# Finding Your "Selfie":

# The New Crisis of the Affluent Adolescent

by

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Abstract

Adolescence, a time of transition, is a critical juncture for role exploration, growing autonomy, and the beginning stages of identity formation. Adolescent identity formation is often embedded in the larger socio-cultural context. The culture of affluence, high parental expectations, and social media all contribute to the forming identity of the affluent teen. In some cases this can lead to a disconnect between the teen's external presentation and the inner feelings of the self. This narrative case study explores Caroline's journey through high school and illuminates how the culture of affluence and media both challenge her quest for identity. Caroline's story illustrates how relationship building through school-based counseling can serve as a venue for learning, self-discovery, and ultimately balance the effects that culture and media have on an adolescent's forming identity. The need for social work services in affluent high schools is highlighted and outlined, as well as ways that school social workers can work effectively with parents, students, and the school community at large, to proactively respond to the emotional needs of adolescents in the school setting.

*Privacy Disclaimer: To protect the confidentiality of the client, identifying information has been disguised and certain details have been concealed.*

*"Look around. Is there really a need for a social worker in an affluent high school?" one parent inquired of me after a PTA Meeting. She continued with an air of pretention, "Sorry, I mean, the families in our community don't need social services or charity ourselves, we just donate to them." Although I was somewhat stunned, I simply smiled.*

As I walked back to my office, I could not help but ask myself, "Was she right?" I began to take note of the décor: bright, cheery walls filled with award-winning student artwork, enclosed trophy cases filled to capacity with league, state and athlete of the week recognitions, and sizeable banners hanging from the ceiling with inspiring quotes from the likes of Shakespeare, Einstein, and other notable writers and historians. I continued through the expansive and gleaming hallway to the cafeteria. I dodged the long line of students and faculty waiting to get their daily coffee fix from the barista, and noticed the other food kiosks selling newly created sushi rolls and freshly squeezed organic juices. Most high school cafeterias conjure up the image of mac-n-cheese and boiled hot dogs. This cafeteria was more like a hybrid Whole Foods/Starbucks for teenagers. Several students smiled and waved to me as they made their way to their respective lunch tables, and I thought, from the outside, this school appeared to be almost perfect. Following the high school teachers and students, I waited on line, and then found a spot to sit. As I drank my skim latte, I thought to myself, "What just happened?"

From the PTA mother's perspective, I could certainly see why parents and the community at large might think that social work services in this setting are unnecessary. With all these well-presented young people who come from affluent homes and who attend a high school that exudes scholastic excellence, how could the students ever need the services of a social worker? Maybe her referent, I reasoned, was one of the urban high schools that are often profiled in the news; a high school that is situated in a destitute community where the poverty level is high, the streets are dangerous, the homes are run down, families are broken, and the students brave multiple drug dealers on their way to school each day. Perhaps she opined, those are people who really *need* social work services and, of course, charity. I found the woman's comment to be jarring if not superficial. That said, her question was a fair one: do affluent schools need social work services? As a school social worker in an affluent district for the

past decade, and having been raised in an area similar to my school community, I understand and recognize the pressures that adolescents face in high performing schools. But for an outsider looking in, looks can be deceiving. In an attempt to mask their emotions, affluent adolescents, like many adolescents, use their exterior presentation to hide their inner fears. Should we use the façade evoked by the outward appearance of an affluent school as a lens to make judgments about the social and emotional well being of 14-to-18 year olds?

As this project unfolds, I intend to construct the case for why now, perhaps more than ever, school social workers with their unique set of clinical expertise and passion for positive change, are integral to raising awareness of, and responding to, the critical issues that impact the mental health of students in affluent schools. Many (not all) young people of high school age appear to be making a choice to travel down a dangerous path that places them at risk for a host of social and emotional deficits. One cursory glance at the profiles of school shooters, suicides covered by the media, and the demographics of heroin use document that reality. Similar to the PTA woman at the forefront of this narrative, many will second guess the need for social work services in affluent communities and their schools. The reality is that many affluent adolescents are at risk; some even say that it is an impending crisis leading to disastrous consequences in life.

In this paper, I will lay the foundation for understanding the culture of affluence and highlight the role that technology plays in adolescent identity formation. Then I will use Caroline's story, which is a composite conveying the pressures faced by several adolescents, to illustrate and reveal the struggles of affluent adolescents in the school setting. Subsequently, I will outline the need for social work services at affluent high schools and suggest ways that school social workers can work effectively with parents, teachers, and students to proactively respond to the changing emotional trajectory of affluent youth in high schools and the school community at large.

## A New At-Risk Population

Adolescence is a transitional phase in our development, spanning from the biological, psychological and social domains of childhood to those of adulthood. During this time, there is a growing need for adolescents to begin to develop an identity, coupled with an emerging sense of autonomy, or independence. In this quest to define and redefine an identity, adolescents explore a variety of facets of themselves and take a series of risks before committing to a specific role or set of values (Marcia, 1980). For some, these risks may be a change in attire or hairstyle, and for others, this self-exploration may manifest itself through experimentation in sexual relationships, drug and alcohol use, smoking cigarettes or pushing the limits with tattoos and piercings. The quest for an identity is the key struggle of adolescents, and for many, this struggle continues throughout the late teens and early twenties as emerging adults explore and have experiences separate from those that their parents create for them. It is only after some autonomous experiences that young adults begin to solidify their identity in love, relationships, and at work, all while developing a unique view of the world (Arnett, 2000).

As with many of life's transitions, experiencing identity changes, coupled with new emergent roles and responsibilities, can be quite stressful and challenging under normal circumstances. The journey through adolescence is not a new phenomenon, but there is something about the way teenagers navigate this phase today that is disconcerting. Instead of viewing adolescence as a time for exploration of self and purpose, some are feeling debilitated by high expectations, pressure, and a fear of failure, which has led to a nationwide rise in teenagers reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that more than 11 percent of 13 to 18 year olds have been affected by a depressive disorder in their lifetime (Merikangas, et al., 2010). Additionally, a 2011 survey by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) reports that nearly one in six high school students has seriously considered suicide and one in 12 has attempted it; suicide remains the third leading cause of death of 10-24 year olds (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). America's youth is anxious, unhappy and heading toward a mental health crisis. In particular, a new subset of this population, America's affluent youth, appears to be an evolving topic for research and media attention.

In the past several decades, the term "at risk" has been used to refer to the financial, social, and emotional experiences of children and families living in poverty. However, beginning in the late 1990s, "researchers uncovered a new 'at risk'

population, a previously unrecognized and unstudied group, that of the affluent teenager" (Levine, 2006, p. 17). According to researchers Luthar and Sexton (2005):

America's newly identified at-risk group is pre-teens and teens from affluent, well-educated families. In spite of their economic advantage, they experience among the highest rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety disorders, somatic complaints, and unhappiness of any group of children in this country. (As cited in Levine, 2006, p. 18)

Luthar and Latandresse (2005) continued research suggests:

Growing up in the culture of affluence can connote various psychosocial risks. Studies have shown that upper-class children can manifest elevated disturbance in several areas—such as substance use, anxiety, and depression—and that two sets of factors seem to be implicated, that is, excessive pressures to achieve and isolation from parents (both literal and emotional). (p. 49)

For some this assertion may be quite surprising; however, to the clinicians who work with this population on a regular basis, this is old news. Dr. Madeline Levine, clinician and author of The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids, wrote a book specifically on this topic by examining her own private practice clients and consulting with hundreds of private practitioners across the United States. Levine (2006) writes,

There is a disconnect between how affluent adolescents appear on the outside and how they are navigating adolescence internally. Modest setbacks frequently send them into a 'tailspin' as their parents, with good intentions, have attempted to provide only opportunities for success. (p. 7)

It appears that when faced with setbacks, such as a poor test grade, or a break-up with a significant other, symptoms of depression and anxiety often emerge as adolescents are faced with a new set of emotions that they are unequipped to handle.

Affluent teenagers are children of parents who have deep and often far-reaching political, social and economic resources. These teenagers greatly benefit from the social capital, the connections and the influences of their parents. Economic resources allow teenagers to receive countless hours of individual SAT tutoring, private college counseling, and even admittance to a university, solely for being a donor's daughter or legacy. Likewise, these individuals have private coaches and athletic trainers to ensure a starting position on an elite sports team. Many parents can often afford to provide the keys to a luxury car, a designer handbag, and a trendy bracelet. Affluent teenagers are a part of the "culture of affluence," a culture that values drive, competition, and material objects, at times over familial ties, kindness, and honesty. This culture places esteem on the exterior, the public persona, and the image, while the needs of the inner self can be neglected, the latter often being hard to detect.

