
Stress: The Mission Predicament

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CASE 1

Freshman Karthik Raman is not only a MSJ student but a novelist, a tennis player, an actor, a reporter and a singer. His secret in managing his extracurricular activities is that he enjoys every single one of them. "They create a balance between school and fun, which makes life easier."

After school, Raman juggles his seventh period class, tennis practice and rehearsals for the musical Crazy For You. He doesn't usually return home from school until about 7:00 pm and sometimes even as late as 10:00 pm. He attempts to complete homework during designated class time or during rehearsals when he's not needed.

Raman also enjoys Western and classical Indian singing. His passion for singing and acting led him to try out for the spring musical, in which he landed a prominent role in the cowboy trio. Musical rehearsals ask him to contribute 15 to 20 hours a week to the production.

But there's more. Interested in writing, Raman has completed the first draft of his novel and even attended a writers' conference last month. When time avails, he submits articles to the local newspaper, the Tri-City Voice.

Despite his jam-packed after-school schedule, Raman manages to sleep eight hours each night and doesn't experience much stress. "Although I am doing a lot of activities, I try to do only activities that don't conflict. I guess I have always been used to doing a lot of activities, so I don't find my schedule stressful."

CASE 2

Sophomore Sharleen Tu is what you would call an overachiever, a hard worker and a highly competitive person. In other words, she's the "typical Mission student."

Although she is only in her second year of high school, Tu is already taking Honors Pre-calculus, and her unweighted GPA first semester was 4.0. In addition to having a rigorous schedule, she is also involved in multiple clubs. She is the historian for LEO club and is an active member of Youth Alive, COR Dance club, and Reach for the Sky. On top of all these school activities, Tu has to make time for her extracurriculars: piano, Girl Scouts, Chinese brush painting/calligraphy and dance.

When asked if college, parents or enjoyment was the driving force for her motivation, she replied, "For the most part, it's a mixture of all three. I want to go to a prestigious college, my parents want me to go to a prestigious college, and I want to make [my parents] proud of me for winning a competition, getting a high grade on my test, etc. I'm also a very competitive person. When I see other people managing to maintain their grades while excelling in other stuff as well, I feel as if I am capable too."

Tu believes that school stresses her out more than clubs do. For her, taking care of LEO club duties adds onto the stress.

"I think that the stress is [here] because Mission has such an academically competitive environment. I think that to lessen the stress, a person has to lower [his/her] expectations."

CASE 3

Junior Sorah Yang has a full schedule every day with activities ranging from being Junior Class President, to trying out for American Idol, to coaching basketball in the Special Olympics. Her level of stress runs high every day.

Along with the hefty load of alphabet soup that comes pouring on this year (ACT, SAT, AP), her role as class president and her passion for singing and dancing add on to her already heavy workload. Right now, planning Junior Prom and rehearsing for Multicultural Week are also on Yang's mind. Outside of school, she enters writing contests, auditions for

talent shows with her singing and dances at Mission Dance and Performing Arts. She looks forward to her activities, and stress is often just a side effect. She doesn't see how it is possible to rid herself of it because stress comes with everything she does. Her stress is defined by the time and effort she throws into each task.

Yang realizes that she could slack off and push the stress elsewhere but knows that people trust her to do whatever she promises. With a sister already in college and two younger siblings, Yang knows that anything she wants, she will have to come by herself. Her working at un-glamorous jobs, such as changing diapers at daycare and sweeping up hair in beauty shops, goes to prove that Yang's stress is a result of her complete devotion to the things she does. She takes on endeavors knowing the possible effects on her health and energy, but she does them anyway because she has a passion for those things. She knows that stress is a part of everyone's lives and therefore she can only keep doing what she loves by putting her best into everything.

CASE 4

Taking some of the hardest courses offered at MSJ, including AP Physics, AP Calculus BC, and Finite/Discrete Math, it's no wonder that Senior Amanda Ren is stressed out from her loaded schedule. "When I come upon something I don't understand in a class, I end up stressing until I get it."

On top of schoolwork, Ren is President of Club Astro and a percussionist in MSJ's band and orchestra. She also works eight hours every weekend at Target, spending her earnings on personal expenses as well as saving up for next year's college textbooks.

The majority of stress doesn't arise from her extracurricular activities themselves, she says, but from balancing her job and academics. "Holding a job can be stressful when you have a test to study for or projects and homework that's due the next day."

Although she is a "second semester senior" awaiting college decisions, Ren still cares about learning the material, not just the college she ends up at. Her motivation to succeed comes from herself as well as fear of her parents' disappointment. She realizes that high school is only the first step, and whichever college she ends up at will bring even more stress.

"Stress comes from the fact that the classes I have now are all related to engineering, which is the major I want to pursue. It's the feeling that if I don't understand the basics now, it'll be even harder in college."

FACULTY VIEW

Teachers often recognize stressful atmospheres in their classrooms. Katherine Geers, a SOS representative, is also a teacher for 10H and 11H English. Naturally, as a teacher and a representative, Geers knows that her students receive a lot of stress.

Geers joined SOS this year and has been attending SOS seminars. When asked about whether or not SOS will actually help students, she said, "SOS has the potential to help the students to relieve their stress, depending on how many students are involved."

These SOS seminars, Geers states, debunk myths about colleges, the application process, and acceptances. They can alleviate the fear that causes the stress that students feel. SOS could also create an understanding between adults and students; students have the opportunity to voice their views on what is stressful, and adults can finally realize the effects of stress.

"Stresses are changing. [Adults] want to understand. Many teachers don't want to be a part of the problem. For teachers, [the understanding] allows them to be more sensitive," Miss Geers says.

Geers wholeheartedly believes that communication is the main method for relieving stress. Once parents, students and teachers know what they're dealing with, they can then act on their knowledge.

MISSION SOS

In response to the increasing stress at MSJ, a recently founded student and parent-run organization is developing a stress education program for students and parents. The following list of student pressures was compiled in an e-mail exchanged with SOS parent coordinator Martha Kreeger:

• They want to go to not just a college, but a SPECIAL COLLEGE - it's hard to get into the college you want to

attend; sometimes every test, every quiz, every project, every assignment feels absolutely important and one more opportunity to fail or succeed. This is called chronic distress and may have long term negative implications.

• Some students may feel they need to perform at the top of the class, not master the material - many students in high achieving schools feel a pressure to be the "best" at what they do as measured by a test (SATs, exams, etc), ranking acceptance into a certain college - but if 100 kids want this and only a handful can get it, that's a high percentage of students who are destined to be disappointed.

• Perceived competition is an issue at many high-performing schools. MSJ has a lot of academically gifted students, so many students feel tough competition. Intense competition can add to a cycle of negative choices and behaviors; the need to compete may encourage students to survive that competition by cheating, living on energy drinks or thinking that a B is a failure.

• Different teachers, different opportunities: Luck of the draw adds to stress. Not all educators connect with students, and it's tough to be in a class if the teacher's teaching style is not right for the student.

SOS hopes to draw awareness to these issues. This year, they have four different workshops to help lessen the stress. For more information, visit www.missionsos.net.

SURVEY STATS

Coming soon are the results of the schoolwide survey taken by Stanford University. As they are not yet available, the Smoke Signal conducted its own survey on Feb. 20 to determine the primary causes of stress among MSJ students.

FRIENDS - 10.1%

OTHER - 22.4

ONESELF - 32.9

PARENTS - 34.6