

Welcome to the Nimble Youth podcast, where we explore the evolving challenges of growing up in today's world, and how parents, educators, and communities can support the mental well-being of young people. I'm your host, Matt Butterman. Today's episode is titled Always More, Anxiety in High Achieving Teens. Let's be honest, there's never been more pressure on teens to be perfect. High achieving students are often seen as the ones doing everything right, taking multiple AP classes, joining clubs, playing sports, volunteering, preparing for college.

But beneath that polished surface, many are silently battling anxiety. Let's ground this conversation in a few facts. According to the college board, the number of AP exams administered has doubled over the past two decades. Nearly forty percent of US high school students now take at least one AP course. Meanwhile, admission rates at the top colleges have fallen below ten percent, creating a high stakes environment where teens feel they must constantly prove their worth.

Joining us today to help unpack these pressures and offer hope is Nicole Beale, a public high school counselor with over a decade of experience supporting students academically and emotionally. Before we get into it, we remind you that the content of this podcast is intended for informational purposes only and should not be construed as medical advice. While we aim to provide valuable insights on pediatric mental health, it's important to consult with a qualified health care professional for any concerns or questions regarding your child's mental well-being. Always seek the advice of your doctor, therapist, or other qualified health provider with any medical or mental health concerns. Nicole, welcome to Nimble Youth.

Thanks, Matt. I'm glad to be here. So let's start with some context. When you say high achieving students, what are we really talking about? Great question.

So when I talk about high achieving students, I'm talking about those students who, take high level coursework, honors, AP classes, community college classes, those students who play sports, they're involved in extracurricular activities, they're trying to do leadership, volunteer work. Most of them in this category see themselves as college bound and a lot of them are aiming for the same competitive schools. And so what is really important to understand about this group is that they often look on the surface like they have everything all together, but many of them are, running on fumes and stressing about each and every decision. Right. And so when they have anxiety, when they feel these pressures, it's a normal response to this ultra competitive environment to get into the top schools.

Right? Right. Yeah. So anxiety I mean, there are many causes of anxiety, but when I'm talking about it as related to high achieving students, it's really not about these students being too sensitive or unwilling to listen to the advice of other people or doing anything wrong, but they're just constantly in a pressure cooker. And, that just that just is what I would call kinda situational anxiety.

Right. Right. Absolutely. So digging into numbers a little bit more, as we said in the introduction, the the number of AP exams, or or AP classes that students are taking and the exams that

they're taking exams, or or AP classes that students are taking and the exams that they take, has doubled, and the students who used to take, you know, maybe one or two AP classes are now taking four to six per year. Yeah.

The jump is just unbelievable. I've been a school counselor for almost twenty five years, and, you know, we used to, I mean, there's always been, right, a group of what I would call high achieving kids. That's nothing different. But the percentage of them that feel like they need to do so much has gone way up. So for example, I've been working on schedules right now.

It's that time of year we're about to open school. And so I see 14, 15 year olds who are rising sophomores, who I just met with one, who are stressing about making sure they have enough AP. Like, they're making sure their class schedule is perfect. And, you know, when I first started, people were like, well, I did well junior, senior year, so I'm gonna be okay with college. And so now I've got, you know, eighth grade parents, seventh grade parents, kids calling, wanting to know how many APs their ninth grader needs to take.

So we're talking about people who can't even get a driver's permit taking college classes. And so Right. It's a hard leap out there from middle school to college, and I see an increasing number of students trying to make that leap. Because the whole idea behind AP classes where they were, in theory, you know, college courses or college level coursework. Right?

Right. Yeah. So the AP courses really started out as a way for kids to obtain college credit. There's also been a way for kids to kind of get an exposure to a college level course if they were college bound. So there's some transitional help there as far as academics.

But when you think about these college classes, most of my kids don't think about them in terms of what kind of college credit they can get. Right. They merely think about how they can impact their GPA. And so there's a lot of strategy to try and take as many as they can and earn enough a's, in them. And so it's really not about trying to prepare for college.

I mean, I'm not saying that's not part of it, but the majority of the discussions center around how do I get the most number of what we call weighted a's. Mhmm. Because locally, we are, we do kinda traditional class ranking. And so the harder the class, the more GPA points it gets. And so there's a lot of strategy that students feel like go into that.

