

## Crash Course

Experts at Stanford University have created a program to help stressed-out students gain perspective -- before they collapse

By Lori Aratani  
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The redheaded woman slips on the Stanford sweat shirt and takes her place in the middle of the 1940s-era wood-paneled classroom.

She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath and then exhales. In real life she is Janet Labberton of [Piedmont, Calif.](#), suburban mom and stressed-out parent. But today she is taking on a new identity: Andy Bishus, college-bound teenager.

Jim Lobdell, an educational consultant and the leader of this exercise, dims the lights and flips on the overhead projector.

"Andy is a junior, taking a tough academic load," he says, his voice dropping an octave as he gestures toward Labberton. "He has two AP classes, two honors classes and typically three to four hours of homework a night. He plays varsity and club water polo. He's junior class president. He's a member of the Key Club. He's on the academic decathlon team. He also works six hours a week as a paid tutor and is a member of his church youth group."

"Now, we're going to see what a day in Andy's life is like."

"It is 7:50 a.m., 10 minutes before first period," Lobdell says.

A man who is supposed to be Andy's Key Club adviser jumps up from behind a table in the room.

He approaches Labberton.

"Hey, Andy," he says, reading from a slip of paper. "The director of the convalescent home said she really appreciated you all going down there last week to play games with the senior citizens. Nice going. By the way, remember to turn in your record and notes about your 20 hours of community service by Friday."

He then kneels down and grabs hold of the sweat shirt Labberton is wearing.

"It is 8:45 a.m., five minutes before first period ends," Lobdell continues.

Another mom, playing Andy's pre-calculus teacher, comes forward: "Class, for homework tonight, do problems 1 through 12 on Page 224 and problems 21 through 30 on Page 227. There will be a short quiz tomorrow based on those kinds of problems, so study up for that."

She then kneels down and grabs another bit of sweat shirt.

"It is 9:43 a.m., two minutes before second period ends," Lobdell continues.

The next woman, playing Andy's honors English teacher, approaches: "Remember, class, you have to finish our novel, *Great Expectations*, tonight," she says. "We'll discuss it tomorrow so you'll be ready for the essay I'm assigning tomorrow."

She grabs a piece of the sweat shirt.

Andy's "day" finally ends at 7:57 p.m. at his church youth group, where the woman playing his youth pastor reminds him about the big ski trip next weekend -- and then grabs more of Labberton's sweat shirt.

By this point, a dozen people are crouched on their knees, each holding a piece of the Stanford sweat shirt. It's just pretend, but Labberton is starting to look a bit alarmed. She shifts her feet to adjust her balance so she doesn't tip over and fall into the group. Around the room, the eight remaining moms and dads are smiling as they take in the silly scene.

"I want to ask the audience how they think Andy feels?" Lobdell asks.

The parents, sitting around long rectangular tables arranged to form a giant square with a space in the middle, look at one another, then back at Lobdell.

"Overwhelmed," says one mom, taking in the spectacle in front of her.

"No control," pipes up a middle-school dad from [Dallas](#), sitting a few chairs away.

Lobdell lets the comments sink in for a moment and then poses a question to the group: "If we were to invite Andy's parents into this, where would they be?"

From their startled expressions, it's clear some in the room hadn't even realized the parents were missing from the equation.

"Standing to the side watching this?" one of the moms ventures timidly. A few of the parents have sheepish expressions on their faces.

"I have a feeling his parents might be tugging on his sweat shirt as well," another mother says.

"Every one of those adults -- they want what's best for Andy," Lobdell says, pointing toward the group gathered at Andy's feet. "But what they're looking at is, 'What are my needs?'"

He's barely halfway through this 80-minute workshop, but he's made his point.

"I never imagined what it looked like," says one of the moms in the audience.

Lobdell nods.

"I know."

He makes eye contact with each person in the room. "Now, what can we do about this besides feeling momentarily depressed?"

