

answer email while eating lunch at my desk. Jamie followed me around a corner and down a few steps into what the Laurel girls call my Harry Potter office. Like Harry's bedroom at the Dursleys', my office is wedged under the school's central staircase in what used to be a large utility closet. As odd as it sounds, the space is perfect. It sits in the centre of the building on the school's main hallway and yet is tucked out of sight so that girls or their parents can meet with me discreetly.

When I set my plate down and asked, "What's going on?" Jamie burst into tears. She put one hand on her stomach, gripped the arm of her chair with the other hand, and started to hyperventilate. Though I am used to sitting with girls who are very upset, I was surprised by how quickly and completely Jamie fell apart. It became clear that she had been barely holding herself together until we got to the privacy of my office. Once there, her levee broke and dammed-up emotions poured forth.

"I can't take my chemistry test today," she said in a rush, "I'm not ready, I'm gonna fail, it's gonna wreck my grade, I can't do it." She then paused to take a heaving breath before begging, "Can you get me out of it? Can you write me a note or something?"

I was stuck. I don't have the power to waive tests at Laurel; I'm there to support the girls, not to alter the academic timetable. At the same time, I fully agreed that Jamie was, at that moment, in no state to take a test.

"What period is chemistry?" I asked, while trying to figure out how I could insert myself between Jamie and her teacher.

"It's not until last period." Jamie paused and her breathing started to slow to its normal rhythm. Then I watched her tension seem to drain away as she added hopefully, "Maybe my dad can come get me before then and I can go home."

The instant I heard the relief in Jamie's voice as she imagined

CHAPTER TWO

Girls at Home

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG, OUR DAUGHTERS ARE OFTEN ABLE TO hold it together while at school or with their friends before falling apart in the privacy of our homes. How parents respond to a girl's distress has the power to make things much better, or much worse.

This chapter will unpack the common, everyday exchanges that occur between well-meaning adults and their overwrought daughters. It will address what doesn't work, and why, and describe tested and effective strategies for helping girls manage their nerves and worries in both the short and long term.

Avoidance Feeds Anxiety

On a recent Tuesday at Laurel School, I was pulled into an interaction with a student that highlights a dynamic that often unfolds between parents and their anxious daughters. As I carried a plateful of food from the cafeteria back to my office, I heard a student trotting up behind me. Turning around, I found Jamie, a usually chipper Year II, who was clearly in a panic.

"Dr. Damour! Do you have a minute?"

chologist came back to me. I pushed my protective instincts to the side as soon as I remembered that helping Jamie avoid the test was probably the least helpful thing I could do.

Primitive instincts tell humans to run from threats. Dashing away can be a great idea, especially if the threat is a burning building, an obviously unsafe house party, or an aggressive sales assistant brandishing a loaded atomizer. Often, however, running off is actually a terrible idea, because everything we know in academic psychology tells us that avoidance only makes anxiety worse.

Avoidance doesn't just feed anxiety. It serves up a two-course meal. First, dodging a perceived threat actually feels good. In fact, avoidance works like an incredibly powerful and fast-acting drug. Jamie felt better as soon as she even *thought* about having her dad rescue her from her chemistry test. The short-term relief gained from avoiding her chemistry test would have soon given way to her fears about the next test on her calendar and how bad *that* one would be. Second, sidestepping our fears effectively prevents us from discovering that they're overblown. Had Jamie found a way to skip the test, she would have robbed herself of the chance to learn that it wasn't so bad after all.

In fact, full-blown phobias can develop when people routinely evade the things they fear. Imagine a woman, we'll call her Joan, who is afraid of dogs. When Joan walks down the street, she feels a burst of dread every time she sees a dog coming her way. Naturally, Joan crosses the street to remove herself from the dog's path. She always feels immensely better when she gets to the opposite pavement, which makes her that much more likely to cross the street the next time she spies a canine. And in doing so, Joan never has a chance to meet a friendly dog. She remains convinced that all dogs should be avoided and knows that staying away from them will reliably deliver an immediate sense of relief.

what we know about helping people like Joan master her irrational fear translates perfectly to helping girls confront overblown anxieties. To address fears, we address fearful avoidance.

Treating Joan's dog phobia would be a fairly straightforward process. We'd teach Joan some basic relaxation techniques and assess how near she could get to a dog while remaining calm. Using a system called graduated exposure, we'd help Joan climb a ladder of increasing levels of canine contact. We might start by having her look at pictures of dogs while using controlled breathing to remain relaxed. Then we'd ask Joan to stand a block away from a pooch before having the pooch come near, and so on. Sooner or later, Joan could find herself enjoying, or at least comfortably tolerating, being close to a dog.