Interesting. Yeah. Back in the stone ages when I was in high school, you know, there was a maximum of four points for even AP classes. Right? Has that changed now?

So I don't know. I was in what came after the stone age? I was right after that, I think, in high school. I certainly remember taking classes based on GPA points. So the weighted GPA thing, at least in the early nineties, was a thing.

I didn't know about that before. But, so that really hasn't changed. But what has changed is it's like every class students feel like they need to have the highest level, so people don't feel

freedom to maybe take a dance class or take Right. The arts class they wanna take, in lieu of another advanced placement class. The amount they're taking has also risen astronomically.

So, like, just for, like, practical, like, math examples, my students who graduated that were in the top 10% of the class last year that are going to college this year, and then many of those colleges these students wanna go to, these high achieving students, many of them took no AP classes as a freshman, maybe one, maybe two as a sophomore, and then three to four junior, senior year. So they just graduated. So talking about the class of 2025. The current class of 2028, they are now, and this is in three years, taking one, like, a huge percentage of them. Probably, I think you said 40% of students now, according to the college board, have an AP course.

So we're talking about probably 20% of the freshman class taking one already. So they've already hit one by then. And then by the end, many of them for sophomore year are signing up for three to four. So they're picking the exact course load for sophomore year that the class that was three ahead of them picked for junior and senior year. And so I have no reason to believe that next year when they pick classes for junior year, that they are not going to then pick five or six.

Like, what was reserved for the one or two students that were really either academically brilliant and looking for all that challenge or had really high academic dreams, and it was, you know, one to two kids a year that would have, say, six APs, you're talking about, I bet, we'll have a good five to 10% of the rising junior class next year feel like they need to take that course load. Wow. Yeah. That's a lot of pressure. What role or what responsibility do the colleges and universities play in this sort of increase in pressure?

You know, I think that that's a hard question because kids will go on college tours. And, back almost in the stone ages, I did college admissions at a very, high selective college. And, you know, as college admissions folks, we sometimes talk out of both sides of our mouths, and I don't think that it is, I don't think it's nefarious. I don't think it's any sort of bad, but they'll say, well, we don't expect kids to have 14 AP classes. But then when they admit the students who fall in the top 10% of the class, let's say just using some of the highly selective state schools, that's kind of about where they fall, and they say, well, 80% of our students are in the top 10% of their class.

Well, if at your particular high school, the culture colleges are really saying we're expecting fourteen, fourteen, but they're not expecting 14. I think if everybody were to say, hey. There's a limit, and this is what we want, kids to take or if colleges maybe said, we won't we're not gonna consider class rank at all and beyond four APs per year or whatever, we're not gonna beyond four APs per year or whatever. We're not gonna look at that as a higher strength of schedule. That would be one thing, but I think that they are also in a situation where they're underfunded and understaffed.

Right. So they've got this increase in applications. They've gotta have some metric to get through them. And so it just is this bad kinda combination of events that lands with kids taking too much. I don't think anybody is setting out.

The colleges aren't saying we want kids to be totally stressed out. High school counselors aren't saying that we want kids to be totally stressed out. Parents aren't saying that. Students aren't saying, yes. Please sign me up.

I want to stay up to 1AM every night and do homework as a 15 year old. But when we're trying to figure out how we get these, you know, institutions, how do they sort out who's most academically qualified. Right? Because at the end of the day, colleges are academic institutions, and so they want students who are academically qualified and can be successful. And so how do we tease that out?

And the metrics they use sometimes are ones that, on the back end, call some, what I would call, unintended consequences. Right. And not all I mean, obviously, the highest performing students, are perfectly capable of AP courses, but perhaps the majority are not are certainly, you know, not capable of a full load. Right? I think there are lots of students who are capable.

In fact, I would love for almost 40% to be a much higher number. I think that for students who are thinking about college, whether that's community college or whether that is a four year institution, I think exposure to rigor is good. Mhmm. I think it's when they take on more than they can physically have time to get through, then it becomes a problem. I also really hate that kids don't feel the freedom to be reflective and determine, hey.