This inner emptiness, or an "empty self," creates many voids in a young person's being. Cushman (1990), a well-known clinician and professor in the field of self-psychology and socio-cultural contexts asserts:

Inner emptiness may be expressed in many ways, such as low self-esteem (the absence of a sense of personal worth), values confusion (the absence of a sense of personal convictions), eating disorders (the compulsion to fill the emptiness with food, or to embody the emptiness by refusing food), drug abuse (the compulsion to fill the emptiness with chemically induced emotional experiences), and chronic consumerism (the compulsion to fill the emptiness with consumer items and the experience of 'receiving' something from the world). It may also take the form of an absence of personal meaning. (p. 604)

Adolescents use many of these extrinsic expressions to attempt to fill up their internal emptiness because they are taught or groomed by their culture and media to always desire, and be in need of, something. Popular cultural themes, often echoed by various media forms, construct an imposing reality of artifice of extrinsic measures of self that do not correspond to the adolescent's actual lived reality. Essentially, various media forms can be thought of as idealized versions of extrinsically composed or constructed selves. But if affluent adolescents are taught to always "want" or strive for more, doesn't that in some way insinuate that who they are at this moment is not good enough? That is, can the external fill the

internal void? One way to examine affluent teens and their inner emptiness would be to explore the possible disconnect between inner happiness, identity, and externality. But why are today's affluent teenagers, a group that seemingly "has it all," so unhappy? As Luthar and Levine point out, why is it that so many affluent children experience depressive disorders and the like? Their question requires further examination. I would assert that having access to external means does not empower these teens internally, thus resulting in a state of inner emptiness and unhappiness.

## The Origins of Insecurity and the Rise of Social Media

In the past several decades, one could infer that an imaginary bubble protected America's affluent youth from the political, economic and social struggles of the rest of U.S. society. However, the 1999 Columbine school shooting, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack, and the Great Recession economic crisis rapidly brought issues of safety and security to the forefront of concerns for affluent families, and garnered intense media attention, spreading the culture of fear. Generally speaking, most enclaves of affluence were and are insulated and immune from street and school violence, job and income loss, and catastrophic events at home. That may have changed in the previous two decades. While most affluent people have not had a direct experience with the violence, loss of income, and catastrophic events, the news media amplified a sense of crisis that resonated with the affluent population. As many parents felt a sense of panic and vulnerability, these feelings trickled down to their children.

The massacre at Columbine brought to light that even America's affluent schools are not immune to mass shootings, a crime that most erroneously associate with poverty stricken and crime-infested inner city schools. This event changed the way families viewed and thought about schools: from a safe place to learn, to that of unpredictable violence and terror. After Columbine, schools across the country responded to the increased anxiety of parents, children, and school personnel to prepare for such unpredictable and terrifying events by increasing the number of practice drills. However, simulations such as active shooter, bomb threats, code red and other emergency drills, which are often times unannounced, increased the levels of anxiety and insecurity that learners and educators feel within the school setting.

A few years later, the 9/11 terror attacks, particularly in the New York metropolitan area, illustrated that in a matter of hours our nation's sense of security could place the young and old alike in a vulnerable position. For many families, this feeling of vulnerability changed the way they viewed traveling on airplanes to even going to work and leaving the home. There was a sense that everything could change in a moment. The economic crisis of 2008 further illustrated how vulnerable affluent families could be when corporate buyouts were causing many in the financial industry to lose their jobs, coupled with a significant decline in the housing market due to unstable mortgage providers. This series of events, and perhaps many smaller ripples along the way, led affluent families to feel an increasing need to protect their children and give them every possible opportunity in an unstable, ever-changing world. Essentially, children are entering school ostensibly, as they are born into a world and generation characterized by widespread and pervasive anxiety.

Another key contributor to the development of affluent youth is the role of technology, most notably, social media. There is a general agreement amongst scholars that identity formation is structured by the sociocultural context (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008). The media: print, movies, TV, Internet and the use of cell phones in the United States has created a culture in which, "images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities" (Kellner, 2003, p. 12). Adolescents are enmeshed in all forms of media and they use other products of the culture to "provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, and to construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of 'us' and 'them'" (Kellner, 2003, p. 13). For many young people, the Internet subculture is a window to exploring new vistas, some frightening, from their bedrooms.

This present cohort of teens and young adults is unique in that social media has had a significant impact on their development. For this reason, some refer to them as the "igeneration", as they were raised with the newest and most advanced technology. Advancements such as smartphones and increasingly realistic and interpersonal video gaming consoles are designed to create immediate connections (Rosen, 2010). However, the "igeneration" is not the only name for this

generation of teens and young adults. Although controversial, Dr. Jean M. Twenge has dubbed this generation as GenMe, because of the rise in narcissism with this cohort. In her book, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before (2006),* Twenge argues that "since GenMe'ers were born, we've been taught to put ourselves first…GenMe is not self-absorbed; we're self-important" (p. 5). As if on cue, the Oxford Dictionary named "selfie" its 2013 word of the year, which officially means "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website" (Oxford, 2013). In our ever-changing electronic world, 'the selfie' attempts to give insight into where you are, what you are doing and how you are feeling, something that an ordinary text message can't always accomplish. The selfie, to some extent, certainly plays a role in illustrating our identity online, and, perhaps, in all aspects of social media. But is this an accurate portrayal of one's true self?

In a recent New York Times article, *Selfies: The Attention Grabber,* actor and director James Franco writes, "We all have different reasons for posting them, but, in the end, selfies are avatars: Mini-Mes that we send out to give others a sense of who we are" (Franco, 2013). I disagree with Mr. Franco; I think selfies are about showing the outside world what we want them to see about us. Not the darker, inner emotions, but perhaps who we want to be. In many ways, I think the selfie is our ideal self, the self that we want to project. As adults, we can see through this persona and realize that a selfie is just a snapshot in someone's day. Teens view selfies and online personas as a true representation of self and they compare how they are feeling internally to how others showcase themselves externally, which is a dangerous mistake.

In an era in which social mediums are prominent, applications such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and Vine seemingly define the identity and reputations of adolescents. These applications allow teens to showcase their best selves by controlling what their "friends," or other users see, including insightful quotes, funny tweets or perfectly edited photographs. Sherry Turkle, author of *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, echoes this idea in her 2012 TED talk, in which she exclaims,

> Texting, email, posting, all of these things let us present the self as we want to be. We get to edit, and that means we get to delete, and that means we get to retouch the face, the voice, the flesh, the body – not too little, not too much, just right. (para. 9)

However, her concern goes much deeper than the editing of our online personas. Turkle asserts that our society is at a crossroads with our ability to connect with others because we do not allow ourselves to be vulnerable. She fears that we use technology to give us the illusion of connection, but without the emotional risks of friendship. She believes,

> Solitude is where you find yourself so that you can reach out to other people and form real attachments. When we don't have the capacity for solitude, we turn to other people in order to feel less anxious or in order to feel alive. When this happens, we're not able to appreciate who they are. It's as though we're using them as spare parts to support our fragile sense of self. We slip into thinking that always being connected is going to make us feel less alone. But we're at risk, because actually it's the opposite that's true. If we're not able to be alone, we're going to be more lonely. And if we don't teach our children to be alone, they're only going to know how to be lonely. (para. 19)

Although the original goal of these applications was to create immediate, positive connections, those same applications can certainly exacerbate the level of anxiety and insecurity that many teenagers experience. If teenagers feel lonely when they are connected, what will happen when they are truly alone?

## Excellence Begins Here: The Role of the School

A prominent developmental theorist, Urie Bronfenbrenner, postulates through his ecological model that an individual's upbringing is shaped through a series of interconnected spheres including family, neighborhoods, and schools, to the larger context of values, attitudes and ideologies held by a culture or subculture (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This model can be used to visualize the individual adolescent at the core of this discussion and the interdependent relationships and multiple spheres or systems that influence development.

