

Learning about Girl World

Remember that scene in Mean Girls when the main character walks into the high school cafeteria and imagines a jungle filled with wild beasts? Well, welcome to Girl World in the digital age, where life is just as chaotic and our self-image is based on likes, views, and shares on Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat.

REMEMBER WHEN SIMONE BILES dropped out of four competitions at the Tokyo Olympics in the summer of 2021? She needed to focus on herself and her mental health as she struggled with the “twisties”—what she calls it when when your mind and body feel disconnected. Later in the games she won the bronze medal in balance beam, stating in an interview that it was both the toughest and most rewarding medal she had ever received. Simone Biles went on to become the most decorated gymnast of all time.

Of course, most young girls aren’t facing actual Olympic challenges, but their struggles might feel that way to them. Girls live in a world so different from when we were kids that most of the adults in their lives can’t fathom what it’s like—and that’s a big part of why girls are having a hard time. At ATFG, we do get it, and I’m here to share the codes. Because the more you understand what your daughter is facing, the more you can connect with and help her. So we’re going to start with a deep dive into what I call Girl World, where things are ever-changing and it’s easy to get the twisties at any moment.

I’ll say right now that this chapter might not feel like the easiest read for a couple of reasons. The first? I’m going to share a lot of facts and figures I’ve collected from talking to, observing, and directly asking questions of moms and daughters during my twelve years in private practice. They’re also from peer-reviewed articles, agencies like the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and

foundations like the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Suicide Prevention Resource Center. And honestly, some of this might feel a little boring. Hang in there. Because eight out of ten times, my clients have made some sort of bid to be seen by their mom, and because that mom doesn't understand Girl World, their responses miss the mark. Girls want moms to understand them (instead of trying to fix everything) and care more about how they feel than their grades at school. Understanding as much as you can about what your daughter's world is like and all she's going through will help you connect with her more and ultimately help her feel better in her life.

The other reason this chapter might feel tough to read? What you learn might bring up twisties of your own. I get it, and it's okay to take a beat. A lot of this feels overwhelming to me, too. Just keep in mind that this is an overview of all the things girls could face these days, not everyone's story. You know your daughter best, and she may not struggle with all of these things. So as they say in *The Walking Dead*, take what you need and leave the rest. (Thankfully, we're not dealing with a zombie apocalypse here.) And remember this book has your back. After we talk about what's true and what's hard, we'll talk about what you can do to make things feel easier in your relationship with your amazing daughter.

Girls Are Facing a Mental Health Crisis

Take a deep breath as we dive into this one. We're going to get serious about the mental health struggles girls are facing today. This stuff is not easy to hear, but remember, knowing what's going on will help you understand the world your daughter lives in. If those twisties start coming up, ask for help in whatever way feels supportive for you. You don't have to do this alone.

A lot of what I'm going to share is about teen girls. This is because way more studies have been done on teens than tweens, and because this is where the mental health crisis has been showing up the most strongly for a while now. This information is relevant because your daughter is heading straight toward her teen years, and I want you to know what's possible—but also what her friends and the girls she sees online may be dealing with.

The most recent findings from ROX (Ruling Our eXperiences), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit whose mission is “to create generations of confident girls who are in control of their own relationships, experiences, decisions and futures,” indicate a growing concern in 2023 regarding tween girls. The Girls' Index developed by ROX is a large-scale national survey of girls from fifth through twelfth grade who share their thoughts, experiences, and perceptions on major issues affecting their lives. The areas the report covers are confidence, leadership, school, and support. According to the latest report, there has been a significant increase in feelings of sadness and depression among fifth grade girls, tripling from 2017 to 2023. Moreover, extreme levels of sadness and depression have tripled for fifth and sixth graders and doubled for seventh and eighth graders.

Along with the recent ROX report, we've seen an increase in mental health issues in tweens and younger children as well. In the UK, STEER Education's Young People's Mental Health report showed that eleven-year-old girls were 30 percent more likely to have poor mental health than their male counterparts. And the National Health Service, again in the UK, says that the number of children between ages five and sixteen likely to have a mental health disorder increased from one in nine to one in six between 2017 and July 2020.

This isn't just happening overseas. As of the time I'm writing this book, calls to our practice about elementary school-age

issues have increased. We are seeing mental health struggles in younger and younger girls. Before we keep going into the research, remember: you're in the right place to start supporting your daughter through what she's facing now and what she'll face in her teen years. I've got your back.

According to research done by the Pew Research Center in 2019, "Anxiety and depression are on the rise among America's youth and, whether they personally suffer from these conditions or not, seven-in-ten teens today see them as major problems among their peers. Concern about mental health cuts across gender, racial and socio-economic lines, with roughly equal shares of teens across demographic groups saying it is a significant issue in their community."

Over the last twelve years in private practice, I've seen what feels like a 100 percent increase in anxiety on my pink couch. While that might sound dramatic, I don't think it is. I know girls and young women who could go into full-on panic attacks from overthinking how their friends will react to them sharing the latest TikTok in a group chat. They are waiting for the hearts and thumbs-ups to determine how the rest of their day will go. Dr. Ron Steingard of the Child Mind Institute, based in New York, says, "Anxiety and depression occur in both genders, but by teenage years, girls are much more at risk than boys... By mid-adolescence girls are more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with mood disorders as boys."

Most of the time, caregivers who call our offices want to discuss how anxiety is affecting their daughters, who are struggling to sleep, eat, or even focus on schoolwork. And often, where there's anxiety, depression and shame are waiting backstage for their moment to shine. I tell clients they're like BFFs, and you never know which one will show up to ruin your good time.