What am I good at? And can I go take something hard on something I'm good at? And maybe I'll take something a little less rigorous in something I'm not. So for example, when I chose a college major, I wasn't gonna choose math because I wasn't particularly skilled in math. So I had the freedom to choose political science classes and things that I was good at.

So the colleges play, there's some responsibility on their shoulders. But, for parents and schools, what role do they play in this sort of increased, pressure cooker environment? Well, so in full disclosure, I currently have a rising junior in my house, and so he would fit in this category of a high achieving student. And, so I've been doing this, like I said, almost twenty five years, and I know what junior year looks like and what it is increasingly looking like in terms of stress around academics, athletics, activities, all the things because they're kinda prepping for their final year to show off to colleges. And, we, as parents, aren't doing a very good job.

And I put myself in that same category because we are terrified, I feel like, or at least I'm terrified of my child not having the kind of scope these days to end up where she wants to be. And so we're complicit in it. I think parents also have a ton of anxiety around, like, we all know well, I shouldn't say we all know, but it seems to me the ones that reach out to me and I have conversations with, we're all aware that what we're doing is potentially a little out there and a

little too much and that we ought to like, I'd love to be able to say, go take what you want. Don't worry about it. But I found myself in a position this year saying, hey.

Don't take this elective you really want because if you do that, you're not gonna be able to get in enough AP classes, and then we're gonna have to be strategic about how you're gonna make sure your GPA stays high. Because if she has a goal of wanting to be in this group of people, then you don't always have the freedom to even advise your child to do what you know might be best for them mental health wise. The other thing is I think that parents feed off each other's anxieties. And I think that everybody is so afraid that they and this is something I didn't used to see just by the way, just as an aside. Like, parents did not used to be quite as fearful that they were gonna fail their children as I feel like they are in 2025.

And so, parents used to just feel a little bit like we'll let them make the decisions and we're gonna guide them, but they weren't quite as involved. I think some of that probably I mean, I don't like everything being blamed on the pandemic, but I think some of that changed after 2025 because it was such a hard time to be a parent of a child. But I find that this phenomenon of sort of pushing our kids to do things that we know isn't good. Everybody's afraid to jump off the train, and so they're afraid that somebody else isn't gonna jump off who commits to jumping off the train. And by that, I mean, like, okay.

This is crazy. We're just gonna take three APs, and we're gonna move on and do all the things. And then they're so parents are so afraid that someone is going to strategize and do something different. And maybe some of this is also the role of independent college counselors that, you know, that that industry has grown tremendously, which is a whole other, would probably be a whole other different type of podcast. But I think that they're getting advice from people, and so they trust that everybody's gonna play fair.

Fair. And so then everybody just keeps pushing. Right. It's about keeping up with the Joneses, basically. Right?

You know, you can't let, you know, this student get ahead of you. Right? Or be a more attractive candidate, for the top colleges, particularly if it's a state, college or university where, you know, the tuition is lower and, you know, so you have to do all the all the right things. And that has also led to a phenomenon they call snow snow plow parenting, right, where the parents sort of clear the road for their kids and don't let them fail at all. And that sometimes failing in a controlled way, perhaps, is important for learning.

Is it not? So if you ask me, do I philosophically believe that it is important for kids to fail and have small failures? I do. If you ask me, even as a parent, if I try to do everything to make sure my child doesn't fail, I don't like for her to have small failures because small failures can have big implications. Right.

So, like, when you are talking about, you know, with grade inflation and other things, no one making b's, then one b all of a sudden potentially puts you out of the running for, as you said,

like, talking about state schools. I mean, there's a huge financial difference between a state school and an independent school now. I mean, the gap didn't used to be so wide. And so if you're thinking about what can I afford and you're meeting with your financial planners and looking at your five twenty nines, you're like, please don't make a B? Please don't fail.

Please make sure you're signed up for everything because you are trying really hard to make sure that this opportunity you want for your child exist, and so then you feel this pressure to make sure you don't fail your children by because then you could end up in a situation where where they could go, maybe you can't afford. And then, and especially, like, you know, for those of us who had the, really, benefit, hold on. Let me think of the right word. I'm up to pause for a second. I had the luxury.