There is a two-way relationship between the school and the community at large in which each influence the development and education of youth. Students and parents bring their cultural practices with them in their backpacks each day. On one hand, the school teaches, echoes, and transmits the values of the past and the larger community. On the other hand, the learning that happens in school through study, relationship building, discussion and experience results in a more radiant individual. But just as one would like to view schools as a place of positive growth, they are not immune to the pressures associated with the larger culture. Schools, in particular, are the places where the community drama unfolds. Schools mirror their community. Adolescents reflect their community. In essence, we are all connected by modern media. There may have been a time, prior to cell phones, when high school students might have been sheltered from the harm, but with technology, every person is a citizen journalist and every news story is only a click away. An unstable global and national economy trickles down to education legislation from our state government forcing more standardized tests, the suicide of a popular alumni athlete, the passing of a local teenager due to an overdose of drugs, the relentless explosion of social media updates from the latest school shooting, and the argument before school this morning. All the aforementioned factors impact the adolescent, and for many high school students, it is overwhelming and chilling. Most can cope, but many cannot.

In order to compensate for our unstable society, many affluent youth try to gain control by being perfectionists and following a "recipe for success," which usually includes taking honors and AP classes, achieving a 2100 or better on the SATs, and holding leadership positions in several clubs and teams. Those credentials will help to gain entry to a highly competitive college, which will lead to a highly regarded graduate school or career, home, spouse, car, and vacation home. Unfortunately, in the school setting, educational professionals reinforce this mentality by giving public accolades and awards for every accomplishment. But is what the school is doing rewarding the very exterior or facade that the adolescent wants us to see? Are we rewarding the "selfie", the artificially projected persona, but not the core self? Perhaps those very accolades are not even reaching the core self because there is such a disconnect between the public (external) and private (internal) selves of adolescents.

Conceivably, they are afraid to be less than perfect for fear of exposing their fragile vulnerability and fear of disappointing others, which may lead to an increase in anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Affluent teens are trying to live up to both their parents' and society's expectations, all while trying to navigate the turbulent adolescent years. It is nearly impossible to form a stable identity while trying to please friends, family, and teachers, and simultaneously succeed in portraying a perfect image to college admission counselors. This cluster of adolescents perceives that being an average C student is considered a failure. This perception creates the feeling that one's best is not good enough. The only difference between the majority of adolescents and affluent adolescents is that money can buy a facade. Luxury cars, parked in the grand circular driveway leading up to a perfectly manicured million-dollar home, makes one form the inaccurate perception that the lives of the families are perfect, easy, and without emotional stress. However, school personnel, especially social workers, know differently. The lives of adolescents play out in front of us every day.

Similar to every typical adolescent, affluent teens are craving someone to listen to, to not be judged, and a safe place to explore who they are without the fear of others finding out that they may not be perfect after all. They are looking for the one place where they are free to be themselves. School is a natural place for this self-discovery to occur as the learning is already woven into the fabric of this social setting. The school social worker's office is its unique little hideaway, away from academic, home, and social pressures. It has its own set of rules. Instead of teachers being the experts, adolescents take on that role by learning about themselves and strategies for coping with life situations by processing problems as they occur. As adolescents move forward on their life path, self-understanding and perseverance are perhaps the greatest skills that teenagers can take with them.

Note: working with the affluent teenager takes time, flexibility and a sense of humor. If you consider yourself an expert in the field, think again. Affluent teenagers are accustomed to running the show and will, at times, treat you like you are on their payroll. It helps to remember that underneath all the make-up and spray tans, there is a self-conscious, anxious young girl who is yearning to be understood. Knowing this information helps to put working with this distinctive population in perspective.

## Caroline

*"You think you know me? No, seriously. You think you know me because you've been my counselor for three years? You have no idea. FUCK! I don't even know me. So how can you?"* That's how the first day of Caroline's senior year in high school began. The impulsive, yet likable adolescent I had worked with for the past three years had morphed into a teenager full of angst over the eight-week summer break, and apparently, I was the first person in her path of self-destruction. Her once long locks of blonde hair had been dyed a deep garnet, and her nose was pierced with a small diamond stud. The preppy, conservative clothes of junior year were replaced by a revealing black dress with a mesh overlay and combat boots. She masked her beautiful blue eyes with deep purple contact lenses and thick, black eyeliner as if attempting to create a barrier between the world and her soul. I said, "Do you think you know me? Are you going to answer me or should I just leave?" I tried to cover up and hide my surprise and concern, but she had seen right through me in a matter of seconds. I was in complete awe of the person that stood before me. I had no idea my opening statement, "Caroline, wow, you've transformed into a whole new person," would have evoked such an intense reaction. If this encounter was any indication as to what the year would bring, I certainly was concerned.

I met Caroline at the culmination of her eighth grade year when I was invited to a meeting to discuss her transition to high school. When I arrived at the conference, Caroline was sitting between her mother and stepfather with iPod headphones in her ears. Caroline's step-father, dressed in a sharp black Armani suit, was engrossed in his cell phone, and her mother, a strikingly beautiful blonde, was staring at her freshly manicured nails. No one was speaking. The room was tense. I broke the palpable tension in the room as I introduced myself to Caroline and her parents and began discussing my role at the high school. "All students at the high school are assigned a guidance counselor to assist with academics and the college process," I began, "but in addition there are counseling services available for students and families who may need extra support. I have several positions and roles at the high school, including working with students with learning disabilities, and acting as an advisor for our peer leadership program and providing counseling to students, families and the greater school community." Both parents simultaneously nodded their heads in tacit agreement and with apparent understanding. I continued, "Caroline, Ms. Wallace, your guidance counselor, thought it would be a good idea if you had someone at the high school that you could talk to, since you seemed to like that outlet here in Middle School. I really hope we can work together." I waited a moment, and then asked Caroline if she had any questions for me, either about my role as a school social worker or about high school in general. She looked up and said, "Not really. I'm going to have a lot to talk to you about, especially with these two as my parents." I smiled and bit the inside of my cheek, trying not to laugh. Caroline's parents looked horrified at first, but then broke out into polite laughter – an unspoken agreement of "ugh, teenagers." Not to be topped, Caroline interrupted, "Laugh all you want now guys, but I'm not kidding." The laughter stopped. This seemed like a good time to end the meeting.

Once Caroline arrived in ninth grade, we began our weekly counseling sessions. On the days of our scheduled sessions, Caroline received a yellow pass in homeroom signifying our appointment and time. When asked by her friends why she always had to see the school social worker, she would laugh and say, "*Have you met my parents*?" or "*I'm stressed,*" or some other socially acceptable reason for going to counseling. To me, the reasons she gave her friends were unimportant; what mattered was that she felt supported and attended our sessions regularly.

Once Caroline walked into my office suite, she was immediately introduced to my team, which is comprised of a collection of other social workers, a school psychologist, learning-consultant and speech/language specialist, all who would be familiar faces in our expansive building. Additionally, she met Mary, my secretary and self-proclaimed "school mom" who has everything from candy on her desk, to tea bags, to a warm shoulder to cry on. Somewhat more importantly, she has access to my schedule and is always aware of my general whereabouts. Knowing that I am only a quick phone call away helps to put my new counselees at ease.