There are many reasons girls are experiencing so much anxiety. We'll talk about a lot of them in this chapter. But I also need to say that I think it would be impossible to separate mental health from the effects of the global pandemic. I know I'm not the only professional with concerns about the impact that COVID-19 has had on our children's and teens' mental health in particular. I'm guessing the effects of the pandemic will be felt for years. One study of 59,000 Icelandic teens, completed between 2016 and 2020, found that COVID-19 had a huge impact on the mental health of all teens, but especially on teen girls.

A report from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that analyzed emergency department data from certain weeks in 2020 and 2021 found that trips for suspected suicide attempts among adolescents, especially girls aged twelve to seventeen, began to increase in May 2020. From February to March 2021, the visits among girls rose 50.6 percent compared with 2019. For boys, the increase was 3.7 percent. "The findings from this study suggest more severe distress among young females than has been identified in previous reports during the pandemic, reinforcing the need for increased attention to, and prevention for, this population," the authors wrote.

But it's not just about the pandemic, and it's not just about anxiety and depression. My mom and I started working on this book in 2017, and in just the last few years, things have changed so drastically that what you're reading is a very different book from the one we started. Around that time, I wrote a brief blog post called "Are We on the Verge of a Mental Health Crisis among Girls?" As I read it now, I can tell I was freaking out a bit (although I specifically say in the blog not to freak out) about the numbers of new patients both our Austin and Houston offices were receiving at the time. Here are some of the statistics I found in 2017 that motivated me to start on this book:

- The percentage of younger children and adolescents hospitalized for suicidal thoughts or actions in the United States doubled over the last decade, with the largest increase among girls aged fourteen to seventeen. Additionally, fall seems to be the time of year when mental health crises come to a head.
- A UK study revealed that the number of hospital admissions for girls aged seventeen and younger had increased over the last decade by 68 percent.
- The UK also surveyed 30,000 students aged fourteen to fifteen and found that one in three girls suffers from anxiety and depression. Out of the girls surveyed, 37 percent had three or more signs of psychological distress, compared to 15 percent of boys.

Unfortunately, things have not improved in the ensuing years, especially because we've been through a global pandemic. The CDC questioned 7,705 teenagers across the nation in the first six months of 2021, during their first full school year amidst the pandemic, for the Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey. Among the key findings in the survey of high school students are these:

- 37 percent said they had poor mental health during the pandemic.
- 44 percent said they felt "persistently" sad or hopeless.
- 55 percent said an adult in their home was emotionally abusive.
- 11 percent said an adult in the home was physically abusive.
- 20 percent said they considered suicide.

- Lesbian, gay, and bisexual teens reported higher levels of poor mental health.

Although this hasn't been mentioned yet in the studies I've shared, we can't ignore disordered eating as a big part of the mental health crisis girls are navigating. In the first year of the pandemic, the University of Michigan Medical School saw a sharp increase in hospital admissions for adolescents with eating disorders, and data from other hospitals and the National Eating Disorders Association helpline showed similar findings.

At the start of the pandemic, everything felt so uncertain, and girls were home all the time. They spent a lot of time on social media, which led to an increased focus on their appearance and their bodies. On top of all the anxieties about what the next day would bring, girls in our practice would often lie awake at night overthinking what they'd eaten that day. Because everyone was experiencing the pandemic at the same time, parents were also having a hard time, which meant girls couldn't always receive the level of support they needed from their families. Again, this is not your fault. The pandemic was extremely difficult for everyone. It's just important to know what was going on for them.

As I blabbered in the intro (let's face it, even I skip those!), my group therapy practice, Austin Therapy for Girls, came to life back in 2012. ATFG (we're on a nickname basis) has now grown into a team of six therapists, and we serve the big state of Texas.

On any given day at ATFG, we interact with approximately forty to fifty clients (ranging in age from five to twenty-five) and numerous caregivers, particularly mothers. The beauty of working as a team of caring helping professionals is that we share tools, stories, and even trends that we are seeing in our populations. And we've noticed that 85 percent of our teens have done some type of self-harm behaviors (cutting, burning,

hair pulling, skin picking, and even harming themselves with a punch or slap) in the past year. But before you start sneaking into your daughter's bedroom late at night to do a body check or having paranoid thoughts about why she's wearing a sweatshirt in the heat of summer, let me give you some hope: the majority of clients stop hurting themselves once they find healthy outlets for their emotions.

Good News in Girl World

Here's some more good news: girls are talking about and seeking mental health services more and more. Compared to other generations, almost 90 percent of Gen Zers and Millennials report having sought information on mental health, according to the 2018 National Council for Mental Wellbeing's Mental Health First Aid survey.

Unfortunately, 50 percent of Gen Zers report worrying about others judging them when they say they sought mental health services. Although we still see a stigma, just search "mental health" on social media apps and you'll find lots of people talking and giving advice about mental illnesses. The good news is that this increased discussion and focus on mental health is lessening the stigma of asking for help during a mental health crisis. The bad news is that what is shared on social media, even by therapists, is not always accurate, and sometimes it makes young girls feel like they must have a mental health diagnosis to fit in.

There are so many wonderful nonprofit agencies helping empower and build girls' confidence, including the Girl Scouts. They did some amazing research in 2020, and in the summary report they said, "Girls feel their mental health is somewhat supported but need more resources and want to address the stigma." Girls also reported feeling 76 percent supported in

their mental health by friends, 70 percent at home, 35 percent at school, and 30 percent in their communities. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, one in five teens struggles in silence, but this research was done pre-pandemic. We don't want girls keeping mental health concerns to themselves, so from that perspective it's great that they're talking to their friends, but this can also lead to more issues, since it means they're not getting effective treatment specifically designed for their unique issues.

