

# ANXIETY IN THE ATMOSPHERE

■ written by MORGAN BILES

With all that students have to handle, anxiety is a common problem

As senior Caroline Birt drove out of Baker University's campus on a brisk February afternoon, she turned to her mom, cracked a smile, and told her, "This is where I want to go to school." For the first time in over seven months, Birt made a decision without factoring in what had been controlling her since July. For the first time in over seven months, Birt was just another high school senior mapping out her future. For the first time in over seven months, Birt was free from her anxiety.

"Anxiety is going to be there probably for my whole life," Birt said. "But when I told my mom 'I want to go to Baker,' I made that decision because that's what I wanted in my heart and not what I thought my anxiety would be able to deal with."

\*\*\*

Just a few months ago, Birt's decisions were constantly influenced by her anxiety. Excess stress from junior year and a nannying job fed her anxiety. She had become anxious about being anxious, and she was scared to expose her anxiety to the stress of school. When her peers returned to school on the second week of August, Birt and her anxiety remained at home. The next week, she was sitting with her mom and grandma in the parking lot. The three of them were patiently waiting until Birt was comfortable enough to walk into East on her own.

"It seems so silly that something as simple as going to school would make someone feel this way," Birt said. "I felt like I was going to spontaneously combust every time I walked into East, which was horrible because I have loved high school and loved

East."

Even though she was back at school, Birt's anxiety was always in the back of her mind, distracting and restraining her.

"I basically felt like I was missing out and that my senior year was passing me by," Birt said. "It was really miserable. The Lancer Day parade, football games, stuff like that – not being able to fully experience that, or not experience it at all; that was heartbreaking."

Avoidance is just one of the many symptoms of anxiety– which can run the scale from normal levels of nerves to more extreme cases that can cause panic attacks, fatigue and repetitive distressing thoughts.

"When someone is anxious, their internal 'alarm system' is broken and their brain plays tricks on them," said Dr. Heather Smith-Schrandt, the Associate Staff Psychologist at Kansas City Center for Anxiety Treatment (KCCAT).

Because anxiety is a natural reaction to stress, the growing pressure on young people to balance parents, teachers, tests, presentations, jobs, friends, college applications and a perfect social media presence makes this generation of teens even more susceptible to anxiety.

Even though Birt's anxiety is completely unique to her, her situation is far from rare. According to the National Institute for Mental Health, 25.1 percent of teens ages 13-18 will develop an anxiety disorder – the most common psychiatric illness. Based on those statistics, roughly 450 East students likely suffer from an anxiety disorder. East counselor Becky Wiseman notices the anxiety of students in the hallway everyday.

"I think a lot of students feel [anxiety] in the buzz of the school," Wiseman said. "It's great we have a lot of talented and great students here, but sometimes there is a feeling of being better than ok, like being ok is not enough, you have to be better."

This environment can create an atmosphere of isolation for those who feel that they don't fit into this mold of perfection. Senior Carlie Smith used to be one of these people.

Smith first noticed symptoms of anxiety after beginning to feel isolated from her friends during her sophomore year. Since Smith didn't think a counselor would be helpful, and her parents are opposed to medication, she had no other choice but to cope with the anxiety on her own.

Smith coped the only way she knew how: cutting herself.

"When I did cut myself it was because all the anxiety kind of built up, and I was alone in my room and didn't know how to handle it alone," Smith said. "So I think the anxiety definitely correlated with cutting myself, because I didn't know how to handle situations and I thought that was something to turn to, but it obviously wasn't."

After meeting her current boyfriend and confiding in a few close friends, Smith was able to find healthier ways to cope with her anxiety. Venting to friends, yelling or going into a room alone and counting to ten have proved to be effective methods, but for both Smith and Birt, being out around other people is the best "therapy" for dealing with anxiety.

"I like being around people, it calms me

more than anything," Smith said. "Of course I love my alone time, but I definitely wouldn't stay home because of anxiety. I would want to go out and see people because they take my mind off of things."

For Birt, learning to cope began by going to KCCAT and working through her anxiety through cognitive behavioral therapy, which targets the way those inflicted think about their anxiety.

"The most important thing to remember is that anxiety can be very uncomfortable, but it is not dangerous," Smith-Schrandt said. "So, don't let it keep you from doing things that are important and meaningful to you. Before long, you will realize feared outcomes don't always happen, aren't as bad as suspected, and you can cope."

Although anxiety has had an impact on their past, both Smith and Birt are determined to prevent anxiety from impacting their future. After she graduates, Smith is planning on moving to Los Angeles to become an actress, despite the challenges she knows she will face.

"I definitely have anxiety, but my passion for acting is so much greater that I don't think [anxiety] will ever stop me from wanting to complete my goals," Smith said.

Birt is less certain about her future, but now more than ever, it's a positive sense of uncertainty.

"I have a blank slate in front of me, I can do what I want," Birt said. "I can choose where I go with my life and instead of dreading the unknown, I'm excited about it."

## FACTS ABOUT ANXIETY

1

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the United States

2

Symptoms can be categorized as physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioral

3

Anxiety disorders can develop from genetics, brain chemistry, personality, and life events

facts courtesy of ADDA & LEARN PSYCHOLOGY