

STRESS & ANXIETY CASE STUDY

Cultivate 2019 — Nashville, Tennessee

Wednesday night youth group attendance has fallen precipitously over the past 18 months, and the elders of the church have noticed. Recently, the pastor of the church called you in to talk about why attendance has been slipping so much. “When I talk to parents, it seems it’s because their kids are too busy for youth group, but we need to get to the bottom of things.”

You call together a diverse group of parents to see what answers can be found, and it doesn’t take much to get the conversation started.

Lashawn Wiley, one of the most vocal and active moms in the congregation, speaks up first. “Janiece is a junior this year and she loves the youth group, just loves it,” she says with a warm smile. “But she hasn’t been coming because she’s so stressed out from homework and activities on most nights that we’re lucky if she doesn’t end the evening in tears—and there have been a *lot* of tears this year. My husband and I have talked about it, and while we value church participation, we’re just not convinced that the value of what happens at youth group outweighs the chaos it adds to her life (and ours) to get her there.”

Samantha Richards, whose son also hasn’t been around much lately, chimes in, “Yeah, my son *usually* likes youth group when he can make it, but he’s just too stressed.”

Bob Guffrey, a longtime youth ministry volunteer is already hot at what he’s hearing. “Look, my kids are grown and gone, but I’ve been around teenagers for years, and this ‘snowflake’ generation needs to toughen up. Church is important. Youth group is important. This is where faith is formed for a lot of these kids. Stress is nothing new, but if we’re letting them drop out of things because they’re stressed, they’re never going to be able to deal with real life.”

“I have to agree,” Susan Lee chimes in. “My son is 14. He’s as busy as anybody, but it’s non-negotiable for us that he participates in every youth event and every Wednesday youth group. Yes, he’s got to be organized to handle all the demands of sports, school, and church, but kids can handle it. We’re too prone to let them drop out, or worse, to take a pill. Ours is a culture that wants to diagnose and medicate everybody. They need to learn to deal with the stress and busyness by developing coping mechanisms, and the only way to do that is to *refuse to* run to a pill — or excuses.”

“I’m sorry,” says Larry Johnson, with a bit of anger in his voice. “I take offense for my daughter whose medication is necessary and really helps keep her even keeled. Some kids need it. I remember what it was like to be a teenager, and what I see my daughter having to handle today is completely different from the pressures I faced. All the tests, assessments, college prep, extracurricular activities — we have them too busy. So, yes, youth group and church take a back seat for some families. I don’t think I can judge that. But let’s not shame them for getting the help they need in a busy, stressed-out world.”

“I wonder sometimes how busy they *really* are,” interjects Sally McNash, “because it seems they have plenty of time to be on their screens constantly. I read an article by Dr. Jean Twenge just the other day in the *Washington Post*, and she found that smartphones are largely to blame for skyrocketing rates of suicide, depression, and anxiety. I really believe that if we get our kids off the tech, then we’ll be able to get our kids off the meds, and we’ll be able to relieve their anxiety and stress to a great degree.”

Your mind is racing as you hear all this. As youth director of this congregation, you *thought* you were walking into a discussion about youth group attendance. You didn't anticipate that the focus would be on teenage stress, but clearly parents see a connection between the two. You're about to redirect the conversation, but before you can jump in, another parent speaks up.

"If we're talking about anxiety, let's not just focus on schoolwork, busyness, or the technology," Jamie Scott says. "We need to point out that these kids are truly feeling anxiety because when they go to school, the mall, or the theater, they have no idea if that's their last day on the planet. They legitimately fear that a gunman is going to end their lives or that of their friends. It's traumatizing to live in a state of constant fear, but that's where our kids live. The anxiety they're feeling? It's because while shopping in Forever 21 they wonder if they'll ever reach 21 themselves."

Heads nod in agreement even as Bob Guffrey, ever the skeptic, rolls his eyes and grunts a bit. "No, Bob, this stuff is real," Jamie retorts, rising up out of his seat angry at Guffrey's dismissive response. "You don't have to believe it, but there's research showing that fear of school shootings is truly affecting the mental health of our kids."

In an attempt to redirect the conversation, you pose the main question again, "Are there any other thoughts about causes of falling youth group attendance?"

Cindy Lane raises her hand in the front row. "I think it's largely due to the fact that kids can't be expected to be everywhere at once--they're over-programmed. My boys have something scheduled pretty much every night of the week, and I think we just have to realize kids aren't going to always make it to youth group because they're over-programmed."

"Over-programmed? Really?!" replies Dwayne Tucker. "In our part of town, there's nothing for kids. Kids in our part of town aren't avoiding youth group because they're over-programmed, and they aren't stressed from extracurricular activities. They're stressed because they don't know where their next meal is coming from. They're stressed that mom might lose her job. They're anxious not because they fear the possibility of a gunman in their school, but because their friend actually got shot over the weekend. Our kids are stressed about the crime in their neighborhood, the gangs, the drugs, and the violence. My son, Leon, stopped coming to youth group, not because he's busy, but because youth group doesn't address the world he lives in. When you're stressed and anxious about life and death issues, coming to church for snacks, games, and a little Bible reading just doesn't cut it."

As Dwayne sits down there's a quiet pause for the first time in the meeting. It seems that there's a sudden recognition among the parents that teenagers' experiences of anxiety and stress — as well as their reasons for not attending youth group — are diverse. Bob Guffrey's voice breaks the silence, "Look I've loved the teenagers in this church for a long time, and though it's hard for me to believe, I do hear you saying that teenagers seem to be stressed out and anxious like never before. And if that's the case, then I think youth ministry should respond in some way and I think we should take this up at the next youth council meeting."

Sure, you think to yourself, thanks for that Bob; we should respond, but there's a lot to respond to. But a few days after the meeting you sit down to reflect on all the forms of stress and anxiety in the lives of youth and what they have in common — and how you might respond in youth ministry (if at all). That leads you into thinking theologically and practically on the purpose of

youth ministry, and the nature of adolescent stress and anxiety. After your time of reflection, you prepare to address parents and volunteers at the next youth council meeting.

What do you say? How do you frame the issue of busy, stressed-out, and anxious youth theologically? And what should the youth ministry be doing practically for stressed-out and anxious youth, especially in light of falling youth group attendance?