BRIEF
Chandaria Research Centre

Rethinking Stress for Youth in All-Girls' Schools

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Caring about the healthy development of girls[1] and young women is a priority for many school communities. Well-being, along with academics and international mindedness, are the key strategic imperatives that support our mission to inspire a love of learning and make a difference in their lives. As authors, we come from a school community that understands and values well-being for girls and young women, believing it is foundational for their engagement in learning and in life. Drawing from recent research and experiences from the all-girls context, we offer our readers an overview of what stress is and its connections to girls and rigorous learning environments, ending with key takeaways for the community.

Those of us who parent or work in schools and other settings with young people are curious about their lived experience of stress and their ways of adaptive coping. We find ourselves wondering how best to support the efforts children and adolescents engage in as they navigate the challenges that life presents. Adults play a pivotal role in the ways girls derive meaning from and respond to life's stressors.

At times, it can seem as though the prevalence of stress and anxiety is epidemic, particularly for young people. The myriad messages we receive each day in our interactions with each other and through traditional and social media make stress and anxiety difficult topics to avoid. We are often told that we currently live in an "Age of Anxiety" (Shorter, 2013), and indeed, a recent global study (Booth, Sharma & Leader, 2016) found a significant increase in anxiety worldwide between 1970 and 2010, with students in America and Canada, in particular, experiencing higher levels of anxiety. According to the 2017 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS), 30.4 per cent of students reported elevated levels of stress (CAMH, 2017), with female students in Ontario twice as likely (41.5 per cent compared to 20 per cent for male students) to report elevated stress levels (Boak et al., 2018, p. 81). Other studies yield similar results, signalling that the impact on girls persists, both in our society and in independent school settings (Statistics Canada, 2015; Leonard et al., 2015).

As a result, professionals working in all-girls' schools and our girls' families, acknowledge that they are faced with a dilemma (Damour, 2019). On one hand, we acknowledge that stress can be useful in developing coping skills and is part of educational experiences; on the other hand, there is a need for a call to action to support young people in cultivating the coping skills needed to thrive in today's world.

[1] *Note that the term **girl** is broadly conceptualized as referring to cisgender, transitioning, transgender, or gender diverse identities (see Branksome Hall, May 2016).*

What is stress?

Stress is the non-specific (or common) result of any demand made upon the body (Selye, 1993). It is caused by stressors (factors or events in our lives that increase pressure) and often triggers the stress response, which is described as how the body and mind adapt, cope, or adjust to the demands being made (Bjorling & Singh, 2017; Nevid & Rathus, 2003; Suldo et al., 2008). Change of any kind, whether welcome or unwelcome, may prompt a stress response. Research shows that individuals have varying responses to stress that can include physiological changes in the body such as alertness, headaches, nausea, increased blood pressure, and enhanced focus. Responses may also be mental, emotional, or chemical, causing responses such as distress, irritability, anger, and sadness.

Stress can be the result of specific events and factors, or due to chronic strains and daily stressors. For children and adolescents, potential factors that may lead to a stress response can include changes such as puberty, reduced hours of sleep over long periods of time, school demands such as workload, transitions or life events such as divorce and death, relational conflicts with parents or peers, self-perceptions, and appearance (Bjorling & Singh, 2017; Levine & Munsch, 2017; McNamara, 2000). In school settings, social stress can also occur when students mature at different rates, especially during a time when peer-to-peer relationships become more important (Sontag et al., 2008). Adolescents may also experience stress as they navigate their newly developing interest in romantic relationships (Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2010).

How girls manage stress in the moment is not necessarily a conscious or controlled process. Each individual manages the stressful circumstances that they are exposed to in their own unique way, and this is influenced by a number of factors. They must make a decision about what is at stake and then consider their viable options for coping with the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Their choice of coping resources and the process they select are, in turn, shaped by their personal (and demographic) factors; their social, cultural and environmental context; the nature of the stressor; and their appraisal of the situation (Moos & Schaefer, 1993).