For those of us who had the luxury of going to college without a lot of debt, you know, the idea that my child would not be able to have that same experience my parents were able to make happen for me, makes me feel there's a lot of guilt involved in that. And so, you know, back when I was with my parents, maybe not trusting other parents, I do wanna clarify that I don't mean that I think that they're doing it because we've got this whole society of bad people. I just think we have a generation of people who especially those who went to college. Most of them, their parents paid for their college or the cost of college was such that they were able to work out through loans a way to get through college that wasn't paralyzing. And so now they've had children and they want their children to have that same experience, but the cost of college has gone way up.

Right. The competitiveness of getting in college is going way up. And so as parents, I think when we are snowplowing, we are trying to just make sure they have opportunities for the future. But it can be a slippery slope as to when what we're doing is making our children feel worse and more anxious and like they're not good enough, which is the other thing that's a real danger in all this is that, you know, we sometimes make our I I think they maybe feel like they're not good enough, and that's a message I have to fight against in my own house that I don't mean to send. You know?

Yes. A B is good enough. If you did the best you can, a B is good enough. But in the back of my brain, I'm going, oh my gosh. Please let that b become a 90.

Right. Right. It's a culture of perfectionism, perhaps. So what do you think needs to change, and how can we shift the culture here? Well, one of the things I think we could do is and people don't they're not fans of, you know, limits and rules.

But one of the things I think we could do at least in large traditional public school systems, we could either do away with kinda traditional class rankings. So some of the pressure cooker areas across The United States have just done away with class rank. I'm not sure how much that solves it, but if you read about it, there are some places that don't give someone how you stand up against your classmates. They don't release it to colleges. That's not kind of a thing.

So that becomes a little bit broader maybe. So, you know, we went to, as a district, a Latin honor system, two years ago, but we also kept class ranking. So, like, if we just did Latin honors, you know, Latin honors, you know, if we did it was just like if you have a 4.5 or higher, you get this acknowledgment. If you have a 4.25 or higher, it's a broader range than when you start. So people would maybe be less nuanced than being like, I can't take painting because I have to take honors sports medicine, but they have an interest in art but don't have an interest in sports medicine.

That kind of stuff might stop if we didn't have a traditional class ranking. One of the things we could do is put a limit on how many AP classes kids could take. There used to be, ironically, a limit on how many dual enrollment classes students could take at the community college, but that has new classes or classes when nobody's paying attention to add on to their GPA. So that's a whole other new strategy. And so that has really, kinda blown up for for a certain group of students.

There are a lot of students that take advantage of these opportunities, let me just say in full disclosure, that really are taking advantage of them to get college credit, to make sure when they go to college, they're paying for three years instead of four. There are a lot of really good reasons why students do what they're doing. But I'm talking about this particular subset of high achieving students in a certain, probably, socioeconomic bracket too. So it's not all students that are getting this level of advice and and go, go, go, go, go. So, I think we could limit it.

We could say, hey. We don't think ninth graders ought to take a college class, period. We used to say that. We could say, hey. Tenth graders didn't used to be able to take a college class.

If they did, we could say, hey. They can take this one. You know? We could say you know? But then their pressure's on schools.

So one of the things that comes out in, like, when they rank high schools is they look at how many AP tests and classes schools take or students take. So then schools are trying to make sure their school report I mean, it's all this report cards. Honestly, like, if we could get away from the report cards, that could help a little bit. I think colleges, if they could and I don't love giving problems without good solutions. So, I apologize in advance for that.

I don't work on the college side. But if they could find some reasonable way of assessing students that also had some limits, that would be tremendous. I don't know how big state schools would do that just because of the volume, but if there was a way to sort of tease that out, if there were more spots, honestly, the more we do all this ranking of colleges too. And so then kids wanna be in x college to get to go to y grad school. So Right.

I mean, we just tend to keep ranking and ranking and ranking all the way up, which means that, you know, as long as we are sort of on the system of this meritocracy kinda system, it's gonna be hard to combat this. But I do think that the rise I mean, I do wanna be clear that I think the rise in the last five to seven years in it relative to the rise for the previous twenty years is

something's gotta give. And, you know, there was a great film and book called *The Race to Nowhere*, and a lot of parents read that. And that was kind of a thing about ten or fifteen years ago, and people were a little bit less intense about it. And then I don't know where that went.

