

Stinking Thinking - Why Girls Stress More

By Dr. Justin Coulson

It is generally well accepted that females experience greater levels of depression and anxiety than males. This is true, not only during adulthood, but also during adolescence.

While there is a range of suggestions as to why – including the idea that ‘men are tough and don’t talk to doctors or psychologists’, recent research offers an important new insight for parents and those who work with adolescents to consider:

Girls experience greater levels of exposure to stressors and more challenging interpersonal events compared with boys.

Researchers at Temple University conducted a longitudinal study with data collected at three time points, each 7 months apart. Close to 400 adolescents responded to the study, provided data across the 14 month period, and the research indicated the following:

- Teens who experienced higher amounts of stress in their relationships (termed interpersonal dependent stress) were more likely to ruminate at follow up data collection time points.
- Teens who experienced higher amounts of stress in their relationships were also significantly more likely to exhibit a negative cognitive style – meaning they interpreted life events in negative ways.
- Those who exhibit these outcomes (rumination and negative cognitive style) place themselves at greater risk of depression than those who do not.
- Girls were exposed to significantly higher levels of interpersonal dependent stressors (relationship dramas) than boys.
- Girls showed significantly higher levels of rumination and negative cognitive style than boys.

The researcher’s analysis indicated that the girls’ heightened exposure to relationship difficulties prompted the rumination and the negative cognitive style – a term many call ‘stinking thinking’. It is important to recognise that girls did not react differently to the stressors they faced compared to boys. The researchers stated,

“if boys and girls had been exposed to the same number of stressors, both would have been likely to develop rumination and negative cognitive styles.”

Why is this happening?

This research offers no clues as to why our teen girls are facing greater levels of stressors compared to boys. Those of us who work with teens might suggest that:

- There is a gender-specific psychology to female relationships.
- Society places uniquely gendered unhealthy demands on our girls.
- As an extension, socialisation processes are also a target for blame, along the same lines... we expect different (and more stressful) things of girls in terms of appearance particularly.

How can we stress-proof our girls?

There are dozens of strategies for bolstering our adolescent girls’ resilience, many with strong empirical support.

Utilising a positive psychology framework, I offer just three strategies that I suspect may make significant positive impact:

1. Build strong relationships between parents and children

There may be nothing more critical to staving off the depression plague and building resilience than strong relationships between parent and child. Children whose parents show they care, who listen, and who validate them will typically enjoy fewer depressive symptoms when compared with children who do not enjoy strong, positive relationships with parents. This may be particularly true for girls who have strong relationships with their fathers.

2. Help them to grow up grateful

Having a powerful sense of gratitude is a powerful protective factor for reducing depression risk among teens. Several studies have demonstrated that not only are happy people grateful, but grateful people are happy – which means less depression.

3. Optimism

Australian research with over 5000 Aussie kids clearly links optimism with the capacity to overcome depression faced by teens – and particularly girls. It appears that having a belief that things can and will get better, and that there are great things coming in the future, can reduce the risk of depression and boost our adolescent's capacity to bounce back from stress and setback. (Surprisingly, optimism doesn't protect against stressful life events – they still hurt – but it does protect against depression)

Our teens are vulnerable. They are facing unprecedented scrutiny from peers, parents, and teachers. The digital world creates more opportunities for relationship challenges than ever before. Girls, in particular, are vulnerable to negative cognitions and rumination in connection with these challenges. These strategies can help us provide support and scaffolding as we attempt to inoculate them against mental illness.

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