I know this section probably felt like a lot to read. Maybe you took care of yourself by skimming, or maybe now it's time to do something to support whatever feelings are coming up. Just remember, you're in the right place. I'm here to help you understand what's going on in Girl World and then, throughout the book, help you build the relationship that will help you support your daughter. I've got your back!

SPRINKLES OF BLISS

Everything girls face these days, the risks and dangers, seems to be heightened. Your daughter knows more than you did as a tween and has a lot more serious things to contend with at an earlier age. I know it can feel like a lot to consider this, but you'll be able to support her (and yourself!) and connect with her better if you know what's really going on.

Girls' Schedules Are Packed

Let's look at a typical weekday for middle school girls. If they ride the bus, they'll need to be at the bus stop about an hour before school starts, so around 7 to 7:30. Even if they don't,

Girl World is **not**
one size fits all ...
although everyone
tries to make
it that way.

they'll still need time to get ready, get out the door, and make it to school. So let's say they wake up around 6:30 to 6:45 to make it to school for an 8 to 8:30 start time. This is a typical day in my city of Austin, but for a larger city, this might be even earlier.

School runs until about 3:30 or 4. If they're lucky, they get forty-five minutes for lunch. They usually take five core classes and two electives, one of which is often a required PE or music class. So basically, they get a say in only one class they take. After school, some will ride the bus home, which can take another hour. Some will have after-school activities. Let's say they get home around 5 to 6 pm. Most of my clients have an hour of homework minimum, and sometimes closer to three if they have a test or a project due.

Once you add in dinner, it's probably almost time for bed, which means their whole day has been spent moving from thing to thing; almost all of their time is dictated by someone or something outside of them. A lot of girls want to be involved in activities like dance, soccer, and volleyball. These are usually the things they look forward to most, and we know doing things we love helps reduce stress. As a choir nerd myself, I love hearing musicals being sung in our offices—I can still remember all the words to the musical *Oklahoma!* and have many fond memories of all the times I felt like I was living my dream of being a star on Broadway. But of course, these kinds of activities take time, and practice often happens on the weekends—which means more coming and going.

This is where I discuss life back in the 80s. During the week, I'd walk myself home from Hill Country Middle School, where I learned words like "totally" and to say "like" before everything. I'd make myself a snack, watch some TV, play with the neighbors, and then do maybe thirty minutes of homework before family dinner. Ahh, the good old days—and yes, I realize I am sounding older and older as I jot this down.

Some of my best memories are of Saturday mornings. I'm an animal lover to the max, and when we lived in Corpus Christi, two black cats adopted us (I always say the animals in my life rescue me, not the other way around). The cats ended up pregnant at the same time, so my sister and I would wake up on Saturday mornings, go get the kittens, and hang out in our sleeping bags watching cartoons and gorging on Cap'n Crunch (until the roofs of our mouths were sore). Saturdays were our sacred time to laugh and zone out and snuggle with our animals. We had a lot of free time.

Girls these days are doing their best to survive the week. They may have a free day on Saturday before the "Sunday scar-ies" kick in, but if they have weekend activities, they may not even get that. Often we get calls from parents who are somewhat frantic to get their daughters in to meet with a therapist. After our admin or my hubby gets all the details of what's going on, which usually takes about twenty to thirty minutes, they start looking for a time on the calendar. This is when the parent often says something like, "Oh, we can only come from 4 to 6 on Tuesdays." Over and over, we hear from parents who are desperate for mental health services but do not want to disrupt their daughter's weekly schedule.

So with all they have going on, when my clients say they don't have time to sleep or exercise, I believe them. But these physical components really make a difference, and this is where I go back to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Basically, trying to improve your mental health before meeting your basic needs is a classic cart-before-the-horse moment. What does it mean to be so busy—and what do you really need to do for your mental health?

Psych 101

This part might start to feel like Psych 101, but bear with me. This stuff is interesting to me, but even if it's not to you, it's important to know. In a 1943 paper called "A Theory of Human Motivation," Abraham Maslow shared what we know today as the Hierarchy of Needs. He took some inspo from his teen years when he felt, let's say, less than. He wanted to reach the top of the pyramid, a place he called self-actualization—the highest form of human potential, where the person is in harmony with themselves, others, and the world around them. Maslow said that if you don't have your basic psychological needs met—like rest, nutrition, and water—then you can't expect to even get to the next level of the pyramid.

Worth noting here is that another famous psychologist, Carl Rogers, believed that self-actualization could only be reached through unconditional positive regard. If you're looking for the differences between these two theories of human development, one is focused only on the human themselves and the other is focused on their environment. Now I might be saying this as a former people pleaser, but they were both right. Of course, I believe it's more of a circular process, but remember the last time you didn't sleep, or slept very poorly? What happened emotionally? I do hope we can all agree that being a successful adult, teen, and tween is an inside job.

I see a huge connection between these basic needs and mental health on my pink couch. Our practice tends to slow down in the months of June and July because girls are out of school. Their lives are less scheduled and they're able to relax and sleep more, eat on a more regular basis, and move their bodies, which results in overall healthier and happier girls.

I love to nerd out on research, so I'm going to share one of my favorite studies. Researchers at Rutgers had college students meditate for thirty minutes and then silently walk to the

gym to do thirty minutes of aerobic exercise. After just eight weeks of doing this twice a week, the symptoms of depression were reduced by 40 percent. I repeat: 40 percent! I like to add a little flavor when I share research, so at this point I usually joke that if they had therapy, I bet they'd be at 90 percent! Especially with an awesome therapist who happens to have a therapy dog named Bagel.

