

How to help teenage girls reframe anxiety and strengthen resilience - Anxiety can be our friend

We are often asked by our SMC families about how to help their daughters manage the anxiety they are experiencing. Rates of anxiety related disorders in teens have risen in the last decade and particularly in girls. Hypotheses about the rising rate range from digital hyperconnectivity to body image as well as a heightened awareness of mental health concerns. Some girls are interested in, and prone to, exploring a set of symptoms and self diagnosing using 'Dr Google' leading automatically to an increase in the levels of anxiety. Whatever the causes it remains to be said that a level of anxiety in all of us is healthy and absolutely necessary for human growth and function.

US psychologist Lisa Damour, in her book *Under Pressure: Confronting the Epidemic of Stress and Anxiety in Girls*, explains that the number of girls who reported that they often felt nervous, worried, or fearful jumped 55 percent from 2009 to 2014, while the comparable number for adolescent boys has remained unchanged. As a clinical psychologist who specialises in working with girls, Lisa Damour, has witnessed this rising tide of stress and anxiety in her own research, in private practice, and in the all-girls' school where she consults. "She explains the surprising and underappreciated value of stress and anxiety: that stress can helpfully stretch us beyond our comfort zones, and anxiety can play a key role in keeping girls safe. When we emphasise the benefits of stress and anxiety, we can help our daughters take them in their stride. But no parents want their daughter to suffer from emotional overload, so Damour then turns to the many facets of girls' lives where tension takes hold: their interactions at home, pressures at school, social anxiety among other girls and among boys, and their lives online. As readers move through the layers of girls' lives, they'll learn about the critical steps that adults can take to shield their daughters from the toxic pressures to which our culture—including we, as parents—subjects girls." (Amazon - blurb for *Under Pressure: Confronting the Epidemic of Stress and Anxiety in Girls* - a great read for parents of teenage girls)

Reframe Stress as an Opportunity to Build Strength

Transition times such as starting school, moving from Year 6 to Year 7, changing from one classroom teacher to another, moving schools, moving homes, Year 10 to Year 11 and on to life after school are all times of change and with change comes stress even if the change is positive. Teenagers' lives are filled with change: bodies and brains are transforming, the academic expectations are increasing and social relationships are constantly moving. The anxiety that comes with stretching to face these and other challenges is part of how humans develop strength. As parents and carers we can make a difference by reassuring our adolescents that stress is operating as a friend and ally to

them keeping them safe and helping them to make informed decisions. It might be helpful to describe to your teen the developing strength of mind by making a comparison with building physical strength: to build physical strength you have to slowly push your level of physical endurance, building strength through resistance training. When a mental challenge presents itself help your child to see that facing it, they are building their capacity by meeting the challenge and becoming mentally stronger and tougher as a result.

Avoidance Feeds Anxiety

Helping girls to move through the stressful times can be excruciating for parents and one tendency might be to alleviate the pain by keeping her home from school. None of us want to see our children suffering but avoidance feeds anxiety. Girls often feel stressed because they overestimate the intensity of the situation and underestimate their capacity to deal with it. When they avoid a situation, they miss the opportunity to correct that perception and recognise their own strength.

The Power of Sleep

The research is unambiguous; when we are sleep deprived, we are less emotionally resilient. Teens need nine hours sleep a night, upper primary students ten and younger students need eleven. Devices in bedrooms will most likely lead to interrupted sleep!

Developing Resilience

The caring, working relationship with at least one loving adult is the most powerful force for good in a teen's life. This loving adult will offer empathy, a grounded perspective and a vote of confidence helping the adolescent to be courageous, not avoidant. Help your daughter reframe anxiety as a condition we all feel, not one that needs to be pathologised. It is one that helps us to evolve, build mental strength to meet life's challenges, some of which may be very significant.

When and if anxiety becomes untenable there are tested strategies for reining anxiety back in. For specific strategies use the links below:

<https://au.reachout.com/everyday-issues/stress>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/in-practice/201503/50-strategies-beat-anxiety>

<https://au.reachout.com/articles/7-tips-to-help-with-stress-and-anxiety>

If after trialling the relevant strategies in these links, your child continues to feel anxious causing him/her to curb their normal activities please consult a GP.

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