The Anxiety Epidemic and Careers

by Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

I've been struck by how many young adults I've encountered recently are leaving their high-flying jobs for positions that are far less stressful. At a family wedding, I learned of one relative who left a corporate marketing position to work for a small company that makes aprons for celebrity chefs. Another exited an impressive position in Hollywood to become a salesman for a roofing company his friend started. Still another substantially cut back on his work in a law firm, preferring instead to spend his time travelling, writing, and enjoying his family.

These are all highly educated and successful people who decided to opt for a lifestyle that allowed for less stress and more boundaries between work and their personal life. As one young fellow I met put it, "Hustle culture is no longer considered cool."

Had I decided to make aprons instead of going to graduate school, it would have been hard to find an oven big enough for my parents to insert their collective heads. Children of an immigrant Jewish family like mine were under pressure to reach for the occupational stars, regardless of the stresses and strains that might accrue along the way. Family was important, but only within the context of high achievement and acclaim. That's how our world worked.

The profound irony is that, in our family, the unquestioned rock star is the one person who isn't a doctor, lawyer, MBA, or Ph.D.—my brother, David. As you've read in past columns and perhaps in my *Book of David: On Caring for Siblings with Special Needs*, he's known far and wide for his cheery disposition, love of life, kindness to all, sound sleep, and the ability to inspire others to look past their worries and embrace the world. And he's been a bagger at a grocery store for most of his work life.

Several recent surveys have found that Millennials and Gen Zers, more than my generation, place higher value on work-life balance and mental health, often above salary or title. Other surveys report that interest has declined in finance, law and tech jobs. Even applications to top medical and law schools have dropped, purportedly due to concerns about burnout and the weight of educational costs. Nowadays, young workers rate mental health support and work-life balance as more important than high salaries or rapid promotion.

Everyone has a take on why this trend has emerged and what it says about the younger generation. Some claim that it represents a healthy rejection of a culture that put too much emphasis on lofty achievement and occupational success. Others laud the greater awareness that maintaining mental health is at least as important as increasing one's income. Some say that COVID-19 and remote work options changed views about what's important in a job and the 9-to-5 routine lost its luster. Others regard the trend as reflective of poor motivation and selfishness, which will ultimately harm productivity and create a less competitive workforce.

Like all cultural shifts, this one surely is fueled by multiple pipelines. But at the top of my list is the impact of an ongoing phenomenon that gets far too little attention—what researchers are calling the "anxiety epidemic."

The term refers to the sharp increase in diagnosed anxiety disorders, self-reported stress, and the widespread use of anxiety medications and therapy among young adults. Factors such as student debt, job insecurity, social media comparison, climate anxiety, the potential impact of AI, and global instability contribute to this psychological strain. College campuses, workplaces, and even social spaces are now filled with conversations about burnout, panic attacks, and the difficulty of achieving balance. Anxiety disorders are rampant and have a profound impact on individuals, families, communities and the workplace.

If one is anxious, it doesn't help much to be told to buck up and beat the stress. Being anxious is not a reflection of inadequacy. It can be a debilitating disorder that flows from the usual mix of genetics and personal history. And one way to deal with anxiety is by reducing those elements in life that trigger it. If you can't find a way to manage work stress, you will seek to put yourself in a more comfortable situation, even if it results in less income and disapproving looks from parents (who will survive having less to brag about).

While medication, therapy, and gummies can be part of the treatment, so can taking yourself out of situations you can't manage well, or at least advocating for healthy changes in job responsibilities. It does all of us a favor if educators and employers have to worry more about mental health and less about maximizing short-term gains in productivity.

I find it admirable when people do the right thing for themselves and their families, even if that means climbing to a lower rung on a career ladder. It's a sign of inner strength and good judgment, not weakness and poor decision-making.