But in the last five years, it is like doubling and trimming. I mean, it's going at a rate that I don't see how we continue. Well, we're talking, also, I guess, within a context of a rising population, in the schools, certain certain schools anyway. There's been a kind of a boom in births, people in high school right now. And I guess when they, when the financial crisis hit hard in 2008 and 2009, that that may in and of itself help ease the pressure. But, for parents who are seeing their kids really struggle in this ultra competitive environment, what can they do?

I guess one thing would be to have them come in and see you. Right? That is I'm usually kinda their first stop. And I usually mean, it depends on where the anxieties landed. Right?

So, like, if their kids are tired and just a little bit anxious and it's not becoming maladaptive, I guess, they're just having a rough time. That's different from a kid who's withdrawing or someone who's having panic attacks or who no longer will come in a school building or who are getting you know, seeing their medical providers for tons of terrible stomach issues and migraines and those kinds of things. I mean, if there are health implications, the first thing I always tell them is stop. Get off the train. Yeah.

Like, there are so many other good options. They're not, for example, in the state of North Carolina, they're not just two good colleges you can go to. There's so many, and they're not just two good ones that you can go to that are state tuition based. I mean, if you, you know, if college is their thing, you know, and they really wanna go to college, that's fine. But there are plenty of options.

And so what I try to tell them is I have a lot of kids who get off the train and just say at some point, and it's usually sometime between sophomore and junior year, and they're just it's too much. And we get off the train, and they go to interesting and different places, and they tend to find their way, especially when they're able to take classes in areas of interest. And those kids maybe sometimes succeed more honestly in college than those who have gotten on a train, and they didn't get off, and they didn't look, and they didn't see where they were going. Because sometimes when they take a step back, the amount of relief I mean, I can still see this one high achieving student who said, I don't care if I don't get in anywhere. She was like, but I am not gonna keep taking this one class.

I have never had stomachaches like this. And she's like, I'm not gonna do it. And she said, and if that means that I don't get to be a junior marshal or recognized at graduation and all these things, she's like, I don't care. Yeah. She ended up getting a full ride to a very good school and did really well there, but she said my physical health is important.

So I think parents are saying to their students, like, paying attention. If their physical health is impacted, you gotta stop. Right. You have to go talk to your That's a line you can't cross. You just can't cross that.

You gotta talk to me, that's where you talk to your pediatricians. That's where you talk to your medical folks to try and see what can be done medically. I think getting them someone to talk to, I think in finding a counselor, I think that's money well spent. I think limiting conversations around it is sometimes important. So sometimes I say, how often are y'all talking about college in your house?

If you're talking about it every day, you're talking about it too much. Like, you know, you should talk about it when you pick classes. You should talk about it senior year when you're trying to figure things out. You should talk about it when you're doing college tours, but you shouldn't be having a conversation on a random Tuesday in the summer about what AP class you're gonna be taking on, you know, August 30 and whether or not that means you can get into x y z school. So I think just trying to kinda limit the constantness of it, I think giving kids the freedom to quit things is important.

You know, growing up, I don't know about your parents, but if I started something, I had to keep playing it. So for my personal example, I played an entire year of high school softball, and I played one third of one inning for the entire season because I was very bad at softball. And, so that's for another time, but I got in the play. I could sing and I could act. And so I was in the play, and they were I was going to softball practice until, you know, 6PM and then eating dinner in the car and then going to play practice back when there weren't rules and limits.

And, you know, we were rehearsing in a condemned building and those kinds of things. Would stay there till eleven and then stay up and do my homework. And I said, can I please just quit softball? Like I'm clearly not valuable to the team. And my parents said, once you've started something, you can't quit, which was good advice in terms of being able to get stuck in.

But what they also told me was you don't have to try out next year. And so, you know, I'm not a fan of students quitting something in the middle of it, unless, again, physical health. But at the end of the season, you can say, yeah. So you've done this for two years. If you don't wanna do it I mean, I've just said this in my own house about a fall sport.

I'm like, if you don't wanna play this because you've got too much going on, you don't have to do it. Now does that mean that she's probably gonna quit? Probably not. In fact, she said emphatically she isn't, but at least she's heard me say, I give you permission to step down in something. And so just trying to take a deep breath and make sure that's the message you're sending.

