



Overcoming teen girl anxiety

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health problems for young Australians – and one of the biggest risk factors is simply being a girl, writes Karen Fontaine

Article contributed by Karen Fontaine

Afflicting around 12 per cent of Australian women and seven per cent of men, anxiety disorders generally take root during early to late adolescence. Research studies report rates of up to 15.4 per cent in children aged seven to 11, and rates of up to 17.7 per cent in those aged 12 to 18.

“Girls are in a crisis of rage and despair,” says respected therapist and author Martha B. Straus – and it would appear that, by virtue solely of their gender, girls experience heightened anxiety due to the pressure they place upon themselves.

According to the Dolly Youth Monitor of 2011 (which interviewed boys and girls in the 14-17 age group), teenage girls put themselves under much greater all-round pressure than boys do.

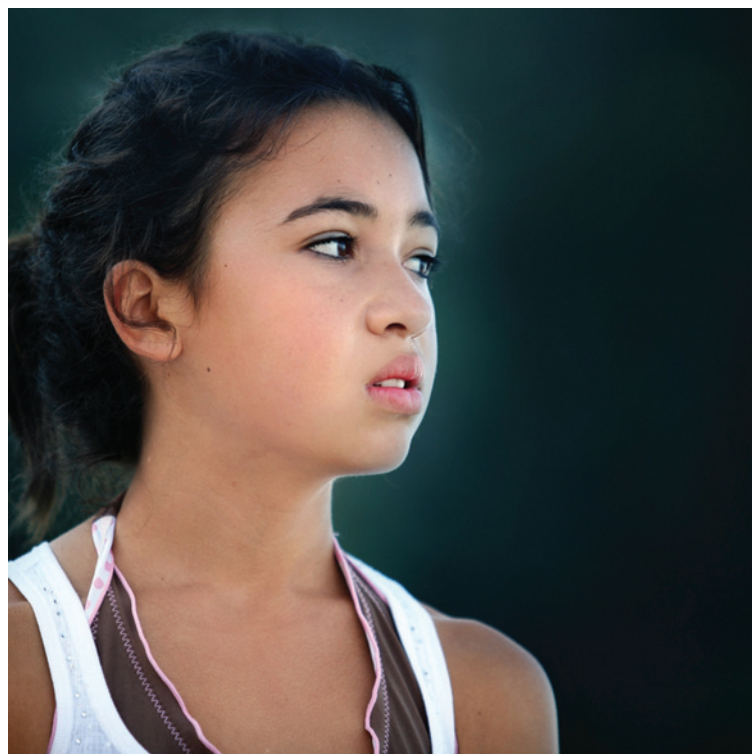
Sixty four per cent of girls want better grades (versus 59 per cent for boys); 57 per cent want to be more confident (41 per cent for boys) and 52 per cent want to be less stressed (29 per cent for boys).

Girls cite school – and the pressure to succeed academically – as major stressors. And, interestingly, they say they experience more pressure from teachers than from their parents.

“Girls can hardly miss the messages from the people around them, school and popular culture about what it takes to be an ideal girl or an ideal woman,” says Dannielle Miller, presenter of self-esteem workshops for girls and author of *The Girl With The Butterfly Tattoo: A Girl’s Guide To Claiming Her Power* (Bantam, 2012).

“Unable to match the ideal no matter how hard they try, many girls begin to loathe themselves for falling short. Many women continue this self-loathing into their adult lives.”

According to Youth BeyondBlue, “a certain amount of anxiety is good for us, as it gets us hyped up to perform at our best”.



It becomes problematic, however, when that feeling remains long after the stressful situation has passed. For a girl with anxiety disorder, it pervades her whole life and continues for weeks, months or longer, says Ms Miller. The anxious feelings tend to be more intense and overwhelming. The anxiety may interfere with her daily life, as she avoids situations that are likely to trigger her anxiety.

As parenting author Steve Biddulph pointed out in a 2007 article in *The Age*: “It’s the more deliberate marketing assault on girls, carefully tapping their vulnerabilities as to attractiveness and belonging, which is doubly toxic, because it comes in an era of diminishing love and care offered to girls by the adult world in general. The bulwarks of parental time and patience, extended family and community connections (age-old supports for the journey through adolescence) have never been weaker.”

All of which paints a bleak picture of what it feels like to be a teenage girl in 21st-century Australia. Ms Miller, whose work

as CEO of Enlighten Education brings her into contact with some 20,000 young women annually, says she feels deeply for today's girls.

"Girls juggle schoolwork, complex teen-girl friendships and boys – all while feeling pressured to be beautiful and thin, cool and sophisticated," she says. "No wonder so many girls report feeling stressed, depressed and anxious."

For parents who believe that their daughter may be suffering from anxiety, the first step is to speak to her about her feelings, says Ms Miller.

"Yes, you might meet resistance or even anger," she warns. "Embarrassed by the thoughts that are going through her head, a girl may try to suffer in silence. Or she may have trouble finding the words to describe the feeling of dread that's hanging over her."

Ms Miller offers these pointers to get the conversation started and keep it going (adapted from Youth Beyondblue's advice for parents and caregivers):

- ▶ Try to stay calm and relaxed
- ▶ Set aside a good time to chat quietly without distractions, and give her all of your attention
- ▶ Ask open-ended questions that can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no"
- ▶ Resist the urge to jump in with advice straightaway. Instead, focus on acknowledging her feelings
- ▶ Avoid making judgments or saying things like "Snap out of it" or "That's silly", as this only shames and doesn't help solve the problem
- ▶ Try not to take it personally if she can't fully open up to you about her anxious feelings, as some girls find it easier to talk with a neutral professional.

How to spot an anxiety disorder

Everyone experiences a certain amount of anxiety surrounding stressful events, but if a girl shows the following signs, and they are impacting upon her everyday life and activities, she may have an anxiety disorder:

- ▶ fast heartbeat
- ▶ pain or a tight feeling in the chest
- ▶ shortness of breath or hyperventilation
- ▶ tingling sensation or pins and needles
- ▶ feeling light-headed or dizzy
- ▶ trembling, shaking or being easily startled
- ▶ sweating
- ▶ nausea
- ▶ insomnia and tiredness
- ▶ constant worrying, about big or small concerns
- ▶ fear or avoidance of certain places, situations or things
- ▶ compulsive actions such as hand washing

A mother's love

"A 13-year-old girl is often more needy than an eight-year-old," wrote Steve Biddulph in *The Age*. "A 14-year-old is experiencing such combative levels of hormones that they need an extra circle of support around their immediate family, to be both cared for and contained by. Other cultures provided this, and 50 years ago so did we, but today's family often does its parenting in isolation."

As Steve points out, a "successful and happy adolescence entails hundreds of conversations about what matters, who you are and what you stand for".

"Yet many teenage girls are basically abandoned by distracted parents and the impersonal melee of large secondary schools," he wrote. "The rise of themed peer groups like emos and goths, the hazards of queen- bee-style bullying and exclusion are a consequence of this adult abandonment. Kids band together for comfort that the adult world is not providing. The mother's love is still essential for a teenage girl. A girl not close to her mother looks for substitute mothering from her peers, who carry a dual jeopardy – they are lost themselves, and they are also in competition.

"The girl who comes through adolescence best has caring parents but also other adult women, relatives or friends who love her. It also helps if a girl belongs to different reference groups through sport or church, which buffer her from rejection crises at school."



Karen Fontaine is a Sydney-based journalist.