Of course, I know most people feel like they can't meditate for very long without starting to think about what questions will be on the next history test or all the things on their to-do list. But meditation is a practice, not a destination, and even sitting in silence and focusing on your breathing for a few minutes could help bring about changes in mental health over time. And really, the point of sharing this study is to show how important the things we do with our physical bodies are for mental health. In session, we usually go on to talk about what changes my client could make in real life. While I'm all for binge-watching a favorite show now and then (big *Stranger Things* fan here), some of that time might be better spent doing something to support the physical body.

Another study was done on a group of adults who, when given psychological testing and surveys, did not meet the criteria for any DSM diagnosis and had no history or current diagnosis of mental illness. After these adults were kept awake for forty-eight hours, almost 85 percent met the criteria for schizophrenia. Imagine what a lack of sleep does to our tweens, whose brains are not yet fully developed.

Indeed, sleep is an especially important factor for my clients. We know from many studies that girls, especially teens, are more affected by a lack of sleep than boys of the same age. Study results show that teenage girls reported more difficulties than boys in staying awake during class in both the morning and during homework hours. Teenage girls also more often

reported feeling too tired to do activities with their friends, missing school because of being so tired, feeling less motivated in school because of their poor sleep, and taking naps on the weekends. However, there was no gender difference when it came to using coffee or energy drinks to compensate for daytime sleepiness or falling asleep in class. “These results suggest that teenage girls may be more vulnerable than teenage boys when it comes to the negative impacts of adolescence’s sleep changes,” said the study’s author.

You probably already know how tight your daughter’s schedule is, and you’re probably dealing with something similar yourself. You may not be able to do anything about it right now—I get that. But just understanding what’s going on for her and why it might be hard can help you start to support her in new ways. You’re doing great!

Speaking of new ways to support your daughter, as you go through the book, you’ll notice three therapeutic theories come up again and again. These are tools we use in therapy and that I use in my own life as well. So I want to introduce you—break the ice a little—so you know what I’m talking about when I bring them up. Note that when I share how to use these tools, I’ve modified them for tweens, so just know that these tools can grow with you as your daughter gets older.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (or CBT) is like an old pair of Birkenstocks that have been perfectly formed to a therapist’s feet—always comfortable, always supportive. Along with a nice cardigan, it’s an essential for any therapist. It’s a go-to for a reason. Basically, CBT is a type of talk therapy based on the idea that thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are all connected. We’ll go further into CBT in Chapter 5: Calming the Chaos.

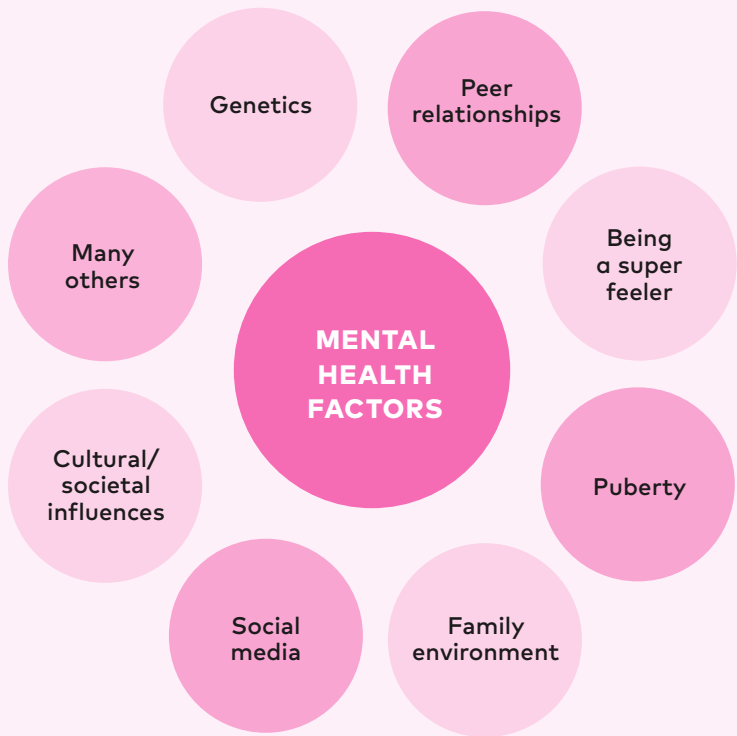
CBT was first developed in the 1960s by a psychiatrist named Aaron T. Beck. He noticed a lot of his patients had unconscious internal dialogues that he called “automatic thoughts,” and he started researching whether these might be linked to the depression those patients were experiencing. Spoiler alert: His answer was yes, and what he created from there became widely accepted as the gold standard for treating all sorts of mental illnesses.

One of our taglines at ATEG is, “Don’t believe everything you overthink,” which comes directly from a CBT technique called True or Untrue. (In a nutshell: Just because you think something doesn’t mean it’s true!) You’ll see lots of CBT techniques in the “Keys to Unlocking Girl World” sections at the end of each chapter. We use them to help girls and their parents learn to identify and change their thoughts, leading to improved coping skills, understanding, and emotional regulation, and reduced anxiety and depression.

If you’re curious about CBT, there’s a great book called *The Power of Thought on Feelings* (previously called *What Is a Thought?*) by Jack Pransky and Amy Kahofer. It’s written for seven- to ten-year-olds, but I think it provides a great introduction for any age.