THE INSIDE JOKE AMONG THOSE PARENTS, and the 100 or so other folks who have come from as far as [New York](#) and [Toronto](#) to attend the day-and-a-half-long Stressed Out Students (SOS) conference, is that the program is held on the palm tree-dotted campus of [Stanford University](#), repository of overachiever angst. At a session the next day, a former Stanford admissions official will tell a crowd of parents, students and educators the story of how a father once begged an admissions official to fake an acceptance letter because he feared his wife would commit suicide once she learned their son had not been admitted.

But no one can deny that the Stanford name lends the proceedings a level of credibility. More than 400 people, from 35 public and private middle and high schools, have gone through the program since it began in 2004. The majority of these schools are in California, but representatives of campuses in [Chicago](#), New York, [Massachusetts](#) and [Canada](#), also have participated. Schools that want to participate must submit two essays describing their interest in SOS and bring a team that includes an administrator, teacher, counselor, parent and student. Once the team members arrive at Stanford, they are assigned a coach who will help them develop a workable plan for tackling the stress problem. The coach will meet with them throughout the school year as they try to make the plan work.

The program was developed in part by Denise Clark Pope, a high school English teacher turned Stanford lecturer who spent a year observing kids at one of the country's top public high schools and was appalled by what she witnessed.

Her book -- *"Doing School": How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students*, published in 2001 -- was one of the first to explore the culture of overachieving students. (Last fall, Alexandra Robbins chronicled a similar phenomenon in *The Overachievers*, a book based on the year she spent following students at her alma mater, [Walt Whitman High School](#) in [Bethesda](#).)

Pope's concerns were echoed by Doug Daher, a former psychologist at Stanford's health center. He believed the university was experiencing the fallout from the college admissions race: growing numbers of students reporting depression, threatening suicide or exhibiting other troubling behaviors, such as cheating and substance abuse. Together with other Stanford officials, he and Pope created SOS. The program, which is offered free to public and private middle and high schools, is supported by the California Endowment and the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health.

Schools that send teams to the SOS program don't fit the traditional definition of "troubled." All are well-regarded, high-achieving schools, many in middle- and upper-middle-class neighborhoods, where the definition of failure is getting into [Harvard](#) but being wait-listed at

[Yale](#). But the schools are represented here because they have come to realize that academic success often comes at price. It's no accident that promotional literature for the conference refers to SOS as an "intervention."

Although no Washington area schools have gone through the program, Pope said the problem is national in scope, and "the D.C. area has a lot of high-achieving schools that face many of the same pressures.

"Many, many parents will say: 'I know they're working too hard, I know they're overscheduled, I know I'm pushing too hard. But we don't really have a choice. You have to do this in today's society.'"

Demographics are fueling that perception. The number of high school graduates has increased every year since 1996 and is expected to peak in 2009, when 3.3 million students will graduate from high school, according to the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. But the growing number of graduates has not meant more available seats at elite colleges. This year, Harvard, Princeton and Yale accepted fewer than 10 percent of the students who applied.

As a result, the push to achieve begins earlier than ever. More worry equals more pressure.

Martha Kreeger gets that.

"It's fear," said Kreeger, whose daughter, Moriah, attends Mission San Jose High School in Fremont, Calif. "I equate good grades with safety. If my child had good grades, then my child isn't going to end up hungry and on the street. Every little decision feels like it affects the bottom line -- and I think it's hard to get off that train."

This summer, Moriah, a rising junior, applied for an internship at networking giant [Cisco Systems](#). Her parents knew the opportunity would look great on her résumé -- but at the same time they found out she needed back surgery. They considered putting off the surgery if she got the internship.

"And then I realized, that was crazy," Martha said. "Her health was more important than her résumé."

THE SUN IS SETTING ON AN UNUSUALLY BRISK MAY EVENING IN SILICON VALLEY when the minivans and Volvos begin pulling into the Stanford parking lot. Car doors open and slam shut, and out pop small groups of adults and teenagers. Clusters of people weave past the campus post office and bookstore toward Kresge Auditorium.