My meetings with Caroline covered a range of topics including school, her home life and friendships. Caroline explained that she is the only child born to Ann, her mother and Michael, her father. She recalled that her parents' marriage was short-lived and that Michael left the home before Caroline entered pre-school. She explained that she has had limited contact with him since that

time. Caroline also explained that, according to her mother, the marriage failed because her father was an *"unstable drug dealer and addict."* She told Caroline that Michael has been incarcerated for several drug-related offenses and has spent a considerable amount of time avoiding the authorities across several continents. He currently lives in South Africa but has lived in Costa Rica, Australia, and South America intermittently throughout the last decade. The fact that he does not even contact Caroline for her birthday, holidays or other important milestones is deeply upsetting to her, but something that she does not voice to her mother. *"I'm pretty sure my mom likes to think of him as just dead to us, but I can't get myself to do that. I have so many questions, but she is just so closed off from that whole chapter of her life. I think that I remind her of him though. I bet she hates that."* Despite an estranged relationship with her father, Caroline does maintain a positive relationship with her paternal grandparents. They often take Caroline on lavish vacations during school breaks and support her varied interests. *"They feel bad for me,"* she says, *"like my dad just abandoned me and he's their son! Doesn't make them look too good as parents either. Clearly they are compensating by being nice to me. Whatever, I'll take it. At least they pretend to love me."*

As our sessions continued, I learned more about Caroline's family and her perception of her role within it. A year after Michael left, Ann met and married Daniel, the CFO of a major pharmaceutical company. According to Caroline, initially Daniel did not want any children. In fact, he did not want to adopt Caroline or have her take his last name. "You're not my blood," he would say. However, within a few years this changed, and Caroline went from being the only child to having three half-brothers. She explained that Daniel's high-stress job often kept him away from home for weeks at a time, and when he returned, his temper was easily flared. Caroline feels that Daniel often takes out his frustrations on both she and her mother, never the boys. According to Caroline, Daniel and Ann constantly fought, sometimes about finances, but mostly about her. She reports that most of their fights involved her grades not being high enough, her laziness or her weight. Caroline felt that she was the scapegoat of the family, always being blamed for something. *"It honestly doesn't matter what I do, I am always getting yelled at. I could be up in my room doing homework or chatting online completely minding my own business, and he is screaming at me from downstairs. 'You only got a 90 on your Pre-Calculus test? What did you do to make your brother cry? You ordered Chinese food? You are never going to fit into your skinny jeans!' I mean who needs to hear that all the time? I get it. He thinks I'm a worthless piece of crap. He doesn't need to keep reminding me of that. I remind myself of that every day."* Caroline, like many teenagers, is quick to fire back, which usually escalates the arguments. At times, their verbal altercations can border on emotionally explosive. Caroline reported that Daniel had told her that she is, "unwanted, her mother's mistake and a disgrace to the family." To which she responds, *"Fuck you! My mother is only with you for your money and your sperm. Just thought you should know that, asshole."* As if Daniel's words were not hurtful enough, when these altercations occur, Ann does not immediately intervene, leaving Caroline feeling unsupported and angry. Instead, to make up for their fights, Ann will take Caroline on a generous shopping spree for some "retail therapy," treat her to a day at the spa or jet away for a quick, 10-day trip to the Maldives.

A bright student by nature, school has never come easily to Caroline as her emotions have always impeded her ability to truly excel. Despite this challenge, Caroline's parents pushed her to take advanced honors and AP classes, so that she could gain entry into an elite college. Prior to the beginning of high school, Caroline's parents outlined her academic schedule for the next four years, which included every AP and honors class she was eligible to take. Academic success, coupled with leadership experience and volunteer work, would get her close to her dream school, but outstanding SAT scores would certainly boost her appeal to colleges. The icing on the cake would be if she were scouted to play college athletics, something her parents had always believed was the definition of true achievement. Essentially, Caroline's parents believed that these elements equated the formula for future success and happiness.

However, Caroline was not sure if she agreed. Caroline knew she wanted to further her education, and was well aware of the standards to gain admission into a prestigious institution; after all, they were engrained in her since she was a young girl. And, even though the relationship with her parents was often in conflict, she always believed that they wanted the best for her and would do just about anything to help her achieve her goals. She recognized that her parents felt that her success in gaining admission into college was a direct reflection of their own parenting, and if she failed to get into an elite school, it was as if

they had failed as parents. These pressures and expectations spent a considerable amount of time circulating in her brain, but what always seemed to surface was, '*would gaining admission to an elite college really make me happy?*' She was not sure.

At school, teachers view Caroline as a model student. She is prepared for class, participates in class discussions and is an articulate writer. She often seeks extra help before school in order to increase her understanding of the material and build rapport with her teachers. She is polite, helpful and a natural leader. However, this is all part of the façade that Caroline has created at school to mask her insecurities. For Caroline, school is incredibly stressful, in part because of the conflict and self-doubt she carries with her from home. "It's so hard to concentrate," she begins. "All the things that people say about me get jumbled in my head and I can't stop thinking about it. It's like I miss entire class periods because I'm spacing out and thinking about what my stepdad said during our fight last night, the mean post I received on Facebook before school this morning, the text that my friend sent me last period calling me a liar. It's like I'm being fired at from all sides, and I can't make any of it stop. I feel like I have to spend so much energy on just holding myself together until I get home."

At home, there is a complete departure from the type of mature behavior that her teachers observe. When Caroline arrives home after school, her parents have arranged for private tutors for every subject, twice a week. In addition, Caroline has an organizational coach and a college counselor, all designed to provide Caroline with the best possible chance of educational success. However, even with the support and positive encouragement from tutors, Caroline becomes easily frustrated and withdrawn. She lacks confidence in her ability to achieve. She often says, "The only reason I do well is because I have a full-time staff making sure that I do. If I didn't, my parents would kill me and fire them!" To compensate for these feelings of inadequacy, Caroline will often act out impulsively. "I took two of my ADHD pills this morning; I thought it would make me smarter. So I waited a few minutes and realized that I'm still me. Sucks. Was totally hoping to morph into someone else."

For many students with tumultuous home lives, school can be a positive outlet. Caroline reports that she loves classes that allow her to express herself, such as music, art, and creative writing. A guitarist, Caroline taught herself to play at age 11 by watching YouTube and now composes her own

scores. She also enjoys filling up personal journals with favorite quotes, magazine cutouts, pictures of beloved celebrities, and original stories and poems. After school, she is an active leader of the varsity swimming team and truly excels on the debate team, winning multiple awards for her persuasive and passionate speeches.

Socially, Caroline maintains a close group of friends, who are among the popular crowd and is always invited to lavish sweet 16 parties and other gatherings. Despite this, Caroline doesn't have a "best friend." Caroline admits that she has always been slow to establish intimate friendships because she has difficulty trusting others. She notes that she is hesitant to disclose any information about her father for fear of being ridiculed or judged by others. Caroline often feels that no one accepts her for "who she is." She feels as if she is always on the verge of being kicked out of the group. She feels that, at times, "everyone hates her," so she often makes jokes to please others and deflect from any real issues. She dislikes conflict and "girl drama," but always seems to be in the middle of it because of her quick wit and blunt delivery. To compensate for some of the qualities, Caroline will often drive her friends around in her new Tesla, take them to sold-out concerts, and do just about anything to secure their continued friendship.

Despite an unstable home life and an academic schedule that presents challenges, Caroline was able to progress well through her first three years of high school. She maintained a 4.0 GPA, sustained her membership on the varsity swimming team, and used our weekly counseling sessions to process problems, receive positive encouragement, and, most of all, vent. These sessions allowed her to form a trusting relationship with an adult, a kind of relationship that she had self-admittedly never experienced before. Caroline was used to adult figures of authority who reaffirmed her already fragile identity, and it was rare for her to find an adult who encouraged her to explore her fears and doubts without consequence. Caroline hoped to improve her relationships with others, but to do so we had to unearth, explore and recreate a new schema for relationships. This process takes time and can only truly occur when trust is earned. For me, this relationship opened the door to a better understanding of the inner workings of Caroline, and subsequently, to the adolescent mind. We had formed a true alliance, which is one of the key factors in working with an adolescent.

I was in shock. Several seconds of sustained eye contact later, I blinked and broke the silence. I asked Caroline to come into my office so we could talk this through. I apologized if my comment had made it seem as if I was unsupportive and unaccepting of her new appearance. My reaction was merely a response indicative of my surprise. She reluctantly sat down and stared at the ceiling. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and began, "I feel empty. Dirty. I disgust myself. Don't even look at me right now." She opened her eyes, turned towards me, and repeated in a stronger voice, "Do you ever listen? I said, 'don't look at me.'" I silently obliged and turned my chair toward the window, so that I could only hear her voice. She began to tell her story.

"One night, at the beginning of the summer, I went with a few of my friends to a party by the lake. It started off really fun. Everyone was swimming and playing drinking games. I guess I thought I could keep up, but, to be honest, I really don't remember too much about the night. I must've blacked out. I woke up in the hospital with an IV. I was so freaked out. My parents were there, and they were so pissed. My friends were there too, and I was like, 'Why would you call my parents?' My friends told me that I drank 12 shots of vodka, smoked pot and took Xanax. Who does that? But that's not it. I had sex too, with a guy I don't even know. And then pictures appeared on Instagram. Everyone was commenting about how I am such a slut when I get drunk and that the reason I do this is because I have 'daddy issues.' I feel sick talking about this. Ugh, the rest of the summer is a blur...I drank a lot, tried a bunch of drugs, hooked-up a lot and basically lived up to my insta-reputation. I figured I should update my outfit to go with it. So, that should answer all of your questions."

