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Stress and Teenage Girls-Author Stephen Hinshaw Tackles the Triple Bind

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Serious depression, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, binge eating, aggression. By the age of 19, one in four girls will have experienced or displayed one or more of these risky behaviors. This is a frightening and confusing statistic for parents in a community like Lamorinda where female teens routinely excel at academics and extracurricular activities and many "seem" happy.

"Adolescence is a time of high risk for girls," states Dr. Stephen Hinshaw, Chair of the Department of Psychology at the University of California Berkeley. Hinshaw spoke about the unique pressures facing teenage girls to a group of over 75 parents at Miramonte High School last Tuesday-an impressive turnout on the evening of the first big rainstorm of the season.

"Teenage boys have it rough," says Hinshaw, who is the father of three boys, "but girls have it a lot rougher." At the same time Hinshaw acknowledges that young women today have access to tremendous opportunities and have experienced unprecedented success as compared to their counterparts of 20 years ago. "Girls are doing better than ever," he adds.

This contradiction in the female teen experience has led Hinshaw, an internationally recognized psychologist and researcher, to ask why and to study the question. Hinshaw explores the problem and potential interventions in his newest book *The Triple Bind: Saving our Teenage Girls from Today's Pressures*.

The triple bind-the ability to excel at "girl skills," achieve "boy goals," and be a model of female perfection-is a toxic triad, according to Hinshaw, that leads some young women to experience depression and suicidal thoughts, to cut themselves or perform other types of self-harm, to compulsively overeat, or to engage in aggressive and violent behavior.

"Girls must conform to narrow, unrealistic standards and pressure to be relentlessly perfect," Hinshaw says, adding that as caregivers by nature, girls are empathetic, nurturing, and compliant. But success in today's competitive world often requires young women to be assertive and dominant-traits that can conflict with a caring nature. Add to that today's cultural expectation for young women to be super feminine and super sexy all the time, and few can escape the stress; in some the risk for unhealthy behaviors and outcomes is heightened.

"It is not a parental problem per se, but a wider cultural phenomenon," Hinshaw says. Although biology plays a role in mental illness, genetics are a factor in 40 percent of women with depression; Hinshaw says much of the risk is in the environment. "Genes cannot explain the recent increases in suicide and serious mental health problems in young women," he states.

What other factors are causing young girls to succumb to the stress? Over scheduling (ubiquitous among teens in Lamorinda)? Probably not, according to recent research, says Hinshaw. Pressure? Could be, he says. Lack of sleep? Definitely.

"Kids actually need to get more sleep in their teen years," Hinshaw says. Getting this needed sleep is not only confounded by teens' hectic schedules but also their physical development. "Teens are more phase-delayed," he explains. "It is more difficult for teens to go to sleep early and wake up early."

So what are the solutions to the triple bind? With no antidote available, Hinshaw outlines a pragmatic approach to parenting young teens through the today's cultural pressures:

- Talk about it. "If you don't talk about these problems, they will fester and get worse."
- Get professional help. "There are effective treatments available, and these work well with early intervention."
- Encourage critical thinking and self-discovery. "Parents can question today's culture and foster inquiry in the outside world."
- Identify with a wider community and purpose. "Turn youthful energy into community activism."
- Provide a caring and structured environment. "Kids are begging for limits. They are looking for you to take some control."

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