Emotion-Focused Family Therapy

Another theoretical practice we focus on at ATEG is Emotion-Focused Family Therapy (or EFFT, as you’ll see it called throughout the book). I first heard about EFFT when I was working under Allison Chase, PhD, as I was dipping my toe into private practice. Allison, who later became the regional clinical director of the Eating Recovery Center and is our local eating disorder guru, shared her experience with EFFT and told me it had changed everything for her.



EFFT was designed to give parents and caregivers the tools that therapists use in session to help clients regulate emotions. Adèle Lafrance, one of the developers, has traveled to Austin several times to teach us how to use these tools in our practice. One of the most valuable EFFT lessons for parents is that mental health disorders are not caused by bad parenting. As you can see in the diagram above, mental health issues are complicated and caused by many factors. This knowledge alone brings so much relief to moms and helps them turn their focus from worry and anxiety to things that can help them and their daughters.

EFFT is multifaceted, but one of the most powerful things it teaches is the skill of validation. If empathy is the act of feeling with someone, validation is the acknowledgment that the feeling makes sense. Imagine having heard this from your parents: “I get it—you feel upset because you studied hard for that test and you thought you’d get a better grade. It makes so much sense to feel that way.” Sounds like a unicorn moment, right? But wouldn’t that have felt good? It will to your daughter, too. If her feelings are valid, then her thoughts and behaviors make sense, and that means there’s nothing wrong with her and she’s worthy. And if your daughter feels worthy, the world is hers—cue Beyoncé’s “Run the World (Girls)” here. EFFT parent training happens over five sessions, but after parents learn this one skill in the first session, I see daughters’ mental health issues decrease tremendously. If you start to use it now, when your daughter is a tween, validation and connection will come much more easily to you both as the teen years—and the drive for independence and individualization—roll around.

I’ll share more about EFFT, including ways you can use validation with your daughter, in the “Keys to Unlocking Girl World” sections you’ll find at the end of each chapter.

Shame Resilience

I started the journey to private practice in 2012 after doing Dr. Brené Brown's connections training, her precursor to *The Daring Way*[™]. At the time, she was working on a book called *The Gifts of Imperfection*, and over the course of our three-day training she introduced us to the guideposts of wholehearted living. Ten years later, those guideposts are so ingrained in our practice that at ATFG we simply refer to the book as "*The Gifts*." And we refer to a set of concepts and practices developed by Brené for dealing with the painful feeling of unworthiness as "shame resilience."

Brené defines shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and, therefore, unworthy of love and belonging. We all face this sort of pain at some point in our lives, and at ATFG, we've seen that we can't truly deal with anxiety and depression until we address shame.

As I joke in my sessions, back in the 80s many of us were called latchkey kids, meaning that we came home to an empty house, because our parents were working, and let ourselves in with our own key. After we made a snack and did our homework, which took thirty minutes at most—those were the days—we had time to ourselves to do all sorts of things. Looking back, one of the funniest was Shrinky Dinks, and if you're not familiar, please allow me to be the one to introduce you. We colored on big sheets of plastic and then stuck them into the oven to watch them shrink. Yes, this was fun in the 80s.

What we want to do with shame is Shrinky Dink it. We can't make it go away completely, and that sucks, but we can lessen its impact and how we react to it so we don't totally screw up our lives and relationships when it rears its ugly head. As soon as we get to the root of why clients feel like they're not enough—hint: it's shame!—they start to feel better.

We'll talk more about shame resilience in the coming chapters. For now, just know that there's hope for that feeling of being unworthy, and I've got your back.

SPRINKLES OF BLISS

Families seem to be busier these days than they might have been when you were growing up. Girls are asked to do more, and things that you may have experienced growing up, like family dinners, may feel harder to fit in. Having phones and packed schedules can make family members' worlds feel further apart, and it may feel like there's less time to connect. Keep looking for the small opportunities in your day to connect, and look to the "Keys to Unlocking Girl World" sections at the end of the chapter for some ideas.

Let's Talk Social Media

Social media is a big source of influence for girls.

The average girl gets a phone at age ten, and the average high school girl spends six to nine hours a day on her phone. If a middle school girl spends even half that time on a phone, that's still three to five hours—every single day. According to the ROX (Ruling Our eXperiences) 2023 Girls' Index comparing phone use from 2017 to 2023, in 2017, 9 percent of fifth grade girls spent six or more hours each day using social media, but in 2023, 46 percent did. If that's not enough to freak you out, they found another scary stat: the more time you spend on social media the less confident you feel. Take a moment; that's a big deal. But remember that in *E.T.*, Elliott played with an alien for days without his mom noticing. So you're doing okay.

As she moves toward adolescence, it's normal for your daughter to spend more of her time with friends and less of it with parents or caregivers. But as the center of influence shifts, that means she's also quite susceptible to another source of pressure: social media.

Companies are spending countless dollars learning what we like and don't like, then building algorithms and "for you" pages and all sorts of other tactics to keep us glued to the apps. "Influencers" on social media capitalize on our daughters' insecurities to sell them stuff. And since the average attention span these days is two minutes (many people won't even read these words, having already moved on to the end of this chapter for some juicy tips and tools, which I totally understand!), girls are accessing a lot of information and ideas as they move from thing to thing. It's not a coincidence that teenage suicide is on the rise and self-injury is happening on a regular basis as early as age eight—among other reasons, girls are seeing it on social media.

Limiting social media and phone access can be helpful; however, I have learned that girls are smarter than we are. They can figure out how to get on at 2 am and create ghost accounts using their grandmother's email. So having an ongoing conversation and social media check-in starting at a very early age is imperative for keeping up with the demands of parenting in this age.

