

## Reclaiming Power in a Media Saturated World: Helping Teenage Girls Remember Who They Are

By Dr. Kellie Raydon

How many of you have teenage girls? How many of you work closely with teenage girls? As a practitioner of women and girls' health, I see women and girls of all ages. I experience their joy as well as their angst. Often when I'm in an office visit with a mother of a teenager, she will open up to me about her daughter whom she is distraught over. "What can I do about my her?" she will exclaim. "She thinks she's fat even though her weight is perfectly normal. And she's so obsessed with getting everyone's approval. Yesterday she wouldn't stop talking about how her lips are too thin."

I assure this mother that I understand how hard it to be a teenager in this culture. All the while, I'm making a mental note to evaluate my *own* lips as soon as I'm in front of a mirror again.

Sadly, many mothers are at a loss as to why their daughters are like this. They say, "I've always told her she's great, and that she doesn't need anyone else's approval. But she doesn't seem to have gotten the message. She's become so insecure. I don't know how I can convince her that she's beautiful and perfectly okay the way she is."

Working with teenage girls can a difficult job. And I want to add right now that since I work primarily with women and girls who identify themselves by the gender to which they were assigned, I will be making some generalizations about the population I see most. What I've found through my work is that it's as if teenage girls have fallen into a trance of sorts, hypnotized by our culture, and we are longing to wake them up. It can make us feel desperate and hopeless. But the good news is that teenage girls can be awakened. They can be empowered in their own lives, because at their core, they are more powerful than either we or they may realize. The key to helping them find their power is to first reach out to them where they are and understand everything they are up against. And when it comes to media and cultural influences, they're up against a lot.

As I take you on this exploration of exactly what our teenage girls are up against, it may be at least as frightening to you as Dorothy's journey to OZ was. But I want you to rest assured that I have a concrete plan that I lead us back to Kansas, and it doesn't involve a hot air balloon.

Simply turn on the television or tune into social media, and you're bound to see someone who has just had a makeover, and it's nearly always a young woman. In 2014, over 90 % of all cosmetic surgeries were performed on females, and the beauty industry is targeting younger and younger women and girls, reinforcing the message that how others see us is what matters most and no measure is too extreme or risky to be considered. In 2013 more 200,000 cosmetic procedures were performed on teenagers.

Perhaps it's no surprise, but plenty of parents are willing to provide their consent for these cosmetic surgeries, which can cost upwards of \$10,000. In fact, in some circles it's trendy for parents to offer cosmetic surgery as a graduation present. Other teenagers foot the surgery bill themselves, sometimes forgoing college.

These surgeries are frequently marketed as necessary interventions to restore self-esteem and mental health. There are even non-profit companies that offer to fund plastic surgery for young people who have been bullied for the way they look.

On one such site, called Little Baby Face Foundation, doctors happily report how a girl came in concerned about her ears, which she had been teased about. The doctor insisted that this girl would also need to change her chin and nose. Prior to her consultation with the plastic surgeon, the young girl states had no problem with her chin and nose. But the surgeon on the site openly states, "That's because she didn't recognize it."

Sadly, girls are being misled. According to a recent study published in Psychological Medicine, when it comes to teenage girls, cosmetic surgery isn't making girls any happier or healthier. Even if these girls report satisfaction with the results of a particular procedure, they report an increase in anxiety and depression compared to the girls studied who chose not to have cosmetic surgery. Furthermore, girls having cosmetic surgery are more likely to seek additional surgical procedures in the future. They are tricked into thinking that self-esteem can only be found and maintained by changing or correcting one's physical appearance.

Our billion dollar fashion industry influences which physical characteristics girls want to change. Buttock implant surgery for example rose 98 percent from 2013 to 2014, making it the fastest growing cosmetic surgery.

Breast surgery now includes both saline or silicone implants. In addition, a new 20-minute procedure, known as the Insta-Breast or 'vacation breasts' is available, which involves having saline solution injected into one's breasts to increase breast size for 24 hours. (wedding photo comment)

Apparently, no body part has been left unscrutinized. The second fastest growing surgery for women and teenage girls in 2014 is labiaplasty, which increased 44 percent in 2012. Media experts such as author Ellen Currey-Wilson speculate that the trend has been heavily influenced by pornography, including the new custom to remove all pubic hair, which has now morphed into a desire to redesign the vulva. How disturbing it is that pre-pubescent labia are now considered the most desirable.

