

Whether at home, at school or in a cultural context in general, girls are subject to a variety of pressures compared to males who do not. This shows that being a girl is not as easy as it seems. In recent years, studies show that rates of stress and anxiety among girls have increased seemingly. Parents, teachers, and mentors are wondering what they can do about this situation and possibly find a solution to young girls' mental health crises.

As a Clinical Psychologist specializing in children's development, Lisa Damour has a lot of advice that will help girls become more confident and stronger so that they will be in a better position to challenge pressures by themselves. By looking at the lives of girls including school, social expectations, friendship and interaction with boys, you will see the number of pressures young girls face. You will also learn what to say and what to do in order to help them solve their problems.

## Stress and anxiety might be beneficial in some circumstances.

Being a girl is still very difficult even in this time period where women have more independence in a legal, social and political sense. Yet, girls face more challenges than males. These pressures cause serious problems. Over the last few years, stress and anxiety among girls are off the charts. Before discussing the serious problems girls face, it is important to understand that a little stress is not always a bad thing, in fact, it can be helpful in some situations.

Psychological research has found that when we force ourselves out of our comfort zone, the stress caused by this result in personal growth. When we are faced with unfamiliar challenges, the stress we experience is actually helpful such as giving a speech in front of a large group of people. These challenges make us stronger and more confident so we can deal with future challenges easier.

Similarly, anxiety which is characterized by dread, panic, and fear is not necessarily bad or something that you should worry about.

Why you might ask? Anxiety works in a way that lets us know something is wrong. Sometimes, this is an applicable reaction. For instance, if a teenager is anxious about an important upcoming exam, maybe they have not studied enough. However, there is a point at which stress and anxiety become unhealthy and start to harm you.

Anxiety could negatively impact one's mental health. It is important to note that the impact is determined more by whether or not one has sufficient emotional, financial or social resources available rather than the actual source of stress.

For example, a broken arm could be a healthy source of stress for a girl who has friends who could take notes for her. However, a girl who is in pursuit of an athletic scholarship at a university could be affected much worse by a broken arm. That same broken arm could damage her mental health much worse.

We can distinguish between healthy and unhealthy anxiety levels by checking if our alarm system is going off too frequently. In such cases, we find ourselves constantly feeling panicked and fearful. Our thoughts change from one anxious thought to the next. In the end, you end up with questions like 'Will my teacher makes me look stupid in front of my classmates?' 'Will my ride home leave without me?'

When we feel extreme anxiety, it affects our sleep, reduces happiness, interferes with our concentration, and quickly become unhealthy.

## You should help girls approach their anxiety instead of avoiding their problems.

As an educational psychologist, Dr. Damour often comes across girls who are one step away from a disaster. One day, a teenage girl named Jamie came to see her crying. She was worried about failing an upcoming chemistry test and was trying to find a way to avoid it. Dr. Damour empathized with the girl's stress and concerns but she did not help her get out of the exam because avoidance only makes anxiety worse.

What would have happened if Dr. Damour helped Jamie avoid that chemistry test? At first, Jamie would have felt an overwhelming sense of relief and satisfaction because it might have seemed like the right course of action.

However, Jamie would have to take the test, and the anxiety would return and possibly worse than before. Also, she wouldn't have learned an important lesson; failing a test is not a terrible thing. Especially, this exam was not extremely important.

In addition, if Jamie avoided it that day, she would have continued to believe that difficult tests are things to be afraid of. So, she may have continued to avoid them in the future. If we urge our teenage girls to avoid something because it makes them anxious, they may even develop a phobia in the future.

For instance, imagine a girl who is afraid of dogs. Whenever she comes across one, she tries to avoid it and feels instant relief when she does. However, by doing this she will never get the chance to meet a friendly dog. In the end, she will continue to associate avoiding dogs with relief and consider them as things to be afraid of.

So, how did Dr. Damour help Jamie that day?

