxiety openly with Mark so that Mark can further broaden his understanding of the role genetics can play and might just possibly learn new skills to manage his feelings.

Whether with a relative or with someone at home, regular discussions about real emotions in daily life will give Mark permission to have an internal life, approval for the full range of human emotions, and help in developing an emotional vocabulary so that he becomes more confident with managing his own sensitivities.

We can also do this by emphasizing the positives of being a male while also finding ways to assist boys and men in getting the support they need. Part of this is assuring them that we do not consider them less masculine by having a failing or weakness, or by needing to ask for help. It is fear that hamstring many of us men. Fear that admitting we can't go it alone will trigger outside ridicule. Fear that admitting we need assistance will cause us to feel like less of a man on the inside.

Monitor your son's relationship with stress – his behaviour, thoughts, or

Emotional courage is the source of real strength in life

feelings – and listen carefully to what he isn't saying as you keep an eye open for increased emotional overloading. If Mark shows signs of excessive stress and is not open to discussing what's going on, be aware that a consultation with a Registered Clinical Counsellor, School Counsellor, or mental health professional may help you to explore the matter further. Every school counsellor knows that helping youth managing anxiety is central to their job. Mark may even be open to talking to a counsellor on his own for life coaching, but don't push him into it.

As parents we all wish we could steer our kids around the inevitable bumps along the path to adulthood. But bumps happen. As you appreciate your son's struggle with life's potholes, and mentor him to learn how to discuss anxiety more openly, maintain your focus on his ability to overcome and fight back against the anxiety – to live a good life. Your belief in his ability to not only cope, but thrive, will provide him a cheerleading team of support – You can do it Mark!

Three chapters in *Boy Smarts* – “*The Culture of Masculinity at School*”, “*Understanding a Boy's Motivation to Learn*”, and “*Mentoring Boys*” – will assist you beyond this brief article to meet boy your boys' varied needs at home and school.

Finally, remember that helping Mark talk about his inner world and find his own way to balance his emotions is the key. Boys will be open about their feelings when we create safe opportunities for them to do so. They will learn that too much or too little of emotions like worry, frustration, and anger can be a problem. They will become heedful of the negative effects of male rage. But they will also learn that stifling of an emotion, like anger, can also be a problem. They will also learn that an unhealthy inhibition of emotions increases their risk for illness. While Mark may from time to time have outbursts like he did last fall, trust that as his parents you can talk with him and support him to find love and acceptance as he matures to manhood.

When boys like your son Mark learn that emotional courage is the source of real strength in life, for males and for females, we all benefit in ways that we may not have previously imagined. • • •

Barry MacDonald

MentoringBoys.com

Consider also reading 3 chapters in *Boy Smarts* –

“The Culture of Masculinity at School”
“Understanding a Boy's Motivation to Learn”
“Mentoring Boys”