Stress can be positive, inviting girls to adapt and solve problems, or negative, overwhelming their capacity to cope. Healthy, positive forms of stress are constructive, acute and capacity-building and enable us to take on new challenges, thereby building resilience and adaptability (Damour, 2019; McGonigal, 2015). Unhealthy stress "exceeds what a person can absorb or benefit from" (Damour, 2019, p. 4). In the latter scenario, girls do not have the resources available to them to manage the situation and this impacts their physical and mental well-being. Unhealthy forms of stress occur when it is chronic, marked by daily feelings of helplessness or of being overwhelmed. Toxic stress, such as neglect, abuse, and severe hardship, can have long-term effects. Even though both researchers and influential organizations, such as the American Psychological Association, recognize that stress can also be a positive force, conversations around stress today often conceptualize it as predominantly negative, with popular literature and research focusing on pathology.

Each individual girl's assessment of the stressor is the key to their response, and is determined by the confluence of their culture, religion or spiritual beliefs, and broader worldview (Tweed & Conway, 2006). For example, one of the biggest factors in determining an individual's response to stress is mindset, and whether they perceive stress as harmful or helpful. Similarly, a girl's ability to recognize when they are experiencing a stress response and having the skills to reframe a situation, adapt, or seek help also play a role (Kutcher & Wei, 2016). One girl may perceive a situation as alarming; another may have a response that sends signals of excitement and the desire to embrace the challenge (Suldo et al., 2008). According to leading expert Dr. Kelly McGonigal, a health psychologist from Stanford University, "Your response won't just help you get out of a burning building, it will also help you engage with challenges, connect with social support, and learn from experience" (2015, p. 47).

Stress and Culture

In a diverse, boarding environment such as Branksome Hall, it is important to recognize the cultural impact of stress. School constitutes a large portion of children's lives, and a growing body of research on stress continues to be situated in educational settings. It is necessary, however, to keep in mind the limitations of such research, because while school plays a dominant role in a child's life, other socio-cultural institutions and structures also influence their development, such as their family and their wider social milieu. Furthermore, many studies have tended to focus on countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Sweden.

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This is important, because other parts of the world may have different conceptions and understandings of stress. For instance, researchers have highlighted the differences in the stress experience and the related appraisal and coping strategies between individualistic and collectivist cultures (Hobfoll, 1998; Chun, Moos & Kronkite, 2006; Tweed & Conway, 2006). The type of events that cause stress, whether or not a girl perceives a potential stressor as a challenge or a threat, and the coping goals and strategies that they use will vary in part depending on whether they come from an individualistic or a collectivist culture. Individualistic cultures tend to encourage a focus on the needs of the self, asserting autonomy and independence, maximizing gain, and attempting to control the external environment in response to a distressing situation. By contrast, collectivist cultures emphasize a focus on the needs of others, reinforcing relatedness and interdependence, minimizing loss, and attempting to control the inner self (Chun, Moos & Cronkite, 2006). Culture also determines socially acceptable ways of experiencing and displaying health and well-being (e.g., somatic symptoms).

It follows naturally that stress may arise when an individual from one cultural context comes into contact with another and experiences changes and events in their lives that challenge their cultural perceptions about life; this form of stress is called acculturative stress and is often experienced by groups such as new immigrants or international students (Berry, 2006). Acculturative stress and its frequent companion, homesickness, may lead to a decline in social functioning and increased psychological distress, but research on high-school student-immigrants finds that acculturative stress may be buffered through personal psychological resources and social support—although discrimination may aggravate it (Tartakovsky, 2007). For adults who work with students, it is important to recognize that the cultural lens of stress is often an overlooked but essential piece to supporting all students, their friends and, especially, girls in boarding school environments.

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The Junior, Middle, and Senior School Years

In recent years, researchers have made a particular effort to bring young people's voices to the forefront and focus on their understandings and experiences of stress. This section discusses how child and adolescent development intersect with experiences of stress. While scholarly research has tended to focus on stress during the adolescent years, science points to the ways stress can impact a child's development from a very early age.

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Providing stable, engaging, and nurturing environments helps support children in learning to cope with adversity. The goal is not to prevent or shield children from any and all stress, because we must keep in mind that "positive" stress, and the subsequent and temporary physiological responses (e.g., a quickened heart rate and mildly elevated hormone levels) are a normal and healthy part of development (Harvard Centre on the Developing Child, 2011). Learning from experience is also important because something that is stressful the first time can get easier as the child learns to develop coping skills and support networks. The goal is to reverse or prevent the damaging effects of stress, which can lead to developmental delays and health issues in the future.

Some ways in which stress can manifest itself in the junior years can include psychosomatic responses such as stomach-aches and headaches, social conflicts or aggression, or even regressive behaviours such as thumb-sucking or emotional meltdowns.