To put it simply, she helped her approach her fear rather than avoid it. She advised her to ask her teacher for more help before the exam. In addition, she advised her to look at online courses for subjects that she doesn't know. What about the result? A few days later, Dr. Damour encountered Jamie who was now calmer and feeling better. The test did not go that well, but she felt better after having taken it.

You should help your teenage girl to take small steps towards the thing that scares them or makes them anxious. Even though they still have a chance to fail, they will learn not to be afraid.

## Being shy and cautious does not mean having an anxiety problem.

As a psychologist, Dr. Damour often talks with parents who are worried about their children's social skills and interactions with other people. 10-year-old Alina's parents had similar concerns. They said Alina was socially anxious, had very few friends and acting weird towards unfamiliar people ever since she was an infant. They wanted to learn how to make her more socially outgoing. Dr. Damour, on the other hand, did not see any kind of problem with Alina's behavior.

In the last couple of years, Dr. Damour has seen many people like Alina's parents who labeled their child as socially anxious. In truth, many of these children are simply shy. Many pieces of research show that children have different personalities even as babies. Specifically, there are three infant personality types: easy infants, difficult infants, and slow-to-warm-up infants.

Easy infants are easygoing and accept strangers easier than others. Difficult infants are easily annoyed and hate change. Slow-to-warm-up infants are very cautious and slow to adapt to change. Research also shows that babies with any of these personalities have the potential to grow into balanced and healthy adults.

Dr. Damour believed that Alina was merely a child who was slow to warm up. This type of child behaves shy and wary in the face of change and unfamiliar people. However, Dr. Damour reassured the parents that this was not necessarily a bad thing. She advised them not to compare her to her more confident and socially open brother. Instead, they should encourage her that nothing is wrong with her and that it is alright not to rush into new relationships.

If you have a daughter who is anxious about socializing, you should remember that her first reaction to social situations may not be the last.

For instance, if your naturally shy daughter gets an invitation to a birthday party, she might behave hesitantly and even decline it at first. In this case, acknowledge and respect her decision and talk to her again in a few days. For children like Alina who are slow-to-warm-up,

their second reaction might be more positive than the first because they get the chance to think about it.

## Even though they are more successful than boys, girls worry more about academic achievement.

When it comes to education in America, girls are observed to be more successful than their male peers. At school, girls perform better than boys in almost all subjects. At university, there are a greater number of girls than boys but their graduation rate is also higher as well as earning more advanced degrees than them. However, this academic success comes with a price for young American women. Girls report more than boys that school stresses them out.

So, what can we do to get rid of this stress and anxiety that they feel in the classroom? First of all, we need to understand some key differences between male and female children. Indeed, girls worry more about academic achievement than boys do.

Research shows that girls care more about the feedback of their teachers than boys do. To see what they are or not capable of achieving, girls tend to put more importance to their grades. Specifically, girls believe that their grades are an important reflection of their abilities. This tendency causes them to be hopeless and anxious when they receive a bad or mediocre grade. Why? Because they interpret a bad grade as something that damages their academic abilities.

On the other hand, boys are found to be more confident in their attitudes at school. They are less bothered by the bad feedbacks of their teachers. In addition, when they get a bad grade, they do not see it as a lack of ability but lack of effort. So, boys are less likely to feel stressed and anxious compared to girls.

In order to help a girl understand that bad or mediocre grades are not the only indication of her inherent abilities, try to persuade her that she can improve it next time. An exam, homework, or tests are about how well she understood that particular material at that particular time. If she works hard on that subject more, she can improve her performance.

You should reassure her that she can improve her academic achievement herself. Research shows that students who believe their skills can be improved through hard work tend to be less stressful than students who believe their grades are the only thing that defines their value.

## When they are sexually harassed, girls often blame themselves.

Apart from talking with girls face-to-face, Dr. Damour also meets with a group of girls who face the same problem. Recently, Dr. Damour had a conversation with a group of 15- to 16-year-old girls. The subject of the #metoo movement, sexual abuse committed by those in power, also discussed with this group. Dr. Damour asked if any of the girls had experienced similar things themselves and the response she received was extremely shocking.

