Helping Parents to Help Daughters Rediscover Their Lost Voices

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We have a problem in society today; despite increasing equality and opportunity for women in all arenas, young girls between the ages of 8 and 16 are losing their self-esteem, self-confidence and self-worth. This pattern in the psychological development of girls has been documented by many reliable sources. A survey by the American Association of University Women (AAUW), entitled *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*, confirmed that: 1) a girl's passage into adolescence is marked by a shattering loss of self-esteem; 2) this loss is particularly evident in the fields of math and science; 3) self-esteem in the area of competence drops much further for girls than for boys and apparently never catches up; 4) a girl's passage is also marked by an increasing negative attitude toward her body.[1]

More recent studies have confirmed the AAUW's findings. In 1994, Peggy Ornstein wrote *Schoolgirls*, a description of how eighth-grade girls can plunge into a tailspin of self-doubt, body hatred, indecisiveness and a lack of assertiveness. In *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls*, Myra and David Sadker revealed that girls are systematically denied opportunities in areas where boys are encouraged to excel. They are taught to sit quietly, defer to boys, avoid math and science, value neatness over innovation, and value appearance over intelligence. Boys are complimented more for their academic acumen, girls for their appearance, social skills and docility.[5]

These findings echo those of the groundbreaking study we are most familiar with, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development*. In this seminal work, Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown found that up until the "edge of adolescence," ages 11, 12 or 13, young girls are incredibly perceptive, naturally assertive, unafraid of conflict, and willing to say exactly what is on their minds. They "know" everything. As they enter puberty, however, they begin to "not know," or more specifically, to abdicate, adapt, conform…resorting frequently to "you know"…"you know what I mean." And finally, by mid-adolescence they "don't know." According to Gilligan and Brown, the "tyranny of the nice and kind" begins to rule; young girls sacrifice truth on the altar of niceness. In sacrificing truth, they give up authenticity; in short, they lose their voice.[2]

Mary Pipher, author of *Reviving Ophelia*, also highlights the conflict between the "true" or "authentic" self and the false, socially-defined self who asks, "What should I do to please others?" She sees eating disorders as reactions to a look-obsessed, media-saturated, "girl-poisoning" culture.[4] After listening to hundreds of girls tell their stories, all of these authors concluded that girls today are being cheated, shortchanged, bullied and harassed.

The bullying and harassment come at a time when adolescent girls are exquisitely sensitive to teasing, shunning, ridicule and rejection by their peers. Yet, it is precisely at this time, as they pull away from their parents and turn to their peers for advice and reassurance that they are most likely to be rejected. Ironically, during this cruel and insensitive stage, peers are probably the least equipped to help, whereas parents are perhaps the most equipped.

As we shudder at these facts and findings, more and more girls are beginning to diet. When they look inward they find imperfection, confusion, unpredictability and chaos; so they look outward hoping to find perfection, certainty, predictability, and control. Even after dieting, weight loss, and the development of an eating disorder, they continue to experience anxiety, self-doubt, and depression. They feel helpless, powerless…and voiceless.

As therapists, we have a job to do: we have to help our patients rediscover, reclaim, and re-own their lost voice. We have to help them understand that there are healthier ways to express themselves than through the voices of anorexia and bulimia, that there are more important things in life to calculate than calories and fat grams, and that there are more interesting questions to ponder than, "How much do I weigh today?" But we can't do it alone, no matter what level of care our patient is receiving. We need the support of her parents when she is an inpatient, and we need that support even more when she is an outpatient, and in treatment only one or two hours a week. What exactly is it that we need from parents? We need their help in facilitating their daughter's psychological journey toward rediscovering her lost voice, the voice that has been swallowed up and replaced by the eating disorder.

I encourage parents to replicate at home the work I do with their daughters in my office. I invite them in for family sessions, mother-daughter sessions, father-daughter sessions, whatever we need to do to ensure the work gets done. I teach, I demonstrate, we role-play, they do homework and report back to me – and their daughters report back as well. They get to grade mom

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and dad on how well they are doing with their homework. Not surprisingly, I often encounter fear, anger, denial and/or defensiveness on the part of parents. But once we get past these obstacles, most parents are thrilled with this approach because it gives them an opportunity to move beyond guilt and shame, to truly become a part of the recovery process.

