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IDEAS | ESSAY

The Lonely Burden of Today's Teenage Girls

Amid our huge, unplanned experiment with social media, new research suggests that many American adolescents are becoming more anxious, depressed and solitary

By Mary Pipher and Sara Pipher Gilliam

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"I have friends with debilitating problems like cutting and OCD [obsessive compulsive disorder]," a girl named Jordan recently told us. "It's frustrating because I can't help them. I mean, I'm only 14 myself."

Young Americans have become unwitting guinea pigs in today's huge, unplanned experiment with social media, and teenage girls like Jordan are bearing much of the brunt. In conversation after conversation, adolescent girls describe themselves as particularly vulnerable to the banes of our increasingly digital culture, with many of them struggling to manage the constant connectedness of social media, their rising levels of anxiety and the intense emotions that have always been central to adolescence.

Girls in 2019 tend to be risk-averse, focused on their studies and fond of their families. They are also experiencing high levels of depression and loneliness. A 2019 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 36% of girls report being extremely anxious every day. They are particularly worried about school shootings, melting polar ice and their ability to afford college.

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past 18 months, we have conducted interviews and focus groups with around 100 American girls aged 12 to 19 and their mothers, most of them Midwestern and middle class. (We agreed to withhold their last names.) We have also interviewed many more teachers and therapists around the country. That sample isn't comprehensive, of course, but the results are highly suggestive and strikingly consistent—with much to cheer but also much to worry about.

Many girls report that their mothers are their best friends. The close-knit family unit has, for the most part, rebounded as divorce rates have dropped to a 40-year low.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

As a young person (or a parent to one), how do you handle the challenges of social media and other pressures? Share your stories with us.

But girls today aren't as self-sufficient as their counterparts in earlier decades: They are less likely to possess driver's licenses, work outside the home or date.

They are also more solitary. Research from the University of Michigan's Monitoring the Future project shows that, since 2007—the dawn of the smartphone era—girls have dramatically decreased the amount of time they spend shopping, seeing friends or going to movies. We found that many girls spend their Saturday nights home alone, watching Netflix and surfing social media.

The glow of screens is unavoidable. Last year, the Pew Research Center reported that 95% of American teenagers have access to a smartphone. The nonprofit group Common Sense Media has found that contemporary teens spend six to nine hours a day online—and that 72% of teens felt manipulated by tech companies into remaining constantly connected.



Because of the omnipresent smartphone, girls can call or text their parents to ask what's for dinner or request a ride home. Many girls are rarely out in the world alone, solving problems by themselves.

When girls do eventually leave home, they often find themselves ill-prepared to navigate “real life.” In 2011, the American College Health Association reported that 31% of female freshmen said they had experienced overwhelming anxiety or panic attacks; by 2016, that had shot up to 62%.

‘When my friends are depressed, I’m the person they call. It’s terrifying.’

—Olivia, age 14

“When my friends are depressed, I’m the person they

call,” said Olivia, 14. “It’s terrifying. I’ve put suicide-prevention apps on so many peoples’ phones.” We are grateful for girls like Olivia who help their friends, but teenagers aren’t ready to handle this level of emotional responsibility.

How did we get here? According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 1993, girls scored the highest levels of suicide ever recorded. From 1994 onward, rates of suicide steadily declined until 2007, when they started to skyrocket.

The American Association of Pediatrics now warns that too much social-media use can lead to depression and anxiety. Social media works against basic developmental

goals—physical, cognitive, relational, sexual and maturational. Girls sleep with their phones and react to every notification. As they create more interesting, supposedly happier virtual personas for themselves, their real selves diminish. Girls collect “likes” instead of making friends. They can be devastated by a cruel text or a tepid reaction to a selfie. Long before they hold hands with a date, they are exposed to online pornography and misogynistic messages.

In a sense, modern girls are never truly alone and never truly with others. In a 2018 national health survey by Cigna, girls reported the highest levels of loneliness on record.

“Honestly, sometimes I wish we were living in the ‘olden’ days, when kids hung out with friends and went on dates,” Genevieve, 16, told us. “But that just isn’t what my friends and I do.”

Many of the girls we interviewed articulated many of social media’s drawbacks even as they declared that they can’t live without it. “After an evening online, I go to bed feeling unhappy,” Izzie, 13, told us. “I wonder, ‘What did I do all day long?’ Then I wake up and do the same things the next day.”

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Fortunately, parents have many ways to ameliorate the effects of social media. To combat the creation of hollow online selves, parents should encourage identity-building activities such as team sports, meditation or volunteerism. Beginning in middle school, parents can nudge girls toward navigating

the world on their own: Part-time jobs can teach patience, persistence and people skills, and girls can schedule their own medical appointments or plan family events.

Girls can also develop their true selves through writing, music, drama and the visual arts. Journaling helps girls process complex feelings. So does meditation and time spent in nature.

We also suggest that girls make pacts with their friends that help them spend more time in the real world—for example, a commitment to put down their devices after 9 p.m. or remove social-media apps from their phones during the school week. These agreements let them all be offline at the same time—hence, none of the dreaded FOMO (fear of missing out).

Times have changed, but girls’ needs haven’t.

Times have changed, but girls’ needs haven’t. They need to be loved and loving—to be safe, useful and free to

grow into all they can be. The role of thoughtful parents hasn’t changed either: Mothers and fathers need to protect their daughters (and sons) from the culture’s noxious elements and connect them to life’s goodness and beauty. In an increasingly complicated world, much of the answer is simple: Unplug and do the things families have done since the beginning of time—tell stories, laugh, work together and talk through life’s big questions.

This generation of girls, we found, is particularly eager to make its opinions heard and defend its rights. “I stand up for myself and others,” Greer, 16, told us. “It gives me hope, because when other girls accept themselves like I do, we can take all that energy and launch the Industrial Revolution of girl power.”

—Dr. Pipher is a therapist and clinical psychologist. Her books include “Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls,” which was recently republished by Riverhead in a 25th-anniversary edition coauthored with her daughter, Sara Pipher Gilliam, the editor in chief of Exchange, an international magazine for early childhood professionals.

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