Research by the American Association of University Women shows that almost fifty percent of American girls in middle or high school, have experienced some form of harassment such as unwanted touching or groping. The girls whom Dr. Damour spoke attended all-girls school but they were still sexually harassed in their daily lives.

Many of the girls were harassed by the boys that they knew. They grabbed their butts, pulled their bra-straps and even called them names like "hoe" or "slut." Dr. Damour also noticed that the girls who were harassed blamed themselves about the sexual harassment they experienced.

One girl in the group was worried that because she and her friend wore leggings very often, they were perhaps asking for boys to degrade them. This type of shame often prevents them from telling anyone about the sexual harassment they face. They think they must have done or worn something that caused it.

It is very important for parents to reassure their daughters that they are never responsible for such acts so that they would not feel self-blame.

If you have a teenage daughter, try to start a normal conversation to learn about sexual harassment. Take your time and casually ask her about boys and their behaviors toward her, to see if she is treated with respect or not. If she opens up about any harassment, make sure to let her know that you are open to talk about it. Tell her that you are ready to help her solve this problem.

Alternatively, if she refuses to talk about it, let her know that this is a very common thing that happens to other girls, that she is not alone. She should not feel shameful as the victim, the harasser should. Also, express that she can ask for your help with issues like this, now or in the future.

## The society expects girls to be agreeable which makes them anxious.

Society imposes some standards on girls that they do not impose on boys. Dr. Damour observed it closely when a 15-year-old girl named Nicki visited her. Nicki was feeling anxious and overburdened with schoolwork and other things not related to school. As a result, she was having sleep problems.

Eventually, the cause of Nicki's anxiety was turned out to be her inability to say no to people.

Nicki was a skilled gymnast who had decided to quit because of increasing schoolwork. Her gym coach would not accept her decision and pressured her to continue long hours of gymnastics training. She was also asked to start teaching a group of younger gymnasts. Nicki reluctantly accepted both of these requests in order not to disappoint her coach.

As a society, we expect and teach girls to be more obedient than boys. We want them to do what we tell them to do.

If you are not convinced, think about all the words we use to label women who disagree with requests. For instance, if a girl declines to help clean up a mess that she did not make, she might be called insensitive or even worse a 'diva' or 'bitch.' Ask yourself if there are similar words to describe men who are disobedient. At worst, we might call a disobedient man a

'dick' but this is not even close to things that we use to label women. When a boy does not behave as he is supposed to, we simply say "boys will be boys" and disregard the situation.

These dissimilar expectations put heavy pressure on girls like Nicki and they often find themselves restrained. It is not okay for them to agree on everything people ask of them. However, they hesitate to say no because they fear of people calling them hurtful words or thinking badly of them.

Therefore, many girls feel anxious about turning people down. For example, a girl who receives an invitation to a party that she does not want to go may accept it because of the fear of being excluded or worry about what people would say behind her. In order to help your daughter get rid of stress and anxiety, teach her that it is okay to say no. Do not side with a group of people who disapproves of everything about women and set sexist boundaries.

## Under Pressure: Confronting the Epidemic of Stress and Anxiety in Girls by Lisa Damour Book Review

Girls face many challenges both at school and in their daily lives which cause them to be anxious and stressful. However, if the adults in their lives support and encourage them, the pressures they face can be diminished greatly.

Don't believe everything you read online.

We live in an age of endless news and often click bait articles. It is very easy to feel pessimistic if we believe in everything we read online. The media often makes it sound like teenage girls are in crisis and that everything is getting worse quickly. Despite what those clickbait articles say and the media believes, teenagers are actually safer than before. In fact, research shows that teens today are less concerned with drugs, alcohol, smoking, sex and often wear seatbelts and bike helmets. Thus, the next time you read an article about how teenagers are corrupt, keep in mind that your teenager is possibly more well-behaved than you were.

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