

# Daughters

For Parents of Girls

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## INTERVIEW

### *Jill Zimmerman Rutledge on Girls' Stress*



*Listening to stressed-out girls for nearly 25 years in her psychotherapy practice, Jill Zimmerman Rutledge came to*

*believe that girls could learn to help themselves manage stress. Her book, Dealing With the Stuff That Makes Life Tough: The 10 Things That Stress Girls Out and How to Cope With Them (Contemporary Books, 2004), gives girl-friendly guidance on ways to tackle troubling stresses and ease symptoms from insomnia to anxiety. She's elated that girls often read the book with a parent, noting that it's an ideal way to spark conversations about sometimes touchy topics. A veteran specialist in eating disorder issues, Zimmerman Rutledge is in private practice in Evanston, Illinois. Daughters caught up with her there.*

#### How to Know It's Stress

Girls often come in reporting all these physical and emotional symptoms, which they and their parents may be treating without linking them to stress. Girls talk about being sad, low-energy, anxious, or irritable. They get chronic headaches, stomachaches, muscle tension, or say that they're "just not feeling good." Often they can't get to sleep, or they'll sleep a lot. They might be eating all day, or not eating at all. Sometimes these eating behaviors can indicate an eating disorder, but often it's just stress. They might be using drugs or alco-

hol as a way of self-medicating.

Girls and their parents can often make the connection with stress by simply being observant. Girls might keep a log of when they feel symptoms, and what they're thinking about and doing when they start feeling bad. Parents can chart their own observations

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as well. When girls are able to change a situation or attitude to make it less stressful, they'll often see symptoms subside. However, if physical or emotional symptoms persist after trying stress-reduction techniques, professional help is in order.

#### What Are the Top Stressors for Girls?

In my book, I address the stress topics that I hear the most about from girls, but I also include top stress symptoms that by themselves cause stress! The book's ten topics are body image, anxiety, depression, guys, substances

(smoking, drinking, and drugs), overscheduling, divorce, sleep problems, bullies and friend relationships, and sexual identity. Overall, the top three stresses that I hear about are body image, school, and guys.

I've seen trends in what causes girls stress over the years, and they're very disturbing. Girls are being pressured to look and act sexy at younger and younger ages. One result of the heavy marketing of sex to girls is that they're too young to really understand the consequences of some behaviors they may adopt.

Another trend is all the anxiety about food and weight. Part of it now is worry about obesity, which is good in many ways, because we want girls to grow up healthy. But too often, especially when girls begin to gain weight with puberty, parents say, "I'm scared she's going to be obese." Girls and even

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parents don't realize that a girl needs that fat at puberty because it provides the hormones necessary for developing into a woman. Nine times out of ten, girls gain weight and then grow out of it.

More kids seem depressed in recent years; maybe it's that we're diagnosing it and picking up on it earlier. More kids are taking antidepressants, and sometimes it's inappropriate. Certainly, if a child is suicidal, or cuts herself, or can't get out of bed, parents need to consider all treatment options. But if a family doctor suggests antidepressants, at least get a referral to a specialist, such as a psychologist or psychiatrist who treats children, before deciding. [Editor's note: After emerging evidence that antidepressants can cause increased depression and suicidal thoughts among teens and children, the Food and Drug Administration now recommends that doctors monitor their use closely.]

**Soothing Stress about Looks**

For girls I see, body image stress is number one. Girls' body image is strongly linked to their self-image. As parents, we can talk with our girls about trying to accept that there are some things about how you look that you may like a lot, and some things you may not like very much. One high school girl helped herself this way: She'd say to herself and her friends and her boyfriend: "I'm good enough. I don't have to be the best."

Another way we can help is to focus on accomplishments and not looks. I tell girls to look at Mia Hamm's legs—they aren't "feminine," they're "masculine" because that's what she needs to accomplish her athletic goals. Another girl found some relief by looking at her baby pictures. She noticed how happy she was then. Of course, back then she never thought about how she looked. She reminded herself that she could get back to that feeling.

**Taming Stressful Expectations**

A tremendous source of girls' stress is all the work that's piled on at school. Especially at schools in middle- and upper-income neighborhoods, there's so much pressure to take all honors and AP classes and do lots of extracurricular activities. There's a lot of emphasis on test scores. And parents are sometimes the worst about pressuring girls to do more. But we have to remind ourselves and our girls that these kinds of classes aren't always necessary. There are a lot of successful people who didn't go to Harvard. The important thing is to feel good about yourself—that's when you can achieve in whatever area you choose.

Girls often keep adding things on because they want to please other people. Many girls have a hard time saying no. They think they have to be perfect. We can teach them to say things like, "I can't do this now." One girl drew up a "don't-do" list. We can help them develop ways to relax when they're feeling frazzled. One girl did puzzles; another liked gardening. Meditation is always a good option. It doesn't require any training or special equipment. Girls can just find a place they like to relax. Even 15 minutes can make a real difference toward rejuvenation.

**Easing Anxiety and Depression**

I know a 14-year-old who was just starting a new high school. She didn't know very many people; she didn't have anybody to eat with at her lunch period. She told her parents she wanted to end it all. She was feeling so overwhelmed with all the changes. So she talked with her counselor and parents, and they figured out solutions like changing her lunch period to one where she had friends, and changing a difficult class to one with not such high expectations. And then she started feeling better.

Many girls are just really anxious. To them, anxiety feels free-floating, and they can't put a finger on what causes it. Parents need to help their daughters figure

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out what the trigger is, even if it's related to family. For one girl, it was behavior at home that brought on anxiety: the parents fought a lot. Often, it's school stuff. Girls sometimes feel depressed around the time of their period, and they don't know this can be a very normal feeling.

Unless there's an acute danger, give her a chance to learn coping skills on her own or with a counselor. When we learn coping skills, our neurotransmitters (brain chemicals) can change to make us feel better, just as they can with medication.

**Helping Girls See the Big Picture**

Parents frequently think they have to fix everything. And girls can also express things very dramatically. What we should teach them is that sometimes life

includes bad feelings, sadness, and disappointment. The focus should be on learning to comfort yourself. Sometimes switching activities helps, going to see a movie, taking a walk, or just talking. Another thing we can do is to tell them about times in our lives when we were hurt and then learned that life goes on. To girls, such a situation can seem like the end of the world.

Don't hesitate to start young—a nine-year-old will need more assistance from a parent, but she can still develop coping techniques to reduce whatever stresses she has. If we can teach them at a young age, they'll be so much more prepared for the increasing challenges to come. Coping skills are a great gift because they last for a lifetime. ★

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