



Celtics 46, Kings 50, 2nd quarter

GLOBE MAGAZINE

# 12 signs you're losing it over the college admissions process

When the death of the family cat is seen as golden material for an essay, you know you're in trouble.

By [Beth Teitel](#) and [Ken Mandl](#) Staff and, October 23, 2019, 7:15 a.m.



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“Not guilty by reason of insanity.” That’s the plea [Felicity Huffman](#), [Lori Loughlin](#), and the other parents snagged in the college admissions bribery scandal should have entered. No jury of their peers would have convicted. As any parent of a college applicant will tell you, the process will drive your whole family mad. With so many families gone crazy over college admission — and the early decision and early action deadlines upon us — it’s time to add new diagnoses to the psychiatric manual.

## 1. Obsessive admissive syndrome.

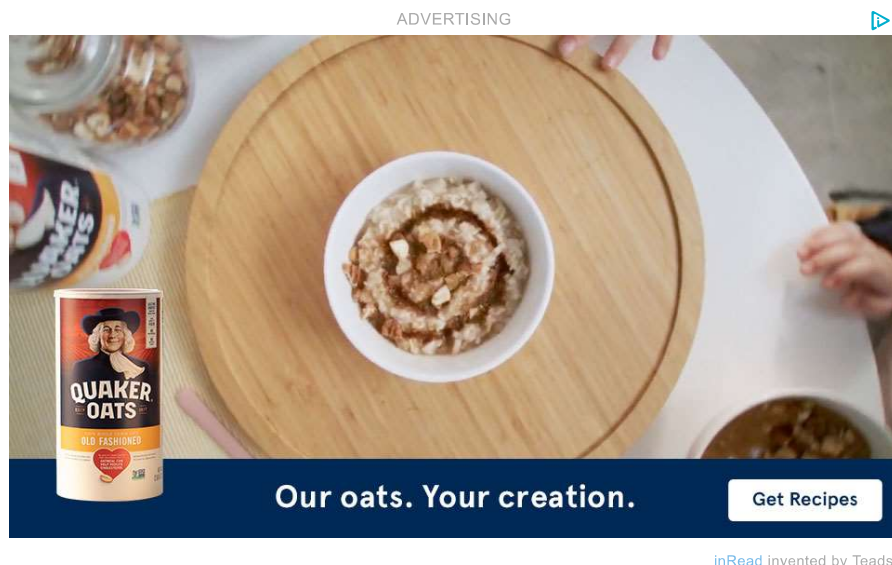
The parent's inner dialogue becomes invaded by a single intrusive thought, *How will this look on the application?* Intervention is called for when even adverse events — the death of the family cat or a minor car accident — are happily regarded as “golden material” for the essay.

## 2. Gapophobia.

No matter the number of safety schools on the list, the family is convinced of rejection at each one, shame at high school, and the dreaded year off before college — in other words, Armageddon.

## 3. Nagatosis.

The parent repeatedly interrupts normal dialogue, blurting involuntary, ill-timed, and poorly-received reminders: Study for the SAT! Work on your essay! Ask for recommendations! Did I mention you should work on your essay?! Nagatosis is a principal contributor to *sudden onset familial collapse*.



## 4. Schlepporrhea.

Desperate to “demonstrate interest” at the maximum number of colleges, afflicted families embark on a string of college tours, taking unexcused leaves from jobs and high school to spend thousands of dollars flying back and forth across the country. The schlepporrheac's worst nightmare is when the campus tour guide does not bother to take attendance.

## 5. School elimination disorder.

During a college visit, the applicant abruptly crosses the school off the list. The students on campus are deemed too bougie (or not bougie enough). Ubers take more than seven minutes to arrive. The bananas in the cafeteria are not ripe. Risk is heightened if the school is the beloved alma mater of a family member, or the

distance traveled to visit the school exceeds 1,500 miles. School elimination disorder comes on without warning, and is untreatable and irreversible.

## **6. Campus tour psychosis.**

This condition is triggered after the family encounters one too many backward-walking tour guides joking about walking backward. Also by repeated exposure to statements such as, “We have a holistic admissions process,” “We have more than 300 clubs, but if you get here and don’t find one you like, you can start your own,” and “We’re vegan friendly.”

## **7. Extracurricular panic disorder.**

The condition is rooted in a fear that the Common Application activities section will be submitted blank. It worsens when the parent learns admissions offices are no longer deceived by the “volunteer” vacation package that includes building a library for an impoverished school. The applicant is pressed into frenetic filing of bills with the state legislature, organizing marches, designing mathematical models of climate change to enter into science fairs, becoming a founder and first president of the bird-watching club, and bringing sushi leftovers to a food pantry.

## **8. SAT deficit hyperactivity disorder (SDHD).**

With only 17 test sittings left to improve the student’s score, and panicked that other high school students are gaining an unfair advantage, the parent can’t control his own increasingly odd behaviors. He signs his child up for all remaining test dates, hires unaffordable tutors, and — even if his child clearly has no learning disability — shops for a neuropsychologist to attest that the student needs an untimed test. Forced enrollment in Russian math on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons is a universal symptom.

## **9. Admissions-induced agoraphobia.**

The parent steers clear of previously pleasurable social situations to avoid triggering reminders of the application process. Anything can and does cause trauma — glimpsing a student wearing a college sweat shirt; hearing an institution mentioned on the radio; seeing a university bumper sticker. Isolation becomes complete when even virtual spaces induce fear, like Facebook, with its feed of families taking smiling selfies while traipsing on campus tours, or worse, announcing acceptances.

## **10. Textatosis.**

Fearing an extreme reaction from the applicant to any college-related dialogue, parents restrict all communication to texting from a remote room in the house. In advanced stages, parents only text from a safe

space outside the home.

## 11. Contact spamatitis.

The parent in the grip of CS has clandestinely gained control of her child's e-mail account to correspond, regularly and fawningly, with college admissions officers. Posing as the applicant, she aims to create a picture of intense interest in the school. The spamatitic often escalates her outreach to phone calls to the admissions office, pretending to be the applicant on the phone. The condition is diagnosed definitively when the parent mispronounces "bougie."

## 12. Younger sibling catatonia.

Unable to unsee what he has witnessed as his family succumbed to sudden onset familial collapse, the middle school student rapidly progresses to a state of immobility, speaking only as he reiterates his pledge to apply exclusively to test-optional schools with no supplemental essays. Or maybe take a gap year in Ibiza.

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Ken Mandl, a physician and researcher at Boston Children's Hospital, and Beth Teitell, a Boston Globe staff writer, are in the throes of their second episode of obsessive admmissive syndrome. Send comments to [magazine@globe.com](mailto:magazine@globe.com).

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