It's Friday -- opening night for the 2007 SOS conference -- and the brightly lit auditorium is packed. People line the side walls; the lucky ones wedge themselves onto windowsills.

Unlike the rest of the conference, which is invitation only, Friday night is open to anyone interested in hearing more about teens and stress. Featured speakers include psychologists and counselors who have studied the teen stress issue extensively.

Many of them receive warm rounds of applause, but it is 15-year-old Audrey Baker, appearing on a student panel, who is the evening's star.

Elementary school was very relaxed and fun, but by middle school, Audrey says, she was "completely stressed out."

Then came high school, where: "I realized that I stressed out too much in middle school about getting all A's -- now it doesn't matter. Before they were saying, 'You have to do this, you have to get ready for high school,' and now they're saying, 'You have to do this, it's going to get you into a good college.' I mean, really, every day it's like if you get a bad grade on this paper, you get a bad grade in the class, and that goes on your transcript, and that goes to the colleges, and then you're living on the streets."

The words spill out of Audrey's mouth so quickly that she barely has time to breathe between sentences.

"A lot of people I see, say, 'How do you do it all in one day?'" she says.

"I make schedules -- every day -- every minute of what I'm doing. It works, it's good, but what happens is at the end of the day, if it's 10:30, and then it's 10:31, and I'm not asleep, I start to panic."

THE PARTICIPANTS GATHER AT 8:30 THE NEXT MORNING FOR A FULL DAY OF WORKSHOPS, COACHING SESSIONS AND NETWORKING. The 14 returning SOS teams are easy to spot: They're the most chatty and the least shy about helping themselves to the buffet of muffins and coffee that has been laid out by their hosts. By contrast, the 11 rookie teams stand in quiet clusters, uncertain about what the next eight hours will hold for them. One of them, the team from Mission San Jose High School, agrees to allow a reporter to chronicle its efforts to promote change.

The group includes Sandra Prairie, Mission's vice principal; Carey Masatsugu, a veteran math teacher who also coaches the boys' volleyball team; Merri Blum, a school counselor; two outspoken parents, Martha Kreeger and Tomasa Macapinlac; and three quiet but thoughtful students.

Mission's coach, Jennifer Carolan, who received her master's in teacher education from Stanford, lays out the ground rules: Respect others' opinions; don't interrupt; all questions are good ones; everyone owns this discussion.

Then she launches into their opening exercise, the "Stress Tree."

"This is the most important activity that we're going to do today," Carolan tells them.

Each team member will draw a tree and list on its branches the things they see as problems at their campus. Then, they'll brainstorm to determine the "roots" of those problems. Once they understand the roots, the thinking is, they'll be able to develop a strategy for tackling them.

Mission [San Jose](#) is one of California's best public high schools. Ninety-five percent of its graduates go on to college -- with 77 percent enrolling at four-year colleges, including the state's well-regarded [University of California](#) system. It had 44 National Merit semifinalists last school year. But the school's administrators are starting to see some troubling trends. More families are seeking permission for their kids to study at home through the school system's Home and Hospital teaching program, because some of the teens are too emotionally distraught to attend class. Administrators are also coming across more "5150" cases, named for the section of California code that denotes persons in danger of harming themselves or others.

And this is happening even though the school has already made efforts to de-stress. Administrators designated Fridays as wacky Hawaiian Shirt Day and created "Stress-Free Week," a homework-free week of fun activities to celebrate the end of AP exams. But not many people wear wacky Hawaiian shirts, and the concept of "Stress-Free Week" is being revisited, in part because many teachers assigned homework, anyway, and student organizers found planning the week to be . . . too stressful.

As the team members sketch out their trees, Carolan turns to the chalkboard, where she begins to outline a tree trunk. She calls time and looks at the group expectantly. With a little prodding, the answers begin to spill out.