Caroline was completely wrong. She answered none of my questions. Did her parents know the whole story? Did the police? Was she hurt? Pregnant? I could tell she wasn't in the place where I could press her for more details. This event was still too raw mostly for her, but also for me. So I just sat there waiting and listening, until I heard her exhale and let out a sob. I turned my chair around and watched the tears slowly stream down her face along with her black mascara. "I needed you this summer," she said. "You weren't around. I had to go through this alone. Please don't make me do that again. I tried to listen for your voice inside of my head. You know, 'If Ms. V was here what would she say?' But I couldn't hear you. You were too far away. All I could hear were the voices of all of my enemies telling me I was nothing." A long silence followed.

"I think they might be right," Caroline said.

I started to say, "I'm here now," but she shook her head and said, "I can't talk about this anymore today. Maybe tomorrow. Will you be around?"

Her words stabbed me in the heart. She needed me. I wasn't around. Will I be around tomorrow? I could not help feeling like this was a real test of our created alliance. I felt conflicted. Why?

School social workers often operate on the same calendar as teachers. After final exams and graduation, the school year is complete. Although I gently terminate with each student, holding a final meeting to provide closure at the end of a school year, I know that the lives of teens continue well past June 30th, which is why I always put a plan in place should an emergency arise. However, as a 10-month employee, I'm not required to come into school or to check my email or voicemail. Just like the students, I've earned a break where I can put my mind at ease, go on vacation, rest and rejuvenate for another school year. On the other hand, I feel as if I am leaving so many things unsettled, namely, my counseling students. Caroline had known the plan if a distressing situation or emergency surfaced in which she needed to confer with me. She should either send me an email or directly call Mary, my secretary, who has my cellphone number. I would then return her call or schedule time for her to come in and talk. Unfortunately, the prescribed plan and protocol was ineffective. I was in California for one month on vacation and my secretary decided not to reach out to me. Caroline told Mary it wasn't that important.

After this disclosure, the once weekly sessions with Caroline became more frequent. I would often arrive at school and find Caroline drawing or napping on the couch in my office suite. She always had a new story to tell, dream to interpret or guitar score to share. We spent the first few weeks of school trying to process the events of that summer night. Sometimes she wanted to talk about it but mostly she just wanted to forget. She talked openly about the drugs that she had tried and how they made her feel. Despite the more frequent visits, I could not help but feel that a wedge had worked its way between us. Physically, she was there in my office. However, she was more guarded and secretive than ever before. It was difficult to ascertain if this was because of the drug use, or if my absence this summer had caused a true rupture in our relationship. One

afternoon after the conversation lulled, I gently tried to bring up the topic.

*Me: So I've been thinking a lot about our relationship in the past few weeks and I can't help but feel like something is off between us. Is it just me or do you feel that way too?*

*Caroline: Yup. Pretty much. Did you know the movie Mean Girls was based on our school?*

*Me: Come on. That's just an urban legend!*

*Caroline: No, seriously. Girls are just mean. They tell you they are your friends and that they like your clothes and your hair and they get you to trust them. So you try. You tell them things about yourself that maybe you've never told anyone before, things that maybe you just discovered about yourself. They tell you they will always be there for you, no matter what. And then something happens, and I need them and they disappear.*

*Me: I can't help but see a parallel between your description of the 'mean girls' in our school and me. Is that how you see me? Gaining your trust and then abandoning you?*

*Caroline: Kind of. Only you didn't tweet and post my secrets on Instagram. So you are winning there. I was really upset about it this summer. I'm over it now. Honestly, it's me who has changed. It's like this experience made me see that the world is just a little darker of a place then I had ever imagined. I mean I knew my parents and home life sucked, but I thought other people were different. I guess I just didn't see how shitty people could be before. I guess now I know.*

With the mounting stress of the college admissions process, a course load that included six AP classes, a high-pressure swimming season underway, and the events of the summer still attacking her on social media, Caroline's moods began to vacillate between anger and listlessness. She began missing school, complained of feeling sick, and avoided schoolwork. On other days, she would leave class to wander the halls or just decide to get in her car and go home. Up until this point, Caroline compartmentalized her school and home selves. She was able to appear as a perfect student, athlete and young woman, all while struggling inside with a great deal of insecurities,

anxiety and looming pressure. However, after the incident over the summer, the barrier between her worlds had broken, and the floodgates opened. Caroline was no longer able to keep her emotions inside. This was her breaking point.

With Caroline's permission, I reached out to her parents and spoke to them about my observations during the past few weeks, as well as some of my concerns about her decompensated mental state. I suggested that perhaps it would be helpful for the family and Caroline to meet with a therapist outside of school, in addition to me, for some guidance and support. Initially, Caroline's parents resisted, telling me that, "*This is just a phase, she will snap out of it. She knows better than to jeopardize her admission into college.*" But with further prodding, they agreed to follow through if I thought it was best. Caroline, on the other hand, refused to see a private therapist outside of school. "*Why should I do that? I have you!*" she said. I explained that this therapist would be in addition to me, and could help her and her parents understand what she is experiencing. However, despite the gentlemen's agreement to attend private therapy, Caroline and her parents only attended two sessions with a family therapist, and when it did not "work," they made an appointment with Caroline's psychiatrist to "up her meds." This just reaffirmed Caroline's belief that she was a burden to her parents and that they did not want to know what she was really feeling.

"You are going to be so mad at me," Caroline announced as she walked through my office door. Starting my day with a visit from Caroline was becoming a regular occurrence. On one hand, I had a mound of work to do, and on the other, I was relieved. She was attending school regularly, had caught up on most of the missed work and seemed to have rebounded quite nicely from the rocky start to the school year. In addition, she and I had made some positive gains in terms of our relationship. After the rupture over the summer, Caroline began to trust me once again. Caroline took her usual seat next to my desk and pulled another chair closer, so she could put her feet up.

"I woke up in my puke," she said abruptly.

I turned toward her without saying a word, and she continued, "See, I knew you would be mad." The rest of the conversation continued as follows,

*Me: You woke up in your puke?*

*Caroline: Yeah, gross, right? I have to be honest, telling you that is slightly embarrassing,*

but whatever, I already said it. I bet you are thinking that I shouldn't be drinking on a school night, but really, that's the least of my problems at the moment.

Me: Hmmm, I'm a little confused. Maybe you can start from the beginning?

Caroline: Okay. So, yesterday on my way home from school I checked my voicemail and there was a message from this guy Tom Connor. Tom Connor happens to be the University of Michigan swimming coach and he called me to give me the news that after my club swim team competition this past weekend, I've been selected to join the Michigan team this fall. So, I obviously thought it was a joke at first, mostly because I swam terribly this weekend, but I called him back anyway. He said that he wanted to sign me and that they were going to give me a full academic scholarship to attend, in addition to a starting spot on the team.

Me: Okay...is this good news?

Caroline: Nope, not at all. In fact, this is the worst possible scenario. I don't want to do swimming in college. Do you have any idea how much time goes into collegiate swimming? Hours and hours, plus land workouts and strict diet/nutrition programs. Did I mention the pressure to get a good time? I'm not even sure I want to go to college anymore. It's too stressful. I don't know what I want to study, where I want to go, and everyone keeps asking me about it and assumes that I am excited about college. Best years of my life, they keep saying. Ugh, make it stop. I can't do this anymore.

Me: You can't do what anymore?

Caroline: This! Live up to everyone else's expectations. I can't even tell my parents that I got into school and received an invitation to swim or else they will make me go there. They don't care what I want.

Me: What do they care about then?

Caroline: Seriously? You've met them! They only care about what friends and the other swimming parents think—that they are good parents because I swim at Michigan.

Me: Is this really about them, though?

Caroline: Ummm. Yeah, sort of. Swimming doesn't make me happy anymore. I just happen to be good at it. But frankly, all of the fun has gotten sucked out of it because it became so important to everyone. It's so annoying that I have to explain this even to you! I feel like I don't have any choices and that my parents are going to be in control of my life forever. So last night, I made the decision to take about 10 shots of vodka...one for each year I swam competitively and hated it.

Me: Wow. I see. So you were finally in control?

