

Senioritis-Parentitis

If you have a senior in high school, I am sure that your kid is suffering from this condition and that as their parent you are suffering from the corresponding and complimentary, Parentitis. Symptoms for Senioritis include, intense procrastination, increased surliness (if that's possible), increased avoidance of parents and home, and rejection of all suggestions of how to complete college applications.

Symptoms of Parentitis include high anxiety and sleepless nights, weakened eyesight from too many hours looking at college websites on the computer, fatigued fingers from keeping up with college application submission deadlines on the family calendar, and wistful looks at your sleeping senior knowing that those looks are numbered as they move away from home.

The whole college admission process is a lesson in letting go. You can huck, you can hound, but the bottom line is you cannot just "make" your teen get this work done. To combat Senioritis, parents must pay less attention to the symptoms, and more attention to the underlying issues. If you label the procrastination as laziness and avoidance, your teen gets defensive, angry, feels criticized and ends up avoiding and procrastinating even more. Not exactly the outcome you were hoping for.

Here are some of those underlying issues:

- **Feeling completely overwhelmed:** Seniors feel they have fallen into the deep dark hole of first, choosing schools to apply to, and then doing all those applications, essays, and finding teachers who know and like them enough to give them recommendations. This is in addition to improving or maintaining good grades, because god knows everyone keeps telling them how important those half year grades are, and by the way could you get the lead in the school play, or get a bunch of touchdowns, or do a great community service project, or, and this is only if you have time, could you cure cancer, it will look great on your college application. Not only are they feeling their own sense of impending doom about where they will end up, but they feel your expectations, their schools expectation, their friends expectations, maybe their grandparents, aunts and uncles who ask every time they see them, "so hows your college application thing going?" Imagine what it feels like to have everyone who has ever known you now so interested in the rest of **your** life. This is expressed through anger and avoidance.
- **What if I don't get in anywhere, or if I don't get in where I want to go, or where my parents want me to go?** Because your senior is so acutely aware of all that you want for him/her, and obviously of what their own fantasy/expectation is they are full of anxiety and dread for that day when the acceptances/rejections show up online or in the mail. Ultimately they feel in some way that this whole college process is like getting the biggest grade of their life on who they are. You get an A when you get in where you want to go, and a big fat F when you get rejected. The worry they feel about disappointing you and disappointing themselves is palpable, but often comes across as anger and avoidance.
- **My life will be changed forever.** Though your senior is excited/nervous/scared for this next step, change is not easy. Leaving you guys is terrifying, even though they aren't showing it. But believe me the more angry they act towards you, the more scared they are feeling. We call that a defense mechanism. They are terrified of leaving their friends. Their friends are their life blood, their support, their source of acceptance. Worry about being replaced, and worry that they won't ever find friends like this again can feel paralyzing, but comes across as anger and avoidance.

So you get the picture, the anger, the procrastination, the avoidance are all expressions of feeling overwhelmed, and anxious. Your teen is engaging in magical thinking. If I put this off long enough I don't have to deal with the consequences. First I want to say that all this is **completely normal**. This is the first and single most important decision they have had to make in their life. They have no previous experience on which to draw that it will all turn out OK. You know that it will, but they really aren't willing to take your word on that quite yet. So here is what can you do to engage them in this process without making this last year with them a complete nightmare.

Here is your 'I Get It' moment. Rather than starting every contact with them with a "Did you start your essay? Did you do your common app? Did you talk to your teachers for a recommendation? You know you're running out of time," "Try this instead. "I get how overwhelming this all feels. You have alot on your plate with school, and sports and college stuff, I know I would just want to get in bed and cover my head for the next 6 months. How can I/we help. I/we are happy to do whatever you need, think of me as your administrative assistant, not your boss. I don't want to have to harp on you all the time, I know how annoying that is, can we come up together with a plan? Maybe the plan includes me bugging you, but at least we're agreed that I will bug/remind you every Sunday night at 6 to complete another application. Lets try to break this all down in small things so it won't feel so overwhelming, and if I do start to annoy you let me know and I will back off for the night. I love you, and I want you to have the kinds of choices you deserve." Then develop an action plan. Sit at the computer together and have them do the writing. Print out the plan, including dates he/she hopes to have things completed and put it up in their room, the refrigerator, in the bathroom if you need to. Maybe put those iPhones, Itouches, and IPADs to good use, with text reminders for what they said they want to complete that week. Be creative, just telling them to "get it done" is not helpful, working with them to operationalize a plan is. But please, and I am begging you here, do not do it for them. Do not come up with your schedule, or your way of doing things. This is a setup for disaster, because they will not take ownership for your plan, and when you see them screwing up "your plan" the arguing commences. And by the way, no problem if you want to use some incentives, money, upgraded phones, clothes, trips to the Caribbean(only kidding on that one) hey whatever works. Businesses thrive on using incentives, if its OK in your job, why not in theirs.

This will be a challenging year, but a year full of growth for all of you. Be patient with the process, continue to "get" their struggle, and provide support and understanding. This to shall pass, and soon enough you will have the car packed ready for this next step. The arguments about applications and recommendations already forgotten. The bottom line is it will all get done, one way or another, and if it doesn't, take that as a sign that your senior is telling you that this might not be the year for college. Senior year is a right of passage for everyone. Just hold on tight and enjoy the ride.