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## Commentary: Back-to-school tips for teens

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It seemed like just yesterday that Annabelle was anxiously awaiting the final school bell to ring for summer vacation. Annabelle loves summer. She especially enjoys the break from school, having more time to hang out with friends and family, going to the beach, enjoying the sunshine and sleeping in, of course!

One summer afternoon in August, Annabelle glanced over at her calendar and realized school would be starting soon. She got an overwhelming feeling, as a million thoughts raced through her mind: "I'm starting high school soon. What will it be like? Will people like me? Will I make friends? What if I can't keep up with school work? What if I can't find my classes? Is school safe? What if I get bullied? Will there be any drama? Should I already know what college and career I want to pursue?"

If you relate with any of Annabelle's thoughts and worries, take a deep breath—you are not alone. You have valid concerns. Starting a new school year in general can be intimidating. There are many things that can increase our worries when it comes to going back to school.

Whether it's a new school, a new school year, friendships, safety or organization skills, here are some take-away tips that can hopefully ease some of your worries. Thinking about these things and planning ahead of time can help decrease some of the school-related anxiety you may be experiencing.

### **Mentorship**

Finding a mentor is important. Before you reject the idea, hear me out. There will be moments when you will have school-related and non-school-related questions. It helps to have someone you trust during these moments. Sometimes you will need advice, words of encouragement, someone to simply listen and someone to keep you accountable. Mentors often carry priceless wisdom that can help you in your specific circumstances. Mentors usually have already been through some of the challenges and seasons you will experience. The role of a mentor is to guide you and to be a voice of encouragement in your life.

You might be thinking, Well, where do I even get a mentor? Good question. Can you think of anyone in your life currently (family member, teacher, coach etc.) that would be a positive influence in your life and who would be willing to take on the role as your mentor if you asked? If not, you can check with your school to see if they have any mentorship programs or if they can link you to mentorship programs within your community.

## **Organization**

Let's be real, some of us do not use our school planners at all. Some of us can't even remember the last time we saw that thing. And some of you are probably asking, What's a school planner? The truth is, you have to experiment with different methods to find what works best for you.

For some, it helps to remember homework assignments and weekly activities by writing them down. For most, noting them in our phones is most helpful. For others, using one binder or different folders for each class is most helpful. Then there are those who think they've mastered memorizing all their homework assignments. There's different methods, and I would encourage you to try different ones to see which one is most effective.

Ask your friends what method they use to get even more ideas! Start thinking of which ones you might try before you start school. Things will get busy quickly once you start school, and it wouldn't be a bad idea to also have weekly backpack clean-up days at the end of the week. Trust me, you don't want to be panicking during 1st period as you dig through your backpack looking for the science homework you spent all night working on!

For those attending a new school, here are some tips for you. If possible, get to school early on your first day so you can get familiar with the campus and locate your classes. If you can get familiar with the campus during orientation, even better!

Schools also have websites where you can usually find the school campus map. This is also the place to look if you're interested in tutoring resources. Feel free to look at your school website ahead of time to get familiar with what your school is all about. Also, don't be afraid to ask where certain buildings and classrooms are. There are people available who will be more than happy to direct you the right way.

## **Social opportunities and friendships**

Having a social life is important! It's easy for some to make friends. For others, making friends can be nerve-wrecking. Wherever you stand, these tips are for you.

Check out the clubs, sports, volunteer opportunities and other activities that are provided within your school. Getting involved in your school is a great opportunity to meet new people.

Also, ask yourself what kind of people you would like to surround yourself with throughout your school years. What kind of friendships would be most positive and healthy for you? Examine your current friendships and ask yourself whether these friendships are positive. Be honest with yourself.

## **Safety and bullying**

School should be the last place where you should be worried about your safety. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. If school safety is one of your worries, you are most definitely not alone. In light of all the news and events around us, this reality can increase some worries.

Stay up-to-date with your school's safety plans. Take school drills seriously so you can have an idea of what to do in case of a real emergency. Ask questions if you are unsure of anything. If you hear or see anything suspicious on campus or through social media, report it to your teacher or school personnel immediately. You can help keep our schools safe. Some schools even have police officers on campus, which brings me to my next point. There are officers patrolling around schools, especially during the school year— this is good news. If you walk to and from school, be aware of your surroundings and try to stay near busy intersections. Also, keep your phone handy and walk with friends if possible.

Bullying is another concern within schools. You can be the nicest person in the world, and yet there will still be someone that doesn't like you. Under no circumstance should you allow others to harm you emotionally, verbally, physically and/or mentally.

It is also not OK to witness bullying and stay silent about it. This only gives the bully power over others. Instead, know that it is absolutely OK to reach out for help. Think of at least two people in your life you can confide in if you ever become a victim or witness of bullying.

Some of you may even be worried you'll be called a "snitch." Know this— some people are going to say negative things about you, but in the end, you have the power to decide which words you will receive and what words you will allow to define you. It is these moments that define what kind of person you are and what kind of person you want to become.

### **Self-care**

At your age, there are countless expectations and responsibilities that you have. You have new challenges and changes that the previous generation did not have. Some of you even have jobs currently. In the midst of busyness and routine, be attentive to your body and level of energy.

Make time to take a break by doing things that relax you. Make time for things you enjoy! Make a list of all the different things that you enjoy doing and add them to your weekly school routine. Your mental, physical and emotional health are important, and the more proactive you are about your health, the more present and energized you will be in all your daily activities.

Ask yourself how you will take care of yourself during the school year. Think about your sleep routine, eating habits and exercise routines as well. Don't wait until you are exhausted and too burnt out to take care of yourself. That's no fun!

### **Enjoy the ride**

One step at a time. One day at a time. One school year at a time. You don't have to have it all figured out. You will make mistakes, and that's OK. (Read that again.) You don't have to have your career and life all planned out by middle school or high school. I know you have high demands and pressures from different places.

Remember, it's OK to ask for help. It's also important to absorb each moment of your schooling. Enjoy your school years because this is a time that you do not get back. Enjoy your friendships, lessons learned, classes, clubs and dances. Take pictures to capture your favorite moments. One day you will look back and be thankful you took some of those pictures.

Sometimes it helps to remember what you have gone through in life— the changes, adjustments, transitions— we've all been through them. Remember starting elementary school? What were you feeling then? Remember transitioning into middle school? What was that like? Did you ever move homes? And now some of you are transitioning into high school. How did you adjust to each of these changes? You see, you've been through several transitions already and look how far you've come.

You have accomplished so much already, and you should be proud of yourself.

Wishing you a safe and fruitful school year! You've got this!

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