



## Are Girls More Anxious Than Boys?

By Russell Hyken, Ed.S., LPC

**Q:** I have both a teenage son and a daughter. It seems that my daughter is much more anxious than my son. Is this because of how I parented?

**A:** A recent study in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry* found that teenage girls are six times more likely to be anxious than boys. Additionally, there is a significant amount of research that shows women are significantly more anxious than men.

Interestingly, life does not start out this way. During the infant/toddler years, boys are actually needier than girls. And as kids go through childhood, both sexes experience equal amounts of anxiety. However, as girls become adolescents, they take the lead in stress-related symptomatology.

Unfortunately for the female sex, society has it out for you. Further, parents tend to treat the emotional explosions of their daughters much differently than they handle the behavioral outbursts of their boys.

For example, parents coddle and empathize when girls hurt themselves, even if it is minor cut or scrape. Boys, on the other hand, are typically told to “suck it up and move on.”

Parents are also more likely to accept introverted, shy, or anxious behaviors from their daughters because there is a societal perception that this is just part of being a girl.

When a boy acts timid; however, he may be punished by his parents or even made fun of by family members. These different approaches are, in essence, teaching boys how to cope while further fostering anxious feelings in girls.

Unfortunately, many girls enter high school without the needed strategies to combat the anxiety which is now brought on by their peers. For example, when

a girl has a problem, she tends to talk to her friends about it -- at length. This type of “rumination” or problem-focused discussion serves only to increase stress and worry.

Girls are also far more likely to “catastrophize” their problems than boys. An argument with a female peer, for example, is often interpreted as the end of a friendship.

Boys, on the other hand, will go shoot hoops or engage in some other distracting activity when they have a problem. Just as their parents taught them, they “suck it up and move on.”

Unfortunately anxious adolescents turn into anxious adults. Here are some tips to help your adolescent reduce stress.

- When your child is anxious provide support and listen. Empathize and don't feel the need to solve the problem.
- Encourage your teen to engage in physical activity to relieve the stress.

- Guide your adolescent to a distraction. Take up a new activity or just do something fun.
- Tell your offspring to just breath—relaxation through deep breathing. This can actually provide instant relief.
- Lastly, if your child's anxiousness is lasting and/or occurring frequently, find professional assistance.

In conclusion, parenting style may have something to do with why your daughter is more anxious than your son. In the bigger picture, however, society may be the actual cause of this condition. Either way, it is good to recognize that your teenagers are different and provide each with the support they need to be successful. ■

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