The students have no school spirit, some of the adults in the group say. Some students cut corners by cheating on homework. Many don't care whether they remember what they learn as long as they get a good grade.

But Carolan notices that not everyone is contributing.

"Let's hear from some of the students," Carolan says, directing her attention toward the three sophomores.

"Cheating," says Alexis Selleck.

"Can you say a little bit more about that?" Carolan asks the dark-haired teen.

Alexis hesitates for a moment.

"Kids cheat," she says. "I see it all the time, and they shouldn't be doing it."

On her right, Monil Patel nods.

Carolan adds it to the stress tree.

Once the group has filled the branches of the tree, Carolan pauses.

"Now," she asks. "What are the roots of these problems?"

The team members think for a bit before throwing out a few thoughts.

"It's the college admissions process," says Moriah Kreeger. The debate continues. And then, finally, Moriah's mother, Martha, says softly: "People are afraid that if [their kids] don't do well, something bad will happen."

The room grows quiet. The others nod in agreement. Time is up.

IT'S LATE AFTERNOON, AND THE MISSION TEAM IS BACK AT THE TABLE. Members are replaying some of the more memorable moments from the day. Monil and Alexis are particularly jazzed about a session they attended on academic integrity.

This will be the team members' last chance to meet before the conference concludes. They have 75 minutes to come up with a plan for moving forward. With the stress tree that Carolan drew earlier as a backdrop, they begin their work.

The goal is to take all the problems, all the issues and concerns they laid out earlier in the day, and figure out what the main causes are, Carolan says.

"Take a minute, and write down what you think are the root causes, and then we'll share," she says.

She reminds them to be realistic.

"We have to focus on things we have control over," she says. "For example, we're not going to be able to take on No Child Left Behind."

As the team members consider the question, Carolan creates three columns on the chalkboard. Above the first column, she writes "Root Causes," above column two, "Vision," and above column three, "Action."

After a few minutes, she asks each team member to share his or her thoughts.

Masatsugu, the math teacher, is first up. He says he's thinking about the intense academic competition at the school and what the team might be able to do to reduce that.

"The problem is, it doesn't matter if kids get all A's as freshman. They're still worried," he says.

The others nod in agreement. Under the "Root Causes" column, Carolan writes "excessive competition."

Macapinlac, one of the parents, looks at her list.

"Fear," she says. "If we can get rid of that, kids can pursue their passion rather than worrying about keeping up with the Joneses."

The team members bat around Macapinlac's fear concept until they've broken it down further. They reason that if they can get people to understand that it's possible to be successful without attending the [Ivy League](#), Stanford or [UC-Berkeley](#), perhaps kids and parents will feel less pressure.

Monil says he thinks it would help students feel less stressed about homework and extracurricular activities if they could learn some strategies for better managing their time.

Next, Carolan asks the members to write down their personal vision of what they'd like their school to be like. Despite their different backgrounds, the visions are remarkably similar, but there's still tweaking to be done.

It takes more than a dozen drafts, but the group finally comes up with a mission statement its members can agree on: "We would like to create a school environment that nurtures integrity, academic engagement, connectedness and well-being, while dispelling perceived ideas and myths."

The words are jargony, but the intent is clear: Team members want their school to be a place where students are excited about learning; where they don't feel like they have to cheat to get ahead; and where they can be healthy and happy because they realize they -- not factors such as the college they attend -- are the ones who determine their future.

Team members knew coming in that they couldn't expect to leave the conference with all the answers, but, this being a group of overachievers, it's hard for them to get over the feeling that they *should* have accomplished more.

Carolan encourages them to think positively. She tells them that people from another school she worked with in another school reform program took two years to come up with a workable plan. From the team members' expressions, it's clear many of them don't find that bit of news particularly encouraging.

"Baby steps," Carolan says. "Baby steps."