Stress Responses in the Junior Years
(Positive and Negative Responses)

- Distraction from schoolwork
- Focus on tasks and ability to prioritize
- Increase in energy (talkativeness, need for physical activity)
- Learning from experience
- Missing home/separation from parents
- Psychosomatic complaints (stomachaches or headaches)
- Regressive behaviour (thumb-sucking, meltdowns)
- Self-soothing (deep breathing, selecting time apart to read, down time)
- Social conflicts/aggression
- Tiredness

While not as heavily researched as the adolescent phase, the middle childhood years are a particularly vulnerable time for children. During this time, the brain continues to develop and undergoes a particular remodelling phase also known as pruning. Similar to the way we prune the branches of a tree to strengthen it, the brain is pruning synaptic connections so that it becomes more efficient. While this process is taking place, the result is a temporary phase where children may not be as efficient in their thinking (Levine & Munsch, 2017). Given the rigours of school in addition to hormonal shifts marking the beginning of puberty, children may experience heightened levels of stress (Damour, 2019). Some of the signs that a child in middle school may be experiencing stress include issues with peers, visiting the health centre more often, and sleep disruption.

Stress Responses in the Middle Years
(Positive and Negative Responses)

- Creative problem solving
- Difficulty falling/staying asleep
- Emotional meltdowns at home
- Exercise
- Frequent health centre visits
- Frequent texts/calls to parents throughout the school day
- Peer conflict
- Psychosomatic complaints
- School avoidance
- Socializing
- Support seeking
- Venting to friends and caring adults

The teenage brain continues the process of pruning while experiencing other ongoing hormonal and developmental shifts. The result is a period when the part of the brain responsible for impulse control, judgment, and planning is still immature; furthermore, the connections between reasoning and emotions are still developing.

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As such, adolescents may seem to act on their emotions without thinking (Society for Neuroscience, 2007). Therefore, adolescents experiencing the stress response during this period may be particularly prone to emotional outbursts. Research tells us that adolescents experience heightened peer comparisons and academic pressure to perform as they approach the post-secondary university applications stage, which can contribute to experiences of stress (Lyman & Luthar, 2014; Luthar, Barkin, & Crossman, 2013). Other signs of stress in senior school students include disrupted sleep and withdrawal from non-academic activities.

Stress Responses in the Senior School Years
(Positive and Negative Responses)

- Avoidance strategies - missed days, parent excusal, missed assignments, extension requests, testing shifts
- Breathing techniques
- Creative problem solving
- Distraction/disengagement from academics
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Frequent health centre visits
- Growth mindset
- Humour
- Rumination
- Self-advocacy
- Sleep
- Sleep disruption
- Withdrawal from non-academic activities

The Gendered Experience of Stress

A growing area of literature focuses on adolescent girls and stress. These articles and studies include understanding them and suggesting ways to support them, based on a developmental perspective (Damour, 2019), as well as research that is increasingly concerned with their specific experiences (Bjorling & Singh 2017; Einberg et al., 2015; Haraldsson et al., 2011; Spencer, Walsh, Liang, Desilva Mousseau, & Lund, 2018). This focus on girls stems from research that shows that in high-income countries including Canada, boys appear to be experiencing either unchanged or lower levels of psychological symptoms related to stress, whereas girls are experiencing an increase in these symptoms (Gariepy & Elgar, 2016; Freeman et al., 2011; Schraml, Perski, Grossi, & Simonsson-Sarnecki, 2011).

> "During childhood and adolescence, friendships take on an almost-as-important-as-oxygen role."

While the causes of these trends are not fully understood, some evidence suggests that girls are more affected by the rise in academic pressure than boys (Moksnes, Eilertsen, & Lazarewicz, 2016). Research also demonstrates that girls, as opposed to boys, may have higher expectations of themselves, including about performance at school (Låftman, Almquist, & Osberg, 2013). They may also be contributing to each other's increased stress levels by talking about how stressed they are (Låftman et al., 2013; Schraml et al., 2011). In co-educational settings, high-achieving girls may face further pressure to strike a balance between being smart and being socially accepted: research suggests that the latter can hinge significantly on physical attractiveness for girls but not for boys (Skelton et al., 2010). Academically-strong girls who attend co-educational schools and who are not considered popular can subsequently experience additional struggles in navigating relationships with their peers and even their teachers (Skelton et al., 2010).