Caroline: Yup, for a minute...And then I wasn't. I hate blacking out, but it happens quite often these days.

Me: Hmmm, okay, let's take a deep breath and process this a bit. You said quite a bit there in your explanation of waking up in your puke. Although you said several things that were concerning to me: feeling like you were not in control of your future, stating that you were giving up, your decision to drink to cope with your feelings, and I could go on...I'm interested to hear from you where you would like to start. What part of this is the most pressing?

Caroline: All of it! Ha-ha. I mean, seriously, all of it. Umm, how do I tell them that I'm unhappy and stressed and that I don't want to swim competitively in college without them being disappointed in me? When they are disappointed, that is hands-down worse than being angry. They can get over being angry, but disappointment sticks with you forever.

Me: I think that's a good place to start...how might you broach this topic with your parents? Do you have any ideas?

Caroline: Well yeah, I've been thinking about this for a while, and I keep playing out all of the different scenarios in my head. I thought about telling them that they really don't know me at all because they never even asked me what I wanted to do after high school or what my real interests are...umm, I thought about telling them that our family kinda sucks, and it's not my fault that they don't like me as a daughter. Last night, I thought about telling them that I've been unhappy and lonely for as long as I can remember. But seriously! I'm truly scared

*for their reaction. So much so that I really don't think I can tell them.*

*Me: I completely understand being hesitant to discuss these topics with your parents. These are difficult topics to discuss no matter how old you are. And even when our relationships with our parents are strained, we still want to make them proud and prevent disappointment. But what would happen if you continued to follow their path for you and not your own?*

*Caroline: I don't even want to think about that! I would probably just hate my whole life. Maybe even more than I do now. I'm not sure I can continue to do this without having a total breakdown. It's going to be really ugly when that happens, and it WILL happen.*

*Me: Sometimes I think breakdowns are important because they cause you to pause and self-reflect on what is important in life to YOU. Think about it…who do you want to be? Are you proud of the person that you are today? If not, what can you change about yourself starting today to have a better tomorrow?*

*Caroline: I'm not sure I have an answer at the moment…can we continue this conversation?*

*Me: Sure can! I don't expect you to have an immediate answer to those questions because self-reflection takes time, but you should give yourself the time and space to do it. Maybe find an hour to just drive to your favorite space, park, beach, etc. Leave your phone and any other devices with social media apps in your car, and take a walk, or just sit and listen to your thoughts. You'd be surprised what sometimes surfaces when we take away all the distractions.*

*Caroline: I'll try. I'm kinda nervous about what might come up…I'm sure I will have some juicy things to share once they do surface. Bet you can't wait!*

*Me: Ha-ha. Can't wait! We'll tackle whatever it is.*

## The Endless Race: New Directions

Bronfenbrenner proposes through his ecological model that development is shaped through a series of interconnected spheres or contexts including: relationships between parent and children, extended family, schools, neighborhoods, communities, politics, media and economic climate valued by a culture or subculture (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). As we come back to the core of this discussion, it will be helpful to keep in mind the interdependent relationships and multiple spheres or systems that influence the individual adolescent. As school social workers, at times we have the unique role of causing a ripple effect: using the power of the relationship with a student to trigger change in the other spheres or layers of an adolescent's young life.

While the student is usually the primary "client" in school settings, the school social worker is often required to work with other members of students' context or system, namely parents and/or guardians, teachers/administrators, and other support personnel (private therapists, coaches, community-based organizations, etc.). Although the setting of a high school community is often intimate and connected, it frequently comes with a political overtone, which mirrors the values of the larger community. If the community values high academic achievement as demonstrated by test scores above the national average, or a first tier ranking on the *New Jersey Monthly* list of top-rated school districts, then, in essence, the school social worker must have an understanding of the importance of these cultural ideals before embarking on a journey to assist students and families with their emotional needs. The school social worker's role is as much about meeting the fundamental emotions of adolescents and families as it is about having an understanding of the larger context of the community. School social workers have the proficiencies to intercede with individuals and groups of adolescents and families, advocate on behalf of issues that impact adolescents, mental health and education, as well as organize movements to create change. Ultimately, school social workers have the necessary skills to make an impact in multiple spheres and contexts.

This brief outline stages the complexity of the social worker's role within the context of the school community and the multitude of systems that impact the adolescent. Beginning with the larger school community and funneling down to the individual social worker, I will use Caroline's narrative to deconstruct, process and make recommendations for social workers working with affluent adolescents in the school setting.

## Community

The culture of affluence places much esteem on educational advancement, the perfect resume, materialism, and financial gains, all in an effort to create the "perfect" life. However, in an effort to accomplish this lofty goal, we, as a society, are instilling these external values in our developing adolescents and neglecting the fundamental part of the self, the identity. By neglecting to foster the internal self and moral compass of affluent adolescents, we are contributing to the creation of a generation of unhappy teens with inner emptiness, lack of passion and an unstable sense of self. How can we, as a society, continue to grow when so many of our teens are giving up?

The film *Race to Nowhere* begins to raise awareness of the pressures of affluent children and teens today through a series of interviews and stories from parents, teachers, educators, therapists and children who are struggling. *Race to Nowhere* declares that our educational system in and of itself creates a culture of stress through endless high-stakes testing (SATs, ACTs, AP tests and state testing), an inordinate amount of homework, and pressure to be perfect. The film postulates that our educational system is leading children to cheat and cut corners because there is such an intense pressure to always perform or produce, instead of an emphasis on learning. This type of school environment, recognized in many affluent districts across the country, is leading to increased stress, anxious and depressive symptoms among children and adolescents, and a rise in the number of children taking stimulant medications, such as Adderall, in order to concentrate, complete schoolwork, and keep up with peers. The film proposes that change should begin with parents and teachers who have placed, according to the authors, impossible demands on students to succeed. The authors believe this is essential in order to protect the mental health of our developing youth. Although this film has sparked heated conversations across the country, grassroots revolution can only go so far without entire systemic change, meaning from the pre-K to the university level. Are we ready for this challenge?

As a larger culture, it is our job to instill certain values in our children and adolescents. In order to create change at a community level, several things need to transpire. First, stakeholders in the future of affluent youth – parents, teachers, administrators, community members including private therapists, clergy and police forces – need to hold a town hall meeting to meaningfully discuss the issues of affluent youth today. Engage the prominent stakeholders in a conversation and listen. Each stakeholder has valuable information and perspectives to share with the larger group. From there, form smaller committees to take on the multiple issues that were raised including: a political action group to write to senators/assemblymen at a macro level to influence No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top and other education initiatives, a group to provide workshops or educational services to parents about key topics (social media, parenting, teen suicide, current drug trends), a support network of community mental heath providers, and a group to work directly with the schools to help inform and influence school policy on issues such as homework and grading. School social workers should have a seat on each of these committees as they have expertise and necessary skills to facilitate an open dialogue among stakeholders. However, this is just the beginning. From there it takes time, perseverance, persistence, and a real buy-in from the larger public.

## Parents

Parents play an integral role in the social, emotional and moral development of their child. As children grow up and enter the teenage years, parenting becomes even more important because just as adolescents are craving autonomy, they still need parents and trusted adults to help them navigate new experiences and vistas. All teens carry some emotional weight into school with them every day. Some can manage the weight and stress based on previous experiences and existing coping skills. But for families where open communication and expression are not valued it can lead to teens feeling stifled or worse. Where do those feelings go? They don't disappear on their own. Of all the auxiliary professional personnel in a high school, the social worker is in the position to mediate what are often disconnected, hostile, and at times frustrated retorts on the part of the families and students.

Caroline, the adolescent illustrated in the narrative, was linked up with a school social worker from the start of her high school experience. There were several indicators in terms of her family constellation including the abandonment by her father, and subsequent divorce and remarriage on the part of her mother, that lead school officials to suggest and offer school-based counseling services. However, this

was just the entry point. From there, the support continued because of the willingness of the family and Caroline to access services. However, this is not always the case. At times there can be resistance for parents to engage with the school on addressing social/emotional issues; oftentimes stating that hormones and puberty are the sole causes of mood swings or that if the adolescent is maintaining the honor roll, then there are no concerns. This is simply not the case with some adolescents. Parents need to be aware that high grades alone are not always a protective factor in development, especially if the school is observing other things such as a change in friend group, constant worry, excessive crying or a need for perfection in the classroom. The social worker has the expertise to initiate this type of discussion with parents and begin to educate them on how they might begin a dialogue with their children to understand what emotions may be laying beneath the surface.