I will never forget my pediatric rotation in residency. The supervising doctor explained to me how I would see in clinic how the majority of adolescents, both boys and girls, now shave or remove their pubic hair. Before the advent of the internet, he explained, most of us had our first sexual experiences with real human bodies. Well, these days, the vast

majority of our kids first sexual experiences are with internet pornography, and they emulate what they see there, hence they remove all pubic hair. I couldn't believe it!

As doctors, we need to be educating girls as well as their parents, because many girls are not capable of understanding the repercussions of their decisions. They need to understand the beauty and valuable function of their bodies in their natural state. A non-surgically altered vulva is optimal for childbirth for example and breast implants can jeopardise breast-feeding.

Because many girls are so caught up in being as sexy as they can in the moment they have lost perspective on the long-term consequences of their actions.

More than ever beauty treatments are marketed to girls by making them think that what's perfectly normal is instead a pathology. For example, prescription products sold in aesthetic medspas to lengthen eyelashes, asks potential consumers if they suffer from hypotrichosis, or short eye lash syndrome." In other words, girls with perfectly functional eyelashes, albeit short ones, now have 'disease.'

More alarming still, Botox is now marketed to young women and girls as a 'preventive measure. Selling them on the idea that the sooner they paralyze those muscles, they will get a head start and prevent them from ever making a wrinkle.

Dr. Gigi Durham in her book, *The Lolita Effect*, documents how the turn of the new millennium spawned "the sexy little girl phenomenon." These days, girls in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade wonder if they are hot. Walmart sells children thong underwear adorned with slogans like Wink Wink and Eye Candy. A clothing chain called Little Miss Naughty offers push up bras and lacy briefs to pre-teens. By the time a girl is 13, she's most likely spending a good percentage of whatever money she has on clothing, ever conscious of what she looks like through what is termed "the male gaze."

On the one hand sexuality is something to celebrate. It's not something we should have to control in young girls, on the other hand we need to rein in the sexist and toxic culture around them, which puts them in danger.

In this toxic media environment, it's not surprising that depression is rampant among teenage girls. Before adolescence, mood disorders occur in equal numbers in girls and boys. However, after adolescence, these disorders triple in girls. The change in hormones at adolescence may explain the difference. The more likely cause of depression in teenage girls is the interplay of hormone levels and the culture we live in.

We need to remember that female hormones are a normal and essential component of female development. The problem is that teenage girls are experiencing the normal effects of changing hormones while simultaneously being bombarded with messages telling them they're not okay, and that their emotional nature is one of the things that makes them not okay.

Girls are stuck in what psychologists view as an impossible set of expectations--relentless pressure to succeed socially as well as academically, while still being expected to maintain an ultra feminine and sexualized persona as shown in the latest fashion magazine.

The pressure to live up to a preconceived ideal promoted by the media is in part one of the reasons teen girls develop eating disorders in record numbers. Anorexia is the third most common chronic illness among adolescents, and 95 percent of those who have eating disorders are between the ages of 12 and 25.

Being seen is more important than ever. To borrow a line from Chris Rock's movie, Top Five, "If it isn't on camera, it doesn't exist."

In my generation, girls often wondered if they were popular enough. Well, now there is a quantifiable way to measure popularity, a social currency called 'likes.' In order to get lots of likes, teenage girls have turned into PR firms for themselves, carefully selecting their best photos, along with writing catchy captions to post to 'their public.'

This past spring, I took my 17-year-old niece on a hike above the beautiful Oregon coast. I was excited about showing her the breathtaking view from Cape Falcon. However, a few minutes into the hike, I realized she was stopping every 50 yards or so to take a selfie so her friends and followers would be sure to know that she was living an exciting and adventurous life. She wasn't nearly as interested in what she might see, but in how she would be seen by others. Later, she spent the evening photo-shopping her pictures to insure she appeared flawless.

Social media isn't just used as a personal PR tool. It also adds a new dimension to relational aggression. In Tina Fey's classic movie Mean Girls, which was made in 2004 she shows girls bullying each other during a 3 way phone call. Nowadays instead of just making a three-way phone call, a girl can use instagram and insult a girl in front of an audience of thousands.

Whereas boys are often physically bullied, girls are more likely to engage in relational aggression, which includes leaving someone out on purpose, telling or ordering one person not to be friends with someone, spreading rumors, and embarrassing or taunting someone in public. As you can see the statistics are alarming.