Of course, social media is not all bad. It can help girls stay connected with the world around them, see how other people live, understand social issues, and learn about things they're interested in. And of course, while social media doesn't replace real social interaction, it can help girls feel connected to and in touch with friends and family in a way that just wasn't possible before. And let's be honest, social media can also be highly entertaining and even soothing (dog videos, anyone?).

But while there are benefits to social media, I still believe the main influences on a girl's mental health are her family and the adults in her life, so take heart. This book will help you stay

relevant in your daughter's life and show you how to support her as she navigates this world that now includes social media!

But Mom, Everyone's Doing It

Tweens live in an ever-changing world. And even that feels like an understatement. I know many of the trends I mention will change rapidly—this year, this month, this week. One of my clients just showed me the current fashion trends on TikTok, and apparently the starter pack consists of Nike Air Force 1s, 90s dad jeans, and oversized sweatshirts with biker shorts. I can remember a couple of years ago when it was dad shoes and mom jeans. Imagine how this fast pace must feel to tweens and young girls, knowing that while trends will change quickly, the pressure to fit in will remain constant.

In all my interactions with clients, ranging from a fourth-grade girls' group dealing with friendship challenges to a young woman searching for her path in life, the common theme has always been the struggle to fit in, which we often address on my pink couch. Dr. Brené Brown emphasizes in her numerous videos that fitting in is the opposite of belonging. This implies that the more we try to fit in, the less connected we feel with others. As my mom would say, that's a hell of a bitter pill to swallow.

Apart from meeting girls and their families in our office and virtually, we at AFIG enjoy engaging with the community by delivering talks on these crucial concepts. One of my favorites in Austin takes a couple of days out of the school year to do a "relationship retreat." Such an amazing idea! I love doing ice-breakers, and I've found with tweens that it's best to start with something they're willing to chat about. Then you can get to the deeper stuff once they feel safe letting their guard down in the group.

A current favorite opener as of writing this (it's been 108 degrees out lately) is, "What's your least favorite ice cream?" The debates on bubble-gum and mint chocolate chip ice cream are intense! We also love the icebreaker of naming your favorite "hairbrush" song—the song you sing and dance to alone in your bathroom. This is so fun, and you can even make a great playlist from it.

Once everyone's opinions have been heard, I love to follow it with vulnerability masks. Each person takes a blank mask and, on the front, writes or draws or pastes pictures from magazines of things they show the world. Then on the back, they depict what they hide. Of course, we also end up having some great conversations about current makeup trends and the best mascara as we flip through magazines. Then we share to whatever extent each person feels comfortable. I've seen the look on eighth graders' faces when they realize they're not alone in something they love or feel or have experienced, and it's incredible.

Navigating the difference between fitting in and belonging when trends change so quickly is already tough. Having a parent who understands what it's like in Girl World can make that feel a lot less tricky.

Research from 2017 and, most recently, 2023 done by ROX is eye-opening. The 2017 Girls' Index surveyed 10,678 girls from fifth through twelfth grade. In 2023, they did a follow-up survey with 17,502 girls and—hold on to your hats (yes, native Texan here)—things are worse, especially for tween girls.

They found that the number of girls who would describe themselves as confident declines more than 25 percent throughout the middle school years, from 86 percent to 60 percent. By ninth grade, confidence is at its lowest point, and then it levels off for the next three years. The Girls' Index reported that confidence does not return to pre-middle school levels for the remainder of high school. From 2017 to 2023, overall, there

was a 13 percent drop in girls' confidence, with fifth-grade girls experiencing the biggest decline.

When the data is looked at by ethnicity, it shows that Black girls' confidence increases from elementary school to middle school, then drops in middle school but remains higher than their peers' throughout high school. The report also found that socioeconomic status did not predict a girl's report of confidence. Other findings from the report show that 52 percent of Asian girls, 33 percent of Black girls, 40 percent of Hispanic/Latina girls, 43 percent of multiracial girls, and 57 percent of white girls don't say what they are thinking or disagree with others because they want to be liked.

This internalized pressure to be seen a certain way can impact how a girl feels about herself, which can contribute to a lower level of confidence. The Girls' Index demonstrates a relationship between a girl's confidence and her desire to change her appearance, and as a girl gets older, her confidence declines drastically as her desire to change her appearance increases. This can lead to girls becoming withdrawn and unsure of themselves.

Puberty accounts for some of these confidence challenges. However, girls also receive intense messaging—from media and society, but also from family members or other adults in their world who have received this same messaging—regarding ideal body shape, size, and image.

I think we all know how hard it is to navigate this part of Girl World. My own experience goes back generations. My mother was an only child, and this meant we spent a lot of time with my grandparents' siblings—my mom's aunt and uncles. My grandmother's sisters, who I called Aunt Lonellen and Aunt Mo, were the worst when it came to commenting about my body, including saying some pretty awful things about my behind area right in front of my mother.

**Confidence
lowers in tweens**
right as pressure
increases.

This is hard to write because I know my mom feels like this is an area she could have greatly improved on, and I'm not sharing it to shame anyone at all. My aunts weren't purposefully trying to make me feel bad; they thought it was an important thing for my mom to know based on the way they grew up and the cultural messaging they received. So while this may be a good time to examine your own relationship with your body to see what kind of messages you're passing on (at ATFG, we see over and over that the primary influence on our young girls—especially when it comes to their bodies and how they view their weight—is their mothers), also remember that your daughter's going to get a whole host of messaging from other sources that have nothing to do with you—and, in fact, shaped your own views!