Relationships matter to girls. Educator and psychologist, Dr. JoAnn Deak found that during childhood and adolescence, friendships take on an almost-as-important-as-oxygen role (Deak & Adams, 2010), due in part to the presence of oxytocin, known as the "tend and befriend" hormone (Taylor et al., 2000). Common sources of stress for girls include conflicts with family members and peer groups, concern with how others view them, being compared with classmates, and concern over grades and homework (Bjorling & Singh, 2017; Einberg, Lidell, & Clausson, 2015; Spencer et al., 2018). Girls may also feel stressed about meeting expectations, whether self-imposed or imposed by their parents or teachers, and by attempting to balance both (Bjorling & Singh, 2017; Laftman et al., 2013; Spencer et al., 2018).

Further research indicates that girls may experience stress when they consider all aspects of their lives as having equal importance and face a subsequent lack of ability to set boundaries and properly plan their time (Haraldsson et al., 2011; Spencer et al., 2018). In school environments where community and co-operation are encouraged, conversations with girls suggest that they may be taking their peer competition "underground" (Spencer et al., 2018). Researchers note that adolescent girls do not generally recognize stress as a healthy experience nor do they appear to feel empowered or to possess the tools to proactively work through stress or stressful situations (Bjorling & Singh, 2017).

Stress in High-Achieving Environments

Researchers find that students in high-achieving environments that offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) or Advanced Placement (AP) courses report greater stress. This is due to multiple factors, the largest being the adolescent response to the academic rigour of these programs (Suldo, Shaunessy-Dedrick, Ferron, & Dedrick, 2018) and the normalized nature of stress in these programs

(Feld & Shusterman, 2009; Pope, Brown, & Miles, 2015). Students' experiences of stress are then compounded by the perceived pressure to perform well in school (Låftman, Almquist, & Osberg, 2013); students' beliefs in adult expectations to master content rather than value the process of learning (Pope & Simon, 2005; O'Flynn & Peterson, 2007); their abilities to cope with the academic demands of their courses (Feld & Shusterman, 2015); and the unavailability of supports to help them learn the skills needed to tackle their increased workload. Furthermore, the academic demands of these environments ask students to develop strong executive-functioning skills at a young age when their brains may not be developed enough to handle such tasks.

High-achieving youth who are also affluent are particularly at-risk of experiencing chronic stress. According to counselling psychologist Noelle Leonard and her colleagues (2015), "Indeed, chronic stress has been cited as the new 'cultural currency' in highly competitive private schools, where students often equate their schools' level of rigor with the amount of stress experienced by its students" (p.2). Girls, regardless of their level of affluence, are having more sleep problems and experiencing nervous feelings, whereas affluent boys are experiencing less depression or irritable behaviour (Gariepy & Elgar, 2016). For girls, these experiences can be exacerbated by the pressures to outperform peers, the misalignment between the drive for academics and their own interests, and a preoccupation with grades. They may also be affected by a sense of loneliness in trying to navigate experiences of competition or feelings of being overwhelmed (Leonard, 2015; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Pope & Simon, 2005; Spencer et al., 2018).

Studies focusing on affluent female adolescents reveal that the girls' often-narrow constructions of success as involving financial gain and professional status can lead to a premium placed on outperforming others. Researchers suggest that "having a sense of purpose that extends beyond individual achievement may help adolescent girls from high-achieving backgrounds better manage academic and social stressors" (Spencer et al., 2018, p. 27).

How Caring Adults Support Well-being

At Branksome Hall, we focus on school-wide initiatives to engage in informed mental health promotion, are strategic in promoting healthy habits, and focus on using evidence-based strategies in the classroom and across the school community to promote well-being. Dr. Patrick Carney's (2014) Well-Being Framework, adopted by Branksome Hall in 2018, clearly defines well-being and enables us to engage in health promotion in a cohesive and deliberate school-wide manner.

When it comes to stress and worry, we believe that all people, even very young people, have the skills, knowledge, and experience to manage, adapt, solve problems and cope with the day-to-day stressors inherent in life. Our school-wide, strengths-based approach employs social-emotional learning as the vehicle to enhance skill development, promoting a sense of efficacy and resilience.