THE CREATORS OF THE SOS PROGRAM SAY ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT PROBLEMS THEY FACE IS DETERMINING WHETHER THE PROGRAM WORKS. So Stanford's Pope and her colleagues have begun to conduct surveys at SOS schools, asking students whether they believe the climate has changed. Preliminary data from 10 SOS schools is under review and slated to be released this fall.

Not all of the schools that have gone through the SOS program have been successful. Parental and student ambition is a difficult monster to tame. Some of the schools that entered the program three years ago are still struggling to make changes. Others have already instituted changes that have had an impact. Acalanes High School, in [Lafayette](#), a wealthy suburb east of [San Francisco](#),

which just completed its first year in the program, is an example. It started holding workshops on stress for parents and students.

Course scheduling at Acalanes used to give counselor Lynn Millar a headache. She'd take a deep breath before each session, anticipating the inevitable battle between what she thought the student should be taking versus what his or her parents thought.

"The parents will say more so now, 'I don't want him to feel overwhelmed. Do you think this is too much?'" she says. "It's refreshing."

Jay Chugh, who teaches AP biology at Acalanes, has cut the amount of homework he gives his students from an hour or more a night to 20 minutes. Chugh eliminated what he calls "busywork" -- assignments that required students to define terms, complete sentences or fill in the blanks. Instead, he assigns essay questions that require students to explain concepts. Such assignments force them to think more deeply about the material; it also makes it difficult for students to copy assignments from one another.

In Chugh's view, too many teachers have adopted the mind-set that more homework equals more learning. "There's a tipping point," Chugh says. "Some students simply stop doing it, or they start copying from each other when they have that much homework. You have to find the balance."

Even with -- or, perhaps, because of -- the lighter homework load, Chugh says, more of his students are passing the AP test.

ON A 90-PLUS-DEGREE AUGUST DAY, THE MINIVANS AND SUVS FORM A LINE ALONG PALM AVENUE IN FREMONT. Mission San Jose parents have arrived to pick up their information packets for the new school year. But this year, when some of the mothers and fathers pull into the horseshoe-shaped driveway to collect their envelopes, they are greeted by a line of enthusiastic teenagers.

In quick bursts, SOS team members Monil, Alexis and Moriah, and several of the classmates they've recruited, make a pitch for an upcoming program the group has put together on the college admissions process. The program grew out of four meetings the team held over the summer, during which it fleshed out its plan for reducing stress at Mission.

The students have blanketed the Fremont campus with fliers and created bumper stickers and T-shirts to promote what they have dubbed "Mission: SOS." While many of the students have taken the message to heart, winning over teachers and parents has been harder. The first real test of whether the SOS concept will play will come during the second week of school, when the team holds its first public SOS event -- an evening workshop on college admissions. "College Match: Prestige vs. Fit" is one of four parent/student education forums the group has scheduled for the school year.

"I don't know if we're going to get 100 people or 20," says SOS parent Martha Kreeger the night before the event. "All the teachers keep saying, 'Please lower your expectations.' But when you're in it, it's hard. We all know the first one sets the tone."

In the end, it turns out, they didn't need to worry.

"We had 250, which is phenomenal," reports Sandra Prairie, the school's vice principal, the day after. "That's huge for us. For other programs, we're lucky to get 25 parents to come. We're just hoping the momentum stays.

"The more we talk about it -- the more doable and realistic it seems -- the more I see things happening," Prairie says. "We're never going to eliminate the stress, but we can say, 'This is how you can deal with it, so that stress doesn't overtake you.'"

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*How can you stop the stress? Join expert and author Denise Clark Pope and others for a discussion Monday at noon at <http://washingtonpost.com/magazine>.*

## **VITAL STATS**

56%, or more than half, of D.C. area high school students said school was their biggest cause of stress.

About 35% of local teens said they experienced stress frequently, compared with 27% of teens nationwide.

77.4% of high school students in one California survey reported having experienced at least one stress-related physical problem during the past month.

3 hours is the amount of homework students reported having each night, on average.

56% reported having dropped an activity or hobby because schoolwork took too much time.