While body image is only one aspect of girls' confidence, I think the complexity of this issue helps show how much girls are navigating these days. And like so many things, it's showing up earlier and earlier. We hear statements like, "When I look in the mirror, all I see is that my thighs are just too big" from girls as young as third grade, and things like, "All my friends think I'm annoying" and, "I have no friends, so it must be me" from girls who are not that much older.

Even though many parents report that they're consciously not pressuring their girls to be perfect, tweens are still receiving that pressure and messaging from other places, like peers and social media, and it affects their confidence around their appearance, grades and school, sports and extracurricular activities, and more.

Early Puberty

You may have read in the introduction that I was an early developer, but since I know we all skip parts in books sometimes, I'll recap. I started my period at age ten, in Houston Intercontinental Airport, heading out on a ski trip with my dad. I thought I'd taken too much Vicks Formula 44 cough syrup, but nope—it was Aunt Flo, Shark Week, or whatever you like to call menstruation. Needless to say, that ski trip was a whole bunch of snowplowing while trying to keep my pad straps up (before pads had adhesives). Starting to develop breasts and menses at an early age meant I was the only fifth grader wearing a bra, and, of course, boys found themselves quite amusing when they popped the strap (obviously less amusing to me). My self-esteem was at an all-time low then. Side note: If you are with a group of people who have a monthly cycle, ask them about their first memory of that time. It's a fascinating look at how amazing girls are and how much we all have in common.

These days, many girls are starting to develop breasts and other signs of puberty as early as six or seven—and no one knows why. What we do know is that there's a correlation between the early onset of puberty and higher rates of depression and anxiety, as well as lower self-esteem and poorer body image. Many clients of ours are still hiding the fact that they've started their cycle from their parents, even though they'd had several discussions about menses before fifth grade. We can only guess why many choose to keep the start of their period a secret. Maybe they feel different from their peers, like I did, and don't want to deal with the judgment.

We don't know a lot about early puberty yet, but it's worth noting as a potential factor for your daughter and for her relationship with her friends. Because if it seems like everyone else has started their period and your daughter hasn't, that can also

bring up big feelings. (We'll talk more about how to navigate friendship struggles later in the book.)

What about Mom World?

I know Mom World is a lot, too.

While I want to help you see your daughter, I also want you to know I see you.

If you were to guess, you might assume that one of the toughest times for mothers is when they bring home a new baby, given the sleepless nights and the adjustments required to care for an infant. However, it might surprise you to discover that research reveals the most challenging phase of motherhood is during their children's middle school years.

Suniya S. Luthar and Lucia Ciciolla conducted a study involving over 2,200 mostly well-educated mothers with children ranging from infants to adults. They explored various aspects of the mothers' personal wellbeing, parenting styles, and their perceptions of their children. Results indicate a bell-shaped curve in stress and depression levels, with mothers of middle school children (aged eleven or twelve) consistently experiencing the most difficulties, while mothers of infants and adult children fared better. We are all aware that middle school is a tough period for tweens, but it can also be quite challenging for caregivers.

You've also been through a pandemic, and I know how hard that was for parents. And as your daughter reaches her tween years, you may be going through menopause or starting the process, taking care of your parents as well as raising children, or facing other challenges. Plus, a lot of what your daughter is dealing with—anxiety and perfectionism, unrealistic expectations fed by social media, wanting to be seen and heard—feels relevant for you, too.

You need a lot of the same things your daughter does: Ways to deal with anxiety, depression, and overthinking. Connection. Validation. Strong relationships. This book will teach you the skills, as well as help you share them with your daughter, so you get support and can also model the things you want for your daughter. This book is a win-win for you both.

SPRINKLES OF BLISS

When I was parenting my daughters, there was basically one book everyone read: Dr. Spock. Everyone had the same information. These days, parents have access to far more ideas from books, blogs, podcasts, and other sources, and it can be hard to sort through conflicting advice. That's why we encourage you to remember that you know your daughter best. As you read what's in this book, consider how it relates to your experience, and take only what you need.

Keys to Unlocking Girl World

Reflection: Put Yourself in Her Shoes

It can feel hard to imagine what it's like to be someone else. Yet it's totally worth the effort. Because when you really connect with what it's like to be your daughter (or, let's be real, what you imagine it's like), you activate things like empathy, understanding, and compassion—all pretty darn important in a relationship, am I right?

Ease in by thinking about your own childhood. Ask yourself questions like these:

- What are my fondest memories? What were my favorite things?
- What felt hard?
- Were there things I longed for from my caregivers?
- Were there things my caregivers offered that felt supportive?

When you answer these questions, I bet some of your memories are not based on what you did at school or the one time when you had perfect hair. Most of my current clients are so focused on avoiding judgment and being perfect that they are missing the opportunity to laugh and have fun.

Then shift into considering your daughter's perspective, being sure to connect with feelings as well as experiences:

- How is my daughter's experience growing up different from my experience growing up?
- What are my fond memories with her? What might some of her fond memories be?
- What are her favorite things? What lights her up?
- What probably feels hard for her? What does she express having a hard time with? When do I notice her struggling?
- What might she want me to do more or less of? What might she be wishing for from me?

And then try this:

- Close your eyes for a moment. Imagine you are your daughter. Now imagine walking up to your front door, coming inside, looking around, and seeing yourself through her eyes. What does she feel? What is she hoping for?

- Then imagine walking up to school. What might she feel nervous about? Excited to do? What other feelings could be coming up for her?
- Feel free to repeat this with other places your daughter loves going. What is it like to be her? What does she notice, enjoy, worry about, dream of?