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Even though the way stress presents itself may look different at each age and stage of a youth's development, there are some universal ways that adults can support the healthy development of girls and young women. When helping girls to develop their skills, we might consider how to adjust language, regulate length of practice sessions and their frequency, and find ways to incorporate playfulness into our conversations. Role-play is another excellent way, especially for younger girls, to develop and practise coping skills. We offer some useful tips for supporting them on the next page.

Branksome Hall's Resilience Building Strategies

NORMALIZE STRESS The stress response is an invitation to practise adaptability, problem-solving and coping skills.	**ACTIVELY LISTEN** With your full attention, empathize, validate their experience by paraphrasing what you see and hear them saying, ask how you can be helpful.	**EMOTIONAL LITERACY** Support the development of a rich vocabulary that allows them to label feelings when they come up.
SELF-SOOTHING STRATEGIES Brainstorm a few healthy self-soothing activities that will allow them to cope with heightened emotions.	**COMMUNICATE CONFIDENCE** Let them know that you know they have the skill and ability to navigate any challenges that come their way.	**ROLE MODEL** Girls are keenly attuned to the language and behaviour of others. What words do you use to describe your experience of stress? What supports you in coping?
SUPPORT SEEKING AS A SKILL Learning to ask for help when needed from a parent, sibling, peer or trusted adult is a useful skill.	**TRIAL AND ERROR** Experimenting and failing are essential for learning what helps them to cope and bounce back.	**PURPOSE AND MEANING** Encourage age-appropriate agency and voice when selecting, participating in and ending activities.

Conclusion

Encountering stress is part of the human experience. This brief represents an entry into a needed conversation around rethinking stress in all-girls schools. While stress is often perceived as negative, it can have positive outcomes when girls learn and practise the skills to adapt to and cope with stressors. Girls experience stress differently than boys, and factors such as culture and educational settings can contribute to how they manage it. The resources listed also offer information and tools to support an ongoing dialogue on reframing stress for youth. Caring adults can make a significant difference in supporting the well-being of girls and young women by helping them to develop healthy habits, coping skills, a sense of efficacy and resilience.

Seeking Help? Where Can I Turn?

It can be hard to tell if additional support is needed. However, assistance is always available, whether as a quick conversation or through intensive help.

At times, stress can seem to take over. It can become chronically overwhelming, interfere with day-to-day activities or feel just plain challenging. When stress is chronic or related to trauma (e.g., an event), this is when reaching out for more formal supports is likely useful. The most effective evidence-based strategies or treatments include cognitive-behavioural therapies, including exposure—in a safe setting—to objects or events that create feelings of stress or anxiety. The idea of these therapies is to change and shape some of the cognitive patterns that create those feelings of chronic stress and anxiety, in order to help diminish their power.

Our school has social workers, boarding advisors, a school nurse, and guidance counsellors who can help with the development of these skills and can also make referrals to community mental health professionals who can assist, as needed.

Resources for Adults and Youth

ONLINE

Anxiety Canada: https://anxietycanada.com/
Resources and tools to help manage anxiety

Be there: https://bethere.org/Be-There-Basics
Learn how to recognize when someone is struggling with mental health issues

Kids Help Phone: https://kidshelpphone.ca/topic/emotional-well-being/stress/

Mind Your Mind (Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services):
https://mindyourmind.ca/tools
https://mindyourmind.ca/expression/stress-vs-anxiety

Psychology Foundation of Canada (PFC):
https://psychologyfoundation.org/Public/Parents/Children--4-13-/Content/Parents/Children__4-13_/Kids-Have-Stress-Too-.aspx?hkey=f1e707c1-6a0e-4429-9b24-8c7819ebd4e2

(video series) https://psychologyfoundation.org/PublicOLD/Parents/New_Parenting_tips_-_6_part_video_series/Public/New_Parenting_Tips.aspx?hkey=10df623e-b721-4bf6-8b5f-db4945b62001

Your Therapy Source: 26 Calming Strategies for the Classroom:
https://www.yourtherapysource.com/blog1/2016/09/10/26-calming-strategies-classroom/

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****Chapter 3: Building the staircase of the mind**

Simmons, R. (2018). *Enough as she is: How to help girls move beyond impossible standards of success to live healthy, happy, and fulfilling Lives.* New York, NY: Harper Collins.

****Chapter 7: The cult of effortless perfection and the rise of stress Olympics**

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