With this being said, shedding light on the emotional needs of adolescents is often a sensitive subject to parents. Some affluent parents, who align with the values of the culture of affluence, only see the positive gains that can be made by creating the perfect resume for their children and can be resistant when they are made aware that such emotional "inadequacies" exist. Many feel that if their children are not "happy" or "struggling" that in some way it is a direct reflection on them or their parenting. Others, who acknowledge that an emotional deficit exists, attempt to "fix" the problem by throwing money at it through medication and perhaps a few sessions of therapy. Caroline's parents in many ways exhibited some of these reactions when responding to her emotional needs. After a call from me, they tried a few sessions of therapy but decided to add additional medication to Caroline's regime instead of acknowledging the underlying issues. Undoubtedly, social workers in a school setting have a "line" that they need to respect in terms of their role or perspective because it is just that, a perspective. However, it is vital that parents view school personnel, especially social workers, as being partners in the journey of raising an emotionally healthy adolescent, just as school social workers need to continually reach out and engage parents in discussions about the mental wellbeing of their children

Once parents are engaged in a dialogue about the social/emotional needs of their child, it's vital that parents begin to understand that setbacks and failures are an important part of the developmental process of adolescence and help normalize these setbacks for their children. It's important to help adolescents to see the lesson that can be learned through these experiences but to also listen to their fears and worries. Parents have a difficult role during the teenage years and often adolescents can "push buttons" that can stir up intense emotions in their parents. It's equally important for parents to take time to reflect on their parenting style and values, as this is a good strategy to model for teenagers.

## Teachers and Schools

Social workers in high schools provide services to students in a context that often includes the involvement, or non-involvement, of the professional staff. In low performing high schools, the academic expectations for many students are low or "soft," whereas in high performing high schools the academic expectations are elevated. Teachers often assume the role of perpetuating the values and culture of the school and community. They develop and align their perceived expectations with what they believe the community, parents and administrators want.

For Caroline, the school culture reproduced a case of "student success without failure." Regrettably, the message that Caroline received was that being her (or her best) wasn't good enough. She had to be "perfect" in school to maintain her reputation, but at home and internally she was struggling. She maintained her school façade until it became overwhelming, and, unfortunately, the teachers did not see the signs of her struggle in the classroom. They encouraged and pushed her. Did they push her beyond a point where she could cope?

Teachers have a difficult role in that they have many responsibilities in addition to academic instruction. However, many times teachers have the most to share because they observe not only classroom and academic achievement, but also social interactions. Teachers often have daily interactions with students either in the classroom or through extracurricular activities. Because of this, they are often the ones to notice and bring changes in mood, academic performance, attendance, and peer groups to the attention of supportive personnel, such as social workers, in the school setting.

An inherent part of a teacher's role is building relationships with students. Caroline and her teachers built their relationships through extra help sessions, engaging her in classroom

discussions and positive feedback on her artwork and writing. These are natural places to begin to build relationships with students. Once this relationship had a foundation, teachers could have easily started a conversation with Caroline about her interests, the swim team, positive feedback from the class or an overall change in behavior. These talking points would have been natural entry points into Caroline's world, perhaps leading a teacher to an increased concern, but perhaps a place of a strengthened relationship. Teachers who have these relationships with students are often the best allies of school social workers, as they often bring a new perspective or information to add to a picture of an adolescent. Just like it takes a village to raise a child, in many cases it takes a group of caring educators to nurture the adolescent.

Unfortunately, because of a teacher's varied responsibilities, often there is just not enough time to build these types of relationships with students, or perhaps some teachers do not feel that they have the skills or are "over-stepping" when they attempt to have these relationships. I would argue that it is essential that time is made for these personal connections and if teachers are concerned or unsure of how to effectively intervene then reaching out for consultation is the next logical step. Consult with parents, social workers, guidance counselors, and the school nurse. Many times, we can work collectively to get the student the necessary support, but it all begins with teachers.

In addition to building relationships with students, teachers in affluent settings can help by decreasing the pressure associated with grades, testing and overall "output." Instead, take the time to discuss the learning process and emphasize that it is not the end result, the grade, but the process of getting to that grade: effort, determination, completion and the little steps in between. Find the teachable moments in class. Ask students to self reflect on their effort, have students share their failures and setbacks when reaching a goal. Most of all, teachers should share their stories. Students want to connect with others who they admire. It's important for adolescents to see that even teachers can make mistakes growing up and get to a place of success. This is the other side of education, the part that emphasizes educating the "whole child" and not just the brain.

**Student(s)**

Caroline's narrative illustrates and dramatizes a small fraction of the struggles of an affluent adolescent today. High parental expectations to succeed, pressures and stress associated with social media, an internal emptiness masked by a well-presented facade and substance use as acceptable means of coping are just some of the issues that Caroline experienced. Many affluent adolescents confront the challenges of growing up and learn to cope, although with varying degrees of stress and strain on themselves and their families. They begin to navigate these complex experiences by relying and reaching out to a supportive group of friends and team members, speaking to their parents or trusted older siblings, or by using social media to connect with others who share similar experiences. But for some adolescents where the foundation or schema for relationships is flawed, reaching out for help and trusting others is a difficult task. Caroline's relationship with her stepfather and mother, and her role within the family, was already strained prior to her entrance into high school. She felt unwanted by her biological father, constantly criticized by her stepfather, and, at times, a burden to her mother. She knew that in her family, it wasn't "feelings" that were important, but rather the flawless and staged exterior presentation portrayed to outsiders. Despite her rocky relationships with family, Caroline had the upbringing and fortitude that many would envy. Caroline, like many affluent adolescents, felt that by acknowledging that she was unhappy when she had the "perfect" college resume, social capital and financial means, meant that she was ungrateful, or that her unhappiness was unfounded. So, instead of acknowledging and expressing her feelings of unhappiness, she internalized them. She buried and stifled these feelings until they could not be suppressed any longer.

Coping mechanisms are the skills that youth learn through experiencing the natural ebbs and flows of life. These proficiencies are rarely formally taught or learned, as we draw on prior experiences to teach us how to respond in similar situations. It is through these meaningful experiences that we learn that we can persevere and rebound from setbacks, a much-needed life skill. Some affluent parents attempt to prevent these types of learning experiences, thinking that setbacks or failure will harm their child's fragile sense of self. However, this is simply not the case. By providing resources that ensured success such as tutors, private coaches, and a road map to college, Caroline's parents sheltered her from

experiencing disappointments, setbacks and failures, which are all crucial to developing a solid sense of self. Also, when the situation was leading to a less than favorable outcome, Caroline's parents rescued her, so that she did not have to cope with the issues or feelings that were dredged up. Her parents' responses influenced events by placing blame on others or an external source. "It's not your fault" or "I'll talk to him, the coach will reconsider," her parents would reiterate. In some ways, it seemed that this mentality was to protect Caroline's parents from the harsh, flawed reality that their daughter was troubled, as opposed to protecting Caroline's emerging sense of self. However, because of Caroline's many talents, most of the time her experiences were favorable. As a result of this and her parents protecting her from disappointment, Caroline never learned how to persevere. Thus when the first issue that resulted in a setback surfaced, a major upsetting event that included rape, alcohol poisoning and exploitation on social media, she did not have the requisite skills nor the experience to cope with the challenging events. Her parents finessed all setbacks in her teenage life. For this reason, when Caroline was presented with, what in her mind was an insurmountable issue, she took the convenient way out to deal with her issues. In the absence of coping mechanisms, Caroline gravitated toward what was convenient and accessible (drugs, sex, external image changing) and immersed herself in a toxic teen culture rather than addressing, or even considering, the more positive alternatives. For adolescents, these negative choices often lead to destructive and anti-social behavior. Without prior experiences to draw up or natural, inherent coping mechanisms, Caroline gravitated to what was socially acceptable in her peer group—drinking, drugs, and sex as a mean of surviving.

