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
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

How to spot an anxiety disorder

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