Normal CC Student Homework

(readings for questions 3 and 4 are on the next pages of this document)

NOTE: PLEASE DO THESE QUESTIONS IN THE ORDER THEY ARE PRESENTED IN HERE…

1. Think about the following question for a few minutes and then write whatever comes to mind on it for a few minutes (more like a brainstorm): Describe the *normal, well-adjusted* teenager here at CCHS. Describe a person who is doing and being what one is supposed to be doing and being here. What are the characteristics of this person? Give me as many details as possible about this person. Feel free to focus on a person of your own gender if you wish, or not; whatever makes sense to you…

2. What is your opinion about this image you have described? Is this a good image for teenagers to live up to or not? Why?

3. After reading the article about Roee Grutman, respond to the following: What stands out to you about this young man and his story? And in what ways do you feel he fits the image of the normal, well-adjusted teenager here at CCHS? Or not?

4. Read the excerpt from Levine's <u>The Price of Privilege</u> and, in your own words, in a few sentences, summarize the author's view on why affluent teenagers are suffering.

A Newton boy left this life without a note or clue

City mobilizes after heart-rending suicides

By Kathleen Burge Globe Staff March 02, 2014

On the last full day of his life, Roee Grutman sat at his family's long dining room table with his biology book open before him. A February snowstorm had canceled school, and he could see one of his younger sisters in the backyard in her pink parka. He took a picture and posted it on Instagram.

"Sister playing by herself in the snow," he wrote, adding, "#badbrother."

Roee, a junior at Newton South High School, was studying for five tests in the next two days, all in advanced placement and honors classes. He left his books only when his mother, Galit, urged him to relax on his day off. She took a video of him playing in the snow with two of his younger sisters. Then Roee, 17, returned to his work.

"There was like a big, giant cloud over his head that he had to study," said Galit, sitting in the family's living room last week.

Early the next morning, on Feb. 6, Roee killed himself at home. He became the third high school student in Newton to commit suicide this academic year, following two girls in October. Roee left no note. His biology book remained for weeks on the family's dining room table, where he left it, near an English paper he was revising. The topic was love.

Less than a month later, Roee's family and friends are still agonizing over what they did not see. Roee did not appear depressed or desperate or in pain. He had many friends; 700 people attended his funeral. He loved sports and math, his older brother, Tal, and his three younger sisters.

His family, who moved here 14 years ago from Israel, believes the stress of an overwhelming course load and an American obsession with elite universities contributed to his death, though they recognize there could have been additional — still unknown — factors.

In the aftermath of the suicides, other parents in town have also begun to question the culture of a high-achieving school community that routinely sends numerous graduates to elite colleges...

"I do not view our efforts at this point as undertaking to look at the culture of Newton," said city Health Commissioner Dori Zaleznik. "I find that an overly simplistic attempt to make something that is very hard to process understandable. I think it's a mistake."

But the two high schools in Newton are trying to talk to students about ways to lower their levels of stress — outreach that began before the suicides, said Superintendent David Fleishman. The schools established no-homework weekends. Students with more than two tests scheduled on any day could ask teachers to reschedule.

"In my experience, there is no more academic stress than in comparable districts where I have worked," said Fleishman, whose past jobs have included the Chappaqua, N.Y., and Wellesley school districts. "Academic stress is multifaceted. It's societal. It's from colleges. It's from families. It's from schools. It's from peers."

Gonzalo Bacigalupe, a Newton father and UMass Boston professor in the Department of Counseling and School Psychology, touched off a debate two weeks ago when he wrote an opinion piece for WBUR's CommonHealth blog suggesting that Newton's high-achieving school culture can be toxic for students.

In an interview, Bacigalupe, president of the American Family Therapy Academy, said he sees a risk of more suicides if the schools do not start talking more about stress.

As a father, he said, he has seen moments "where we need to remind our kids that maybe you don't need to do a certain amount of APs or honors. It's very hard. I have a sense that it's maybe more stressful to be a high school student than an undergraduate."

Roee Grutman's family moved to Newton from Israel when he was 3 and his older brother, Tal, was 5. The family grew to include three girls, now 11, 9, and 7 months. Roee had wanted to become a doctor since he was little and talked about studying cardiac medicine or Alzheimer's, a disease that runs in his family. He had set his sights on getting into Johns Hopkins University, one of the nation's most selective.

But his friends also recall Roee's compassion and the way he made time to listen to their problems. He could be quiet but also very funny. He dressed up in a Superman costume freshman year when he wanted to be elected as a class officer — and got the job.