Affluent teenagers whose family culture is to persevere at all costs neglect to foster the development of an identity, the fundamental part of the adolescent self. If the development of the self is not being explored and fostered at home, then a natural place for this to occur is at school, where learning is embedded in the context. Many students make connections with trusted teachers and use this relationship to explore the "who am I" question. But for others, an inherent power differential exists, as the teacher "grades" the adolescent on his or her work. As a result of this, at times a fear exists that by exposing the self to a trusted teacher that he or she may not have the skills to handle the perceived magnitude of the problem or worse, use the sensitive personal information against them by sharing it with others, treating them differently in class, or assigning grades more harshly.

Forming a relationship with the school social worker can be a critical step for adolescents who are struggling with the pressures of the culture of affluence and navigating adolescence. The school social worker is frequently familiar with the school context, cliques, pressures and the complicated web of the school, which for some adolescents is a natural bridge toward seeking mental health services. Furthermore, due to the confidential nature of the relationship, no topic is off limits, which allows for exploration and validation of feelings often times in the moment, or within the day, because of the flexibility and accessibility of the social worker. In the world of instant feedback and validation through social media and text messages, teens also expect that therapy, or "feeling better" will also happen immediately. This is often not the case, as relationship building and therapy is a process that takes some time. Unfortunately, this is a hazard of society, GenME, as well as adolescence, such that one is unable to see that those setbacks are temporary or that a future exists beyond high school. In addition, when "feeling better" does not happen immediately, and there is a process, often previous experiences to draw from are non-existent. This leads to a lack of perspective and at its worst moments, a sense of hopelessness that he or she will feel this way forever.

In a society where media is ever present, adolescents often send and receive hundreds of messages per day. But sending and receiving these messages through personal devices does not allow for adults to help process the messages. In essence, social media alienates parents from being part of the conversation about life experiences. By alienating parents and choosing to have more "conversations" over text and social mediums, we are allowing adolescents to take on a greater independent role than they are equipped to handle and thereby reinforcing their emotional distances to one another. Social media can't help adolescents to feel. Yes, you can "like" a comment or picture, but there is still an emotional detachment, as well as many misinterpretations that go along with social media. In essence, connections through social media are not a substitution for face-to-face conversations and relationships. These in-person interactions cause us to pause, consider another person's perspective, and feel, not just react in an attempt to provide an

instantaneous response. However, there is often an inherent fear of letting or allowing others to see our flaws; we feel exposed and vulnerable. That's why we re-take and retouch our pictures over social media, but it is much more difficult to do this in real life.

This vulnerability or apprehension of exposure has direct links to the fear of failure in the culture of affluence. However, if adolescence isn't the time to "fail" or make mistakes, then when is? Isn't making mistakes essential to personal growth?

Taking the time for self-reflection is a key component to development. It allows us to process, understand, and grow from experience. Today with social media, however, teenagers don't always take the time to feel vulnerable or self-reflect because they are never "alone." They always have a phone or device to occupy them and keep them from their innermost thoughts and doubts. Consequently, these are often the thoughts we need to listen to—listening to these uncomfortable thoughts force us to learn the most about ourselves.

How can we, as social workers, help with this process? We can encourage students to take a social media break or disconnect for one hour every day. We can teach coping skills by building on natural strengths. We can encourage and challenge students to go against the grain, choose happiness and life balance over emptiness and over-commitment. We can educate, process, and laugh with them. We can help adolescents to see the humor in experiences, and that many uncomfortable life experiences are temporary. We can help them to see that there are always options or alternatives in life, even though they may be difficult to talk about or discuss. We can encourage teenagers to fight for their lives and discover their unique purpose in life.

## Social Workers

So how does this all fit together? In summary, affluent teens have issues; they are not just the ones that you read about in textbooks or the daily newspaper. For many, their serious psychological and social issues are masked by the façade of affluence. Perhaps that is one reason why researchers often neglect this population in their research. It is clear that the affluent have resources most do not have, but that does not minimize the pain that some experience.

In this quest for identity and self-understanding, affluent teens start off with everything to lose, as they are given the best possible education and upbringing in order to be successful. Thus, when they are disappointed, face a setback, or make a mistake, as teenagers inevitably do, they feel as if their whole world just fell apart. Many graduate from college, land the perfect job, and then realize that they are unhappy. For the first time, many don't have a clear plan set out for them by a parent or the larger society. They are forced to think for themselves, solve problems independently, and know that their decisions are finally their own. For many affluent teens and young adults, this is the scariest moment they have yet to face. However, I'm not sure getting to this complex life juncture is entirely their fault. Affluent teens and young adults are conditioned by the culture of affluence to believe that education and wealth buys happiness, and to be happy you need to work hard every moment of the day, and be the best at everything that you do. To some extent, I agree with this mentality, but I fear that by instilling this endless external drive into our teens and young adults we are completely neglecting the internal drive, understanding of the self, and purpose in life. For students such as Caroline, it was not until the day she voiced her dissention to the life path that her parents created, and took responsibility for her choices and ownership of her own experiences, that she began to form her identity as a young woman.

The past decade as a social worker in an affluent school community has taught me great lessons about the educational experiences of affluent youth, and the challenges they experience along the way. I thought that by being raised in a town with a similar socio-economic scale that I would have an understanding of the struggles and fears of affluent families. I was wrong. It has taken me years to comprehend and appreciate fully the affluent subculture of today's youth and the unique challenges they face in our unstable and ever-changing society. I have witnessed firsthand the complete unraveling of an adolescent and parent after a rejection from a top college, a countless number of youths who find themselves in a psychiatric hospital for persistent suicidal ideation, and adolescents who are admitted to inpatient drug rehabilitation for prescription drug addictions. These were the types of events that I was prepared for. What has surprised me is the number of "well-adjusted" youth who just want to talk, be heard, connect, and attach. They seek to understand themselves and genuinely want to know what to do in situations that are uncomfortable and unfamiliar. They want to know

how to talk to their parents about their feelings. They want to know if it is OK to be selfish and make their own life path instead of following the directions of others. They want to know if they choose to go against the culture of affluence's "recipe for success" that they will still find life's purpose and happiness. I often find myself asking them, "why do you want to join this club, take this class, go this route? Is it for others? Or yourself?" At some point, it isn't about doing what parents, coaches, and teachers want or expect adolescents to do; it's about the path that the adolescent chooses to take. The thing is, I am saying this, but it is not the message that adolescents are receiving from our society or their parents. Perhaps this cohort of affluent youth will be the ones to change society's "recipe for success" and to question why we keep perpetuating values that are having a devastating impact on the mental health of youth.

The past year has been filled with much emotional heartbreak, challenges, and tragedies that have left our school community badly bruised, including two suicides from the class of 2013 that were widely covered by the media. Our students and staff are emotionally drained from the long school months, but there is something about this year that is much different. Our students are anxious about leaving for college, and unsure of what the world outside of our school community holds for them. They have seen firsthand role models who were "perfect"—beautiful, star athletes, honor students from the grade above them—choose to end their lives instead of persevere in the face of challenge and adversity. They think, "if they couldn't do it, how can I?" Affluent teenagers feel that they should be their best self by the time they are 18, but that is just not feasible for many. Even the ones who look perfect on the outside are not inside. That's the secret. No one is.

Ultimately, I fear that we are sending our youth into the world prepared academically, but not with the life experiences or coping mechanisms necessary for the real world. We are setting them up for academic success, but failure in terms of their mental wellbeing. We are telling our kids there is only one way to get where they want to go in life: Play it safe and stay within the lane, even though we know there is not one recipe for happiness. We know it's our personal journey, unique set of beliefs, and maybe a little luck that gets us there. We need to teach our kids that it is the journey, not the destination, that is important and that all of the little unexpected, unanticipated

successes and challenges that we have along the way make life what it is, an adventure.

What is the role of the social worker in affluent school settings? On the macro level, it is to listen, observe, and seek to understand the context of the school environment and the values of the larger subculture. At the school level, it is to advocate and engage in policy discussions with administrators, teachers, and parents about the issues that impact the mental health of students, and to bridge the gap that sometimes exists between teachers and students, and parents and students. At the individual student level, it includes processing social media and text messages, encouraging students to talk to their parents about difficult topics, and giving them a framework for the discussion. We need to: Instill hope and give students the confidence to believe in their inner compass. Help students self-reflect and see failure and setbacks as a natural part of growing up. Put things in perspective. Give them the tools to advocate for themselves and instill the value that reaching out for help is a sign of strength and not weakness. Essentially, the role of the school social worker is instrumental in every context of raising an adolescent in the culture of affluence.

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