

# LivingArts

By Kara Baskin  
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Back to school is packed with big emotions, especially for teenagers. Now, everything is changing: hormones, complexions, voices, friendships, classes, expectations. This week, my seventh-grader burst into tears because he couldn't find his friends at dismissal. Then, on the way to guitar, he asked me if "school would be his life forever" — as in, no more recess and no more complete laziness. I didn't have the heart to tell him, well ... yes, kind of.

But I did talk to Dr. Jacqueline Sperling, co-program director of the McLean Anxiety Mastery Program at McLean Hospital and author of the young adult nonfiction book "Find Your Fierce: How to Put Social Anxiety in Its Place" for ideas about how to cope with these early weeks of readjustment. If you're coaxing your kid out the door each morning — or watching them sob over math homework — read on.

## How can parents respond to an anxious kid?

The first step is validation, which means to acknowledge how your child is feeling without agreeing or disagreeing. To say: "It's really stressful to start a new year. You had a very relaxed summer, and this is a very big change. You don't know who's in your class. The unknown can be really scary."

We're socialized to help people feel less alone by saying, "I totally know how you feel. You're definitely not alone." That works with your peers. A parent-child dynamic is unique, though. Teenagers go through a developmental stage called a "personal fable" where they think that no one else knows what they're experiencing. They're also tasked with separating and individuating from a parent, developing their own separate identity. It's this push-pull, where they're still dependent on you but they're trying to be independent; they're trying to be separate from you.

If you use the phrase "I know" or "I understand," parents often find that they feel like they just walked into a landmine: What happened? I was trying to be supportive! But the teen often feels like: You don't know. I have a very unique experience, and you don't understand. You're not me.

## Do you have any strategies for breaking through when you suspect that your kid is unhappy but they don't want to open up?

Sometimes people need space to cool off if they're experiencing an emotion. Once they settle, they may be more open to talking about it, and they also may want to talk about it on their terms. In those moments, you just really acknowledge how the child's doing: "You seem really down. I'm wondering if you want to talk about it at all." Just be curious. And if they say no, it's OK to say, "Well, whenever you want to talk about it, I'll be in the kitchen with open ears." Leave the door open for them, but don't insert advice in that moment.

## How do you help a kid who's really nervous even just to go to school?

It's tough, because that takes over the whole family. At the beginning of the morning, when time is scarce, feelings are running high for every-



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# A parent's coping guide for back-to-school teen anxiety

one: A parent can run in and be like, "Come on, we're going to be late. If we're late, I might lose my job. Your sister is going to be late for school!" It tends to spiral.

The first step is to validate. Then break it down — not all or nothing, because school may feel like the top of a mountain, and they're at the base right now. Think about getting dressed, brushing teeth, eating. Once you start taking steps up that mountain, the top feels less far away.

You want to try to get them to school so that the concern doesn't grow. What happens is, if you give a mouse a cookie, it's going to ask for a glass of milk, a straw, and a napkin. The anxiety feeds off the avoidance, and then it just keeps growing.

If this is an [ongoing] struggle — and this is easier said than done, because I recognize we have a massive challenge in terms of the increase in rates of anxiety, but the numbers of mental health providers have not increased commensurately — if you can get your child connected to a provider, [it] takes the parent out of the line of fire. I like parents to be the cheerleader and not the manager.

## What if we can't find a mental health provider right away?



The first step is to validate or acknowledge how your child is feeling: "You're really worried about going to school today because . . ." to help your child manage their own feelings as well as create space for communication.

Next, offer to help break down what likely feels like a daunting mountain to climb into smaller steps by having your child make a bravery ladder or hierarchy with the school experiences that they fear the least at the bottom of the ladder and the school experiences that they fear the most at the top, including all the steps that come beforehand, such as getting ready for school.

Collaborate with your child, so they pick which step that they would be willing to start with, so that it's one step at a time. When it comes to approaching school, it may be that your child starts off with going to one

class that day and gradually adds on more time at school every couple of days as they establish a sense of mastery and gain some momentum. The key is for the child to learn that the experience either is not as bad as expected or learn that they could do it.

## Social anxiety is so huge in middle and high school. Maybe your friends are ignoring you, or you're changing social groups. How do you walk your child through that? It hurts to watch!

In adolescence, peers become more important. Research has shown that those who identify as boys are more likely to be aggressive physically, but those who identify as girls engage in relational aggression, and this has to do with social relationships. This could be exclusion or spreading rumors about someone. This has become much more challenging for teens because many of them have access to smartphones and social media. . . . Now you can see evidence posted online, or someone may start a group chat without you.

I think the more that you can create space for open conversation . . . including how to navigate screen use, because I think it's intertwined in

this: setting up the infrastructure so that you meet with your teen regularly to go over the conversations in an open, non-judgmental way. Learn more about what their takeaways are, and just be curious: "What made you post that? What are your takeaways from these posts? How did they make you feel?"

This creates opportunities for an open dialogue and also for some opportunities for education about it: "Sometimes, people might do this because they don't feel very good about themselves, and so they aim to make someone feel smaller."