His brother, Tal, believes Roee and his peers started worrying about college plans too soon, years before they needed to apply. Tal graduated last year from Newton South and, disillusioned with the narrow American path of higher education, joined the Israeli Army. He is home for a month to mourn Roee.

"My brother was really nervous about getting scholarships and getting accepted into schools," he said. "He had kind of figured out that no matter what, until you finish your college education, and then, possibly, even into the workforce, you're always doing something that you don't entirely want and you're always stressed out about it. And that's depressing."

David Berman, one of Roee's closest friends, knew that he was driven to be the best at everything he did — academics, sports, even friendship. Roee scored a perfect 800 on the math portion of his SATs. He skipped 10th-grade math after he taught himself a year's worth of material the previous summer. He did not often show the stress he felt, and he did not like to burden people by revealing thoughts that might be considered worrisome.

"I had no idea how bad it was," said Berman, 16. "He seemed totally fine and happy."

Newton South is a competitive high school that sometimes leaves students feeling like they are on a treadmill of increasingly more arduous work, he said. "It's hard to feel accomplished with all the hard work you have put in when it keeps moving on to the next level and you have to keep working harder and harder to be what people would describe as successful," he said.

From The Price of Privilege (2006)

Madeline Levine

It was 6:15 P.M. Friday when I closed the door behind my last unhappy teenage patient of the week. I slumped into my well-worn chair feeling depleted and surprisingly close to tears. The fifteen-year-old girl who had just left my office was bright, personable, highly pressured by her adoring, but frequently preoccupied, affluent parents, and very angry. She had used a razor to incise the word EMPTY on her left forearm, showing it to me when I commented on her typical cutter disguise—a long-sleeve T-shirt pulled halfway over her hand, with an opening torn in the cuff for her thumb. Such T-shirts are almost always worn to camouflage an array of self-mutilating behaviors: cutting with sharp instruments, piercing with safety pins, or burning with matches. I tried to imagine how intensely unhappy my young patient must have felt to cut her distress into her flesh.

The traditional trajectory of adolescence—withdrawal, irritability, defiance, rejection of parental values, the trying on and discarding of different identities, and, finally, the development of a stable identity—seems to have given way to a far less successful trajectory. Fewer and fewer affluent teens are able to resist the constant pressure to excel. Between accelerated academic courses, multiple extracurricular activities, premature preparation for high school or college, special coaches and tutors engaged to wring the last bit of performance out of them, many kids find themselves scheduled to within an inch of their lives. Criticism and even rejection become commonplace as competitive parents continue to push their children toward higher levels of accomplishment. As a

result, kids can't find the time, both literal and psychological, to linger in internal exploration; a necessary precursor to a well-developed sense of self. Fantasies, daydreaming, thinking about oneself and one's future, even just "chilling" are critical processes in self-development and cannot be hurried. Every child has a different time table, and most are ahead of the pack in some areas and behind in others. We would do well to remember "late bloomers" like Albert Einstein, John Steinbeck, Benjamin Franklin, and J.R.R. Tolkein. Sometimes a nudge is helpful, but a shove rarely is.

What looks like healthy assimilation into the family and community—getting high grades, conforming to parents' and community standards, and being receptive to the interests and activities valued by others—can be deceptive. Kids can present as models of competence and still lack a fundamental sense of who they are. Psychologists call this the "false self," and it is highly correlated with a number of emotional problems, most notably depression.[3]

Psychological development goes awry when children are pressured into valuing the views of others over their own. A young girl works madly to maintain her high GPA because "my mom would have a breakdown if my grades dropped." This girl might be an enthusiastic student under other circumstances, but her need to keep her mother's anxiety at bay is bound to interfere with her capacity to work independently and with pleasure. Ultimately, motivation for any venture needs to feel like it comes from inside. When it does, it feels "true"; when it comes from outside, it feels "phony." Working *primarily* to please others and to gain their approval takes time and energy away from children's real job of figuring out their authentic talents, skills, and interests. The "false self" becomes particularly problematic in adolescence as teens are required to confront the normal proliferation of "selves" ("I'm so cheerful with my friends, but I feel like a different, unhappy person with my parents") and figure out who is the "real me." Authenticity is not aided when kids have to battle against parents who are implanting other, often unrealistic "selves"—stellar student, outstanding athlete, perfect kid—into their teenager's already crowded psychological landscape.