Note that none of this is about criticizing yourself or making a long list of things to do based on what comes up—though if there are changes that feel important, you do you. This is about awakening curiosity and practicing the skill of seeing things from her perspective, which will help you so much when she’s doing things you don’t understand or making a point that clashes with your own needs, desires, or opinions.

Tool: Empathy

A lot of people confuse sympathy and empathy. If this is you, you’re not alone. So I’m here to set the record straight: Sympathy is “I feel for you.” It’s the “awww,” the “you poor thing,” maybe even that secret feeling of, “whew, glad it’s not me” (we’ve all felt it). On the other hand, empathy is “I feel with you.” In the groups we hold at ATEG, empathy can sound like anything from a formal statement of “I totally get what you’re saying” to a simple—and often clearly relieved—“Same.” Empathy shows both people involved that they’re not alone in feeling or experiencing whatever is coming up.

One of the scripts we use from Emotion-Focused Family Therapy, or EFFT (see the “Psych 101” section earlier in this chapter if you want a refresher on what EFFT is), starts with, “When I put myself in your shoes . . .” That’s exactly what we suggested in the “Reflection” section above. And this is the first step in an empathetic response. When your tween is having a

hard time, try imagining how she's feeling. Whether she's having a hard time or she's done something that brings up some big feelings in you, can you get curious about what was going on for her without any judgment? Get as specific as you can. Might she be feeling sadness as well as disappointment? Regret mixed with shame and a little fear? Scared but also relieved? That's the first step.

Once you've tapped into empathy, ask her how she's feeling. You've imagined what might be going on, so you can connect with her and her perspective, but don't assume you're correct. Help her find the words to express what's going on. You might say, "I can understand if you're having some feelings about not being invited to that birthday party. Maybe angry or sad or a little nervous?" Then give her a little time to sort through it all.

Once you find out—as best as she's able to describe—how she's feeling, here's the part that can be hard for so many of us: don't jump immediately into fix-it mode. I know, she's your daughter and you love her. But what she needs most from you is to know that she's seen and supported. Of course, your immediate response may be, "Let me fix this for you," and I get that. It's so hard to see someone you love suffer. And if you do that, or have done that, don't beat yourself up. It's natural! But I suggest learning to do something a bit different: assume that she has all the answers within herself. So your support might sound like, "What can you do to make yourself feel better right now?" Or, "How can I support you?" Or you can even ask if she would like some suggestions, or to hear about ways you regulate your emotions, and see if she would like to try those. (You'll learn more tools for this throughout the book.)

Remember, you can offer yourself empathy, as well, by getting curious when big feelings come up and suspending any judgment. You can offer yourself some of the same options—asking someone to help come up with ideas or be in the feeling

with you, or giving those things to yourself. We could all use a little more understanding in our lives.

If you'd like to learn more about empathy, there's a viral video by Dr. Brené Brown about it. In fact, there are several versions—animated for adults, as well as a kid-friendly version I play the most for tweens. Search online for “Brené Brown empathy video.” There is even a cute *Sesame Street* video where Mark Ruffalo describes empathy to Murray.

Conversation Script: Learn Your Daughter's Algorithm

When I was growing up, my main source of influence was my family. Sure, I watched TV after school before doing my homework. And yes, I started turning more to my friends at an appropriate age. But we didn't have the internet or anything remotely resembling social media, so my sphere of influence was small.

These days, girls have such a vast array of information, ideas, opinions, and perspectives at their fingertips. How are families supposed to compete with social media?

Start learning your daughter's algorithm. What is she into? What are her favorite songs? What trends have caught her attention? What does she daydream about? Who does she admire? What's getting a side eye from her (besides you)?

You don't have to sit down and ask her these questions all at once, though remember you know your daughter best. If she'd like that, if it would make her feel seen and special, go for it! But for those of you who would just get an eye roll, try sprinkling these into conversation when you can, and also simply start listening for the things she's already sharing.

One technique I love for this is a daily check-in. At ATEG, we use Rose, Thorn, and Bud for elementary-aged kids and Happies and Crappies for middle school. Basically, you and your daughter (and anyone else in the family who's around when

you do this) share the different parts of your day that went well and then ones that didn't go so well. Sometimes the check-in is quick, but sometimes you can also go deeper into things you may never have heard about otherwise. I'll share more about this in the "Keys to Unlocking Girl World" section in Chapter 2.

As you get to know her algorithm, share more about yourself as well. What were you into at her age? What would you have wanted to know about your own mom? What did you love? Remind her that you're a real person and you can connect on more than dinner, grades, activities—whatever the usual topics are. Even my clients like to hear about the silly things we did in the 80s (thanks, *Stranger Things!*). One time I had a client call while having a panic attack. She was able to speak, so we went through a couple of calm-down techniques first, then I tried to distract her from the actual fear (a sports performance). So I had her get on YouTube and search "Physical" by Olivia Newton-John (rest in peace). I told my client that this was a good example of what working out was like in the 80s. This particular distraction and laughter gave her time to get perspective on what was really happening and remember that it was not the end of the world. (Quick tip: Bonding and healing through music is one of the best techniques anyone can teach you. Having a shared playlist and relating to each other's music is magical.)

As you learn about each other, try doing things your daughter likes with her. Settle in for one of her shows together. Watch her giggle at how bad your favorite show from childhood looks to her eyes, so used to modern technology. Make a shared playlist that has songs you both love. Spend this time with her while she's a tween, and you'll open the door for more time together when she's a teen.