- 40% of teen girls have been cyber bullied compared to 28% of teen boys.
- 18% of teen girls have been cyber bullied in the past 30 days
- 14% of teen girls admit to cyber bullying others
- The reasons for being bullied reported most often by students were looks (55%), body shape (37%), and race (16%)

AS I've already illustrated, teen girls often defined themselves primarily by their appearance. In addition those in the LGBT community experience much more bullying than their non-LGBT peers.

- Teenagers bullied by their peers are 2.4 times more likely to report suicidal ideation and 3.3 times more likely to report a suicide attempt.

The consequences of relational aggression and cyberbullying are devastating. As physicians we need to help our teen patients who are being bullied, as well as those engaging in relational aggression.

In spite of the women's movement, which recognized females' entitlement to sexual pleasure, a backlash is occurring, perpetuated by the media. In the popular MTV teen show, *Awkward*, a football player is shown having sex with a teenage girl in an impersonal manner without foreplay and without regard to her desire for satisfaction. Afterwards, instead of being outraged, the girl wants this guy all the more, but she feels she needs to play it 'cool,' so he won't think she's looking for any sort of commitment.

These days girls more than ever feel pressured to give oral sex to guys, and have unwanted and often unprotected sex. Moreover, they feel they need to compete with the pornography their boyfriends view online by sexting, hoping to imitate porn stars, promoting the idea that girls are here primarily for the pleasure of males.

Worse still, rape culture is being normalized in the media. In the popular teen show, "Gossip Girl, a teenage guy is attempting to rape a younger high school girl, and he would succeed, except the girl's older brother stops him. Sadly, no one seems to think it's necessary to report the incident, even though the male rapist character is known to have attacked numerous girls. Shows like these send the message to girls that boys will simply be boys. It's a dangerous, sometimes deadly message, but it's pervasive, so much so that comedians such as Amy Schumner have begun to address it in new and provocative ways.

Comedian Amy Schumer has been using comedy to get our attention and shed light on rape culture. Joking aside the statistics are grim:

- 44% of survivors are under 18 years old.
- 1 in 5 women in college are sexually assaulted.

Colleges are working to combat the problem through teaching new consent rules. In California for example it's the law now for consent to be required before having sex. In addition the definition of rape has been revised. It's now considered rape if someone is too intoxicated to give consent.

- Not surprisingly 47% of rapists are a friend or acquaintance
- 68% of sexual assaults are never reported to the police.

That's in part because rape trials are still a grueling experience for women and girls, and women and girls who report often put themselves and their loved ones in danger.

More than ever, drug and alcohol use are being glamorized in the media and binge drinking is on the rise in high schools and colleges.

Teenage girls are in the most danger, because far less alcohol is required to reach toxicity levels.

- Binge drinking for girls ages 16-17 is defined as drinking an average of 3 drinks
- Binge drinking for boys ages 16-17 is defined as drinking an average of 5 drinks.
  
- 11.5% of 16-17 year olds have engaged in binge drinking
- 24.6% ages 18 or older reported engaging in binge drinking in the past month

The typical televised football game or movie aimed at young people is filled with images of young people drinking, often excessively, so it isn't surprising that for many young people heavy drinking is perfectly normal. But it's taking its toll.

- 29,000 girls ages 12-17 were hospitalized for an alcohol related problem in 2013.
- 97,000 college students between 18-24 report alcohol related assault or date rape.

We need to educate teen girls about drugs and alcohol, but we also need to address the underlying pain teenage girls experience, if we want girls to stop self-medicating.

And alcohol is just one of the substances being abused.

As physicians, we can see that many of these drugs are pharmaceuticals. Sadly, many of these are advertised in the media, so that girls think they are less dangerous than they are. We have a responsibility to our patients to continue to monitor their use of these drugs, particularly their long-term use and possible abuse.

Clearly girls are up against a lot when it comes to media influences, but the good news is positive things are happening as well, particularly in the arena of social media. Celebrities such as Emma Watson spoke to the United Nations, asking men and boys to join women and girls in fighting for equality, and her message went viral. Taylor Swift and others have stepped up as role models to girls, giving them a voice. As practitioners, we, too, can use social media for good by sharing examples of strong women and girls. Male practitioners can play an important role as well by modeling respect to female colleagues, to wives, and to daughters.