## Let's say your child comes home angsty because they saw on Snapchat that everyone's at a party and they weren't invited. What can you say that doesn't sound completely hollow? Sometimes you just want to fix it.

Validate. Your initial reaction may be to come out swinging: "I'm calling those parents!" Going into full-on protective mode isn't what your teen needs in that moment. I try to have parents refrain from problem-solving and just to sit in the emotion. I also like to set parents up for success. You could say, "I have ideas of how to approach this situation. When you would like to hear them, let me know." That way, you're opening the door, and they can come to you when ready.

## If your child is upset, you're upset — it can take you right back to seventh-grade anxiety.

I have yet to meet someone who says, "Gosh, I would love to redo seventh grade!" I want to be mindful that, again, we're socialized in society to make people feel less alone. So this is not to blame parents: They're doing everything that they've been socialized to do; if they see their child in distress, they want to make their child feel less alone and give them some hope. But never in the context of an emotional experience share your own personal experience, unless you've been asked.

## How come? That's really interesting. And not what I would do!

A couple of reasons. One is that it takes the focus away from the child. All of a sudden, it's about the parent's experience. Say you have a child who has panic disorder and is having trouble going to school. The parent says, "When I was your age, I also had panic disorder, and I had trouble going to school, and it can get better."

But the parent works full time right now, and this child is in a dark tunnel and cannot see the light at the end — and then sees their parent working and somehow getting through it. Oftentimes, the child then can feel shame: "Somehow you were able to do it, and I'm not able to do it." A child may feel that they're letting a parent down.

I like to have parents imagine that their teen has a "no solicitors" sign on their forehead. When they see a parent open their mouth and start to talk, they're going into lecture mode: "I'm going to shut my ears and just nod as if I'm listening" — but they're not listening. If there's an invitation, your child will be more receptive and likely to hear what you have to say.

Interview was edited and condensed. Kara Baskin can be reached at [kara.baskin@globe.com](mailto:kara.baskin@globe.com). Follow her @kcbaskin.

# 'Tall Tales from Blackburn Tavern' comes up short

By Terry Byrne  
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GLOUCESTER — The title of "Tall Tales from Blackburn Tavern" suggests an evening of stories full of wonder, magic, mystery, and humor told in an intimate pub setting. But playwright John Minigan, whose "Noir Hamlet" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" offered such joyous interpretations of familiar stories, seems overwhelmed by the 400-plus years of Gloucester history he had to draw from.

For this world premiere production, commissioned as part of the city's "Gloucester 400" celebration, Minigan focuses on his four storytellers — Jaime José Hernández, Paul Melendy, Katie Pickett, and Sadiyah Dyce Stephens — and they oddly dominate the proceedings rather than the stories. Each of these storytellers is defined in such broad, cartoonish strokes, their assigned personality traits obscure some of the potentially fascinating characters central to the history of the harbor city.

The result is a mishmash of sometimes humorous, never scary, rarely poignant tall tales that seem designed for an outdoor fair rather than a tavern. The most theatrical effect is Ryan



JASON GROW

From left: Sadiyah Dyce Stephens, Paul Melendy, and Jaime José Hernández in "Tall Tales from Blackburn Tavern" at Gloucester Stage Company.

Natcharian's array of shadow puppets, which are cleverly coordinated across three upstage screens with the movement of the performers.

Although the script tells us several times that "the only way to get to the truth is to examine it closely," Minigan never digs deeper than the surface, rely-

## STAGE REVIEW

### TALL TALES FROM BLACKBURN TAVERN

By John Minigan. Directed by Bryn Boice. Original music and lyrics by Minigan. Through Sept. 24. Gloucester Stage Company, Gloucester. Tickets \$15-\$67. 978-281-4433, [www.gloucesterstage.com](http://www.gloucesterstage.com)

ing on a litany of dates and names, glossing over human struggles and sorrow.

Some of the tales with the most potential revolve around "Dogtown," a once vibrant neighborhood abandoned for a settlement closer to the harbor. Tales of the "outcasts" — women labeled "witches," formerly enslaved people, cross-dressers, and others — could have explored the compassion and cruelty that exist cheek by jowl, but instead we get brief snapshots of several people that feel more like encyclopedia entries than stories.

Most disappointing is the tale of Cassie, the Gloucester Sea Serpent, a legend that fits perfectly in a town that

has lived and died by its relationship with the sea. We are teased throughout the proceedings by one performer's superstition that by telling the story they will incur the wrath of the monster, but after all that buildup, the story provides little excitement or even a coherent plotline. The best moment is delivered by Melendy, who morphs into a series of characters who've seen the serpent. When he takes a moment to portray a fisherman who tells of seeing the serpent acknowledge the fishing boat and its occupants before swimming away, we have a glimpse of the wonder that shapes the determined individuals who make their living in a town so reliant on the power of nature.

Director Bryn Boice, who has earned awards for her ability to find nuance in scripts and coax complex performances from actors, seems as uncertain as Minigan about where the focus should be. Although the song that repeats occasionally throughout the proceedings (props to Hernandez for his accordion playing) reminds us that "the test of the story is the way that it's told," these tall tales lack cohesion and connection and miss the opportunity to explore Gloucester's fascinating past.