What I recommend first and foremost is that parents listen. I'll say, "Tune into your daughter's stories of injustice and unfairness…she's probably accurate in her perceptions. Help her address the system, school, family members, or her friends, and fight for her right to be recognized and heard." I teach them how to encourage the expression of real thoughts and feelings, and how to ask all there is to ask about thoughts and feelings. "When your daughter says, 'You know what I mean, whatever, I don't know,' say, 'No, I don't know, tell me; what really is whatever; what do you mean you don't know?…of course, you know…who knows better about you than you?…and if you don't know now, you will know; what does your heart/head/stomach/intuition tell you?; if you could pretend to know, what would you know?; if you don't know, take a guess.'"

I insist that parents help their daughters rediscover a real sense of who they are and help them focus on their own thoughts, opinions, views, ideas, desires, preferences, and choices. "Both of you are working on reconnecting your daughter to her true self, the 8-year-old who 'knows everything,' and on disconnecting from her 'false self,' the self that is busy trying to please others and 'not make waves.'" I want parents to concentrate on their daughter's strengths and competencies. I want them to talk to her about her talents, aspirations and dreams, and to dream with her, with an "anything is possible" attitude. I want them to encourage independent and informed decision-making and to be supportive of her decisions: "Talk about everything with her – sex, drugs, relationships, sexual harassment, teasing, spirituality – and talk about what she wants to do about it all." Parents need to encourage her to take strong stands for what she believes in and strong stands against what she does not; to educate her about the media she consumes; to help her become a critical consumer; and to join with her in actively challenging the media, writing letters to editors, refusing to read fashion magazines, and becoming more aware of the lies, the promises and the impossible standards.

I demonstrate and ask parents to pay attention to and support their daughter's individuality by asking, "What is it that makes your daughter unique, different from everybody else?" I want them to help their daughters avoid the conventionalizing forces of adolescence by acknowledging, on the one hand, the understandable desire to conform, the need for approval, and the wish to please, while, on the other hand, the price one pays for conformity, particularly in the sacrifice of the self. I encourage parents to become interested and versed in their daughter's music, reading, writing and poetry. When it seems appropriate, I'll say, "If your daughter keeps a journal, ask her if she'd be willing to share; if she doesn't, ask her if she would like to start one, and shop together for a beautifully bound book."

I teach parents to focus on attainable goals, goals that are within their daughter's reach, so that she can begin to feel successful and worthwhile. So, I'll say, "Tell her stories, perhaps personal ones, about achievement and overcoming obstacles. To really help your daughter accomplish a feeling of 'worthwhileness,' and to combat society's overemphasis on looks and appearance, suggest volunteer work." The ability to do something meaningful for others can work wonders on an adolescent's crumbling self-esteem.

I model authenticity, assertiveness and the self-in-relation. We role-play and I invite them to copy me. I tell them, "You have to be the very person you are encouraging her to become… genuine, confident, caring, assertive, strong, opinionated, knowing, and decisive. If your relationship is to be a truly empathic and responsive one, your daughter must come to trust and respect you. Only then will she truly have a model of herself-in-relation, as well as a relationship which can serve as a cornerstone for future relationships in her life."

Finally, I constantly remind parents about how much their daughters need them, despite the 'closed bedroom door.' I suggest that they respect her privacy and create a closed-door policy by asking, "Would you like us to knock when your bedroom door is closed?" The answer is almost always "yes," a "yes" that not only says, "I'd like you to knock," but also, "You are welcome to enter." I encourage humor in any way I can. We laugh a lot during family therapy sessions; hopefully, the laughter becomes contagious and they take it home with them. One of my patients admitted that she closes the bedroom door on purpose, to create intrigue, so that her parents will become curious and want to know what's going on. So our joke became, "Whenever you want to have a meaningful conversation with one of your parents, be sure to close the bedroom door."

References:

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3. Orenstein, Peggy. (1994). *SchoolGirls.* New York: Doubleday Books.

4. Pipher, Mary. (1994). *Reviving Ophelia.* New York: Ballantine Books.

5. Sadker, David & Sadker, Myra. (1994). *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

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