It doesn't have to be a losing battle. In my practice I make a point of approaching teenage girls who are my patients in an authentically non-judgmental manner. This is especially important if we want them to feel comfortable disclosing personal information. And because I can empathize with what girls face every day, it isn't difficult to understand their plight. Rather than giving girls a list of what they should do, we need to help them tap into their own inherent strength and wisdom. Too often, as a culture, we tell girls they

simply need to toughen up and cultivate non-attachment. In other words, we tell them to be more like men stereotypically are, rather than honoring their innate strengths. It's these strengths that can save our girls, by helping realize that their true source of power is valuable and unshakeable.

So, how do we tap into these strengths?

With girls' permission, I start by simply asking them a series of three questions, each of which is followed by a more in-depth exploration. The purpose of these questions is to validate girls for who they intrinsically are and help them use their strengths to nurture themselves. Please note that when I speak of traditionally gender-linked qualities, I am actually referring to human qualities, available across the gender spectrum. Since I work primarily with girls, I am making generalizations based on this population.

The first question is designed to tap into a girl's highly evolved social development. Girls are good at imagining, which is why even at a young age, they are more likely to engage in higher level creative play with their peers than boys of the same age. As early as preschool, girls' use of language is more developed than boys. Girls, whether through nature or nurture, typically know how to listen to others, show empathy and connect with others. They want to be liked. They want to be loved. And they are good at liking and loving others.

Here is exploration 1:

Who in your life do you love deeply and unconditionally? Think of someone whose appearance isn't important, because you simply love them for who they are. Now, think about a time when you felt that way about yourself. Close your eyes and imagine you feel that way about yourself now. What does it feel like?

Most girls are not used to thinking about themselves the way they think about other people whom they care about. By simply asking them to engage in this exploration, a profound shift can occur. Even if they don't normally think of themselves as worthy of unconditional love, this exercise gets them to imagine what it might be like to feel this way. They are able to experience what it feels like to socially cast themselves in the same positive light that they cast the people they are seeking love and approval from. It gets them gets them back to their own place of self worth.

The second exploration is designed to tap into girls' innate ability to nurture. The biological imperative to nurture others in most girls is powerful during adolescence. It's the reason we are able to look at the face of a non-verbal baby and understand its cues

to respond in a nurturing way for the survival of the species. We want to harness this energy and give girls the experience of nurturing themselves.

So this is exploration two:

If you had a daughter who felt worried the way you have at times, what would you say to her to help her feel better? Now imagine that you are that daughter. What does she need to hear? Imagine saying that to her. What does it feel like to hear these words?

The experience of having this natural nurturing energy directed toward themselves can be amazing for teenage girls. As a culture, we so often discount the myriad ways females take care of others. Rather than discounting this skill, we can validate it and help girls direct it toward themselves as well as others. This gives girls the opportunity to like themselves for who they are, rather than simply for what they have accomplished or received approval from others for. They are directly experiencing what unconditional self-love is.

The third exploration is designed to tap into girl's inner sense of knowing. Women today are in many ways stigmatized when they choose to rely on their innate wisdom rather than on logic and objective data. Most likely intuition is due to a combination of socialization and biology. Whatever the reason, we can help teenage girls cultivate their inner wisdom, so it can serve them.

This is exploration 3:

Think of a time when you felt really empowered and happy? What were you doing and why? Now bring that self into the present. How does it feel? Now move into the future and see yourself with that same feeling, bringing this confident self forward. Imagine yourself ten years from now with this sense of empowerment and happiness. What does it feel like?

This last exploration can be the most transformative, particularly the part in which I ask girls to imagine moving into the future, bringing their new empowered self into that time. Often a strong sense of deeper purpose can emerge that transcends ordinary survival goals and the need for outer approval.

I've used these explorations in one form or another with countless girls now to help them get girls back to their center, to help them to reclaim their own power and then share it with others.

These questions and explorations are valuable tools, but we don't want to make girls think they have to use them. I don't want to tell them they have yet one more job to do, in addition to making straight A's, making friends and staying sexy, they now have to make straight A's in Self-Love.

Instead we are simply there to listen to them and provide an avenue they may use the very next day, or maybe the next month, or maybe the next time they're in my office. No



matter what, we are validating their innate skills, strength and experiences as females, something girls desperately need, and something we all need as a culture.

Like Dorothy asleep among the poppies, our girls can be awakened with our help. They have had the ruby red slippers the whole time! No matter how many negative images they are bombarded with each and every day, our girls can remember who they are. Because who they really are at their core is more powerful and beautiful than they may realize. They can reclaim their strength, and in doing so, reclaim their lives.