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## Helping Girls Regain Their Confidence and Motivation Andrew Fuller

While the pandemic years have challenged us all, the effects have been especially severe for girls and young women. They are the most likely to experience the 'disorders of distress'- anxiety and depression and for some, self-harm, and body insecurity.

I want to combine the conversations I have been having in my therapy room with girls and young women with recent research to start a conversation about creating antidotes.

Of course, these issues can also affect boys and do not apply to all girls or to all young women. Nevertheless, discussing ways to help our girls and young women recover after a tough time is needed.

### **Oxytocin**

Extended lock downs disrupted the social networks and support of girls and young women. Replacing face to face interactions with an online version did not work for many. In our usual face to face, conversational world we are able to 'read' people more accurately and also use our interactions to soothe ourselves while calming each other's fears and worries. Human are built to co-regulate.

One antidote to this is have girls and young women 'synch and link' with one another. Learning how to re-regulate after times of dys-regulation is the basis of stress management and recovery. For many, the answer to high

levels of stress is not individual support, it is social support and activities with others.

### **Conversational Impoverishment**

During the pandemic years, gamers could discuss triumphs, strategies, and challenges. People who didn't play computer games as much could discuss... er... Netflix?

Much of the conversational fodder for girls and young women is their shared experiences. Having felt/ done/ endured similar events, bonds and highlights the similarities between girls and young women. When there are less shared experiences, it leaves some girls and young women feeling isolated and unvalidated. This increases feelings of agitation and stress. Some feel abandoned and left out.

### **Distorted Reflections**

Viewing your own image on screen during extended on-line sessions does not do many of us, great favours. For young women, it has left many of them overly self-conscious and hyper-critical. Levels of body image issues and nutritional restriction have escalated. If you restrict food intake too much, you increase cortisol, the stress hormone. This lessen the capacity for creativity and flexible thinking.

The enhanced degree of self-scrutiny has been worsened by negative comments about appearance from others.

The formation of a deeper sense of identity is part of knowing yourself and knowing the contribution you can make. To assume that only your physical attractiveness counts, diminishes us all.

### **Perfectionism and Idealism**

The internet lies to us all, but it reserves the most toxic lies for women. It allows for the fast sharing of information but with it comes the spreading of poisonous ideas. One of the most toxic ideas is that you are never 'enough'.

One lie is that somewhere in the inaccessible world of social media exists the perfect life with the best boy or girlfriends who wear wonderfully stylish fashion, are always glamorous and thin and always say or do exactly the right thing.

Happiness is not just about many times you smile or laugh each day. It is more about your feeling of appreciation and contentment with who you are, what you have, and the people around you. Social media annihilates this for many girls and young people and leaves them feeling imperfect, dissatisfied and on an endless pursuit for perfection.

### **Avoiding failure (at great cost).**

The quest for perfection effects learning. For some young women the desire to attain the perfect score at school becomes a tyrannical quest. If you are clever enough or driven enough to attain high scores in one subject area, there is often a strong avoidance of other areas. This narrows rather than expands the learning of girls and young women.

In this regard, sadly, they are emulating the position sometimes taken by disengaged boys- it is better not to try than to try and fail.

### **What the Internet Steals From Us**

If we consider the way most girls and young women calm and manage stress, it seems these are the very things that social media does not offer:

Shared decision making

Deepening & enrichment of conversations  
Collaboration  
Kindness  
Effective support.

In short, our young women are being robbed by the very tools they seek support from.

### **Vaping Your Way to Calm??**

The proliferation of fake I.D.'s to obtain vapes and alcohol has never been higher. If you think home delivery services just apply to food, think again. There is a thriving business in dropping off supplies of substances to young women.

Let's imagine you were feeling isolated and unaccepted. There is a substance that offers you social connectedness, stress reduction, potential skinniness and feels rebellious. As a teenager would you? Vaping is the new norm. (*I'm not saying that is a good thing*). Hard to control in schools. Toilets are not a place most teachers wish to intrude upon, understandably.

Increasingly young women in co-ed schools are inviting male students into the girl's toilets as 'fellow' vapers. This means even less privacy for young women. For those who have had unpleasant experiences with young men, a visit to the toilet can be fraught.

Regular vapers report lower levels of happiness than peers.

### **Girl Power**

After a few years in which female empowerment had some much-needed gains, it feels as if the pandemic years have caused it to stumble. Careers with higher proportions of female staff have been among the least well supported. Support packages seem to have been directed mainly at careers where men predominate. Wage gaps remain alarmingly disparate.

Girls and young women are rightly shaken by the restriction of pathways to economic futures. While the belief in a traditional career pathway

Is lower, interest in entrepreneurial start-ups remains high.

### **Teach self-reliance.**

We need to help our girls and young women to shift from narrow perfectionism to developing strong identities and create great lives.

Being timid or oblique about their capacities and strengths does them no favours. Let them know you think they are smart and can get even smarter. Everyone makes mistakes. Great people use their mistakes to get smarter and stronger.

You don't overcome perfectionism by not making mistakes. You overcome perfectionism by making mistakes and learning how to use that knowledge to create different outcomes in the future. All great undertakings require overcoming adversity and setbacks.

Once girls know that you believe in them and like them, it is useful to move them from pleasing others to self-reliance. This is the development of courageous resilience. This is best done by coaching them towards strengthening a positive sense of their identity and extending their skills in an area of their choosing.

The way we do this, is called **CARE** coaching-  
**C**onnect  
**A**sk  
**R**eassure  
**E**mpower

Create a non-judgemental environment in which they can take risks, make mistakes, and improve on their performance over time.

The desire that many girls and young women have to 'get it right' can quickly topple into anxiety and perfectionism. Perfectionist girls may constantly seek reassurance from you that they are doing the right thing. Discuss options with them and then teach them to trust their instincts and do what they think is right.

Most girls will do what is asked of them, but they may be less likely to realise that they have acquired a transferable skill. Instead of focusing on having pleased an adult, we want them to attribute their successes to their own skills and capabilities. This builds self-efficacy, self-awareness, and meta-cognition.

Help them to develop a resume of acquired skills. Teach them that everyone can get smarter and has learning strengths they can develop. Support them in trying out and learning new things. Encourage having a go and living by your wits.

Our girls and young women need us to be bold and to act as positive antidotes to the dreadful effects of the past few years.

### **More information**

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Andrew's websites

[www.andrewfuller.com.au](http://www.andrewfuller.com.au)

[www.mylearningstrengths.com](http://www.mylearningstrengths.com) has helped over 45,000 young people in the past year discover their learning strengths.

### **Books for Parents**

*Tricky Behaviours*

*The A to Z of Feelings*

*Unlocking Your Child's Genius* (Bad Apple Press)

### **Books for Teachers**

*Guerrilla Tactics for Teachers* (from

[www.andrewfuller.com.au](http://www.andrewfuller.com.au))

*Tricky Behaviours*

*Tricky Teens*

*Unlocking Your Child's Genius* (Bad Apple Press)

*Neurodevelopmental Differentiation- Optimising Brain Systems to Maximise Learning*

(Hawker-Brownlow)