If they choose to keep going, at least then as a parent, you are saying they can hear in your voice. My parents aren't gonna be disappointed in me if I take a step back. It starts with being,

accepting of their desires to get off, you know, to a certain degree, get off this crazy pathway. Right? Right.

And there are limitations. Right? Yeah. I mean, you know, if you think about it, when we're talking about four or five AP classes, in a college semester, you typically take four classes. Right?

Right. Maybe five if you're, like, doing something, you know, that requires it. So if you're taking four classes in a college schedule, you're not then in school from 8AM to 03:40 and then doing extracurriculars and then starting all of your work. So they're doing four or five college classes plus two or three non college classes, plus they don't have many hours in the day. And so some of it is not just about saying, hey.

You're getting off the train. Some of it's just saying there's a finite amount of time in each day, and you are running out of time. And we've gotta find some time back, and I'm giving you the freedom to figure out where you find it back. But something has to give because we just can't all go on fumes right. Inevitably, like, for in perpetuity.

Right. Right. So what are some things that, you know, maybe give you hope, in this, otherwise, very high pressure situation? What gives you hope? Well, one of the things that gives me hope is I think that the great majority of the kids turn out just fine, and they make it through it.

There are many pathways to success. But even on the high achieving Yeah. Fast pathway, you know, when I was pregnant, my grandfather was a physician and he used to say, you know, don't worry so much. The great majority of the time, these things turn out just fine. And that's true too for these students.

And so even if they have a moment where they're feeling really, really anxious or even if it's impacting their physical health, I mean, I think if they do the things and get the support, they end up okay. They end up finding their way. The path isn't always as straight and narrow as we may see it, but it gives me hope because I see them and I see them graduate and I see them come back and, you know, for most of them, they make it. And they are successful and they are okay. So that gives me hope.

One of the things that gives me hope is that I think that teachers are doing a better job in 2025 recognizing the anxiety than they did years ago. So I think teachers have become, more grace might not be the right word, but they are a little more nuanced in how they either assess students or how they reassure them or the opportunities they give. They understand that there's kind of a pressure for everybody to make an A, and I think they've been a little more generous with A's, and I think that's okay. Yeah. And I think they've been a little more generous with A's.

And I think that's okay. Yeah. Because I think it's okay for kids to be given their best and getting rewards. I mean, you know, we do so much external reward in childhood, and I think that's okay that teachers are on board with that, and that gives me hope. Mhmm. I think it gives me hope

that I think educators are constantly thinking about how we can better support kids, from a mental health standpoint. You know, we have mental health providers, at least locally, in all of the high schools.

And so that is great because we didn't used to have that. And so students can get access to a mental health provider without having to necessarily be driven somewhere or have access to a car or, have a parent that's not working and can take them. And so I think we're increasing mental health support, and that gives me hope. Yeah. And I think that the medical community has, honestly, like, local pediatricians.

I mean, I talked to lots of them about how we can work together as medical communities and educators to try and support our students and have them be happier and healthier and all of those things. And that is a collaboration that I think has really, really increased in the last ten years, and that gives me hope. So, I mean, I am fairly hopeful. I wouldn't work with high school students for this long if I didn't like them and if I didn't they also I don't know. I mean, they are such interesting people, and they do find interesting ways of figuring it out and thinking through it.

And so getting to watch them struggle and make it through, like, I feel like that is just such a gift that I've been given to be able to watch them make it through and then be able to celebrate their successes. So, like, at the end of senior year when we do awards and, you know, and I'm see you know, it's amazing to see all of these folks and their pictures, and here's where they're going, and they're smiling, and they're, you know, college t shirts or their whatever their plan is after school. I mean, just seeing them be able to say, hey, I did this. It's pretty cool to get to watch someone figure out something and come out on the other side and be able to, acknowledge, hey. I'm really you know, so celebrations, I think, are really important.

Yeah. That's very gratifying, and those are very hopeful signs. Well, Nicole, thank you so much for your insight on this important topic, and thank you to our listeners. If this episode resonated with you, please share it with a parent, teacher, or student and, who could use the encouragement. And please, visit our website www.nimbleyouthpodcast.com for show notes for each episode.

And until next time, please take care of yourselves and each other.