Returning to Jamie, I can tell you that I pulled myself together and said gently, "Wait. Let's hold off on teaching out to your dad. I think that we can figure this out together." Jamie clearly did not like the fact that I intended to block her escape, but the thought of bolting from school had relaxed her enough to make a conversation possible.

"What's the story in chemistry?" I asked. "Are you having a hard time in that class?"

"Not usually, but I'm really confused about the topics we covered for this test."

"Did you ask your teacher for help?"

"I did, and she was great. But I'm still not sure I get it."

"I can see why you're scared," I said, "and I can see why you're here in my office. But I'm worried that you'll end up feeling worse if you don't meet this head-on." Jamie sighed and indicated that she was open to suggestions. I asked, "Do you have any free periods between now and the test?"

"Yes, I'm free right after lunch."

"How about this . . . why don't you look for your chemistry

If she can't, I want you to hop online and find a video tutorial on the topics you're worried about. Most important, I want you to take the test, even if you feel that you won't do as well as you want."

Jamie agreed, unenthusiastically, to my plan. A few days later I ran into her in the hallway and asked how things had come out.

"I couldn't find my teacher to get help before class, and I don't think I did all that well on the test. But right before the test a lot of girls were asking the teacher about the stuff I didn't understand, so she said that we could go over it again later and, if needed, make corrections to get some points back."

"That doesn't sound too bad," I said in a way that sounded half like a question.

"No," Jamie agreed, "it's not that bad at all. I think it will end up okay."

When your girl wants you to stand between her and something she fears, resist acting on your gut instinct—the protective impulse to rescue her—and turn your attention toward helping her approach the source of her anxiety. For example, if your daughter tells you she can't possibly go to her piano recital, find out what she thinks she *can* do. Can she play the piece for you while thinking about the recital? Can she invite over a few neighbors and practise playing for them? Can she check in with her piano teacher to see what happens if she attends the recital but then changes her mind about performing? Can she get up on the stage and see how much of her piece she can play? Failing these options, see what you can learn from your daughter's teacher about where she's hitting a snag. In short, organize yourself around helping her move *toward* the threat, even in baby steps, rather than running away from it. Your daughter may not love this approach, but the immediate relief she'll feel when she avoids the threat is not worth the guaranteed exacerbation of her

How to Manage Meltdowns

You may want nothing more than to encourage your daughter to face her fears. And you may have already tried to share your wonderful suggestions on how she could approach a situation that has her wringing her hands. If you've gone down this path, you have likely discovered what most parents find when they try to help their daughter at the height of her discomfort: she considers every single one of your excellent ideas to be useless and rejects them all. There are many fun moments in parenting, but this is not one of them. In fact, it can be especially miserable to try to support a young person who lays her violent distress before us and then becomes even more upset when we try to be helpful.

What the heck is going on here?

She's letting you know how helpless she feels by making you feel every bit as helpless, too. There are many ways to share a feeling. At our best, we can put our emotions into words and express them to the caring, supportive people in our lives, knowing that they will respond with warmth and compassion. At our not-so-best, we become overwhelmed by our emotions and communicate them by inducing them in others. This is what happens when we feel angry and decide to pick a fight. And this is what happens when a girl who is at the end of her rope engages loving adults in a way that quickly brings them to the end of their ropes, too.

Attempting to help, cajole, or advise anyone who is overtaken by distress rarely works (just as telling someone to calm down almost always seems to have the opposite effect). If we want to get to the place where we really can be useful to our daughters, we need to find a way to bear with them when they feel powerless in the face of emotions that have spun out of control.

There's an ingenious strategy for responding to girls who feel

Texas. I was spending time with some colleagues at an excellent girls' school in Dallas when we got to talking about how forceful and overwhelming girls' emotions can be. "That," said one of the counsellors, "is when we get out a glitter jar."

Before continuing with this story, I need to acknowledge that I am not always a nice person. I can be sharply critical of anything that I view as pop psychology, and I'm equally tough on anything I deem to be excessively girly. You can imagine that the term *glitter jar* put me on high alert on both counts. The counsellor left and quickly returned with said glitter jar—it was a clear jar, about four inches tall, filled with water and a sedimentary layer of sparkling purple glitter. The lid was secured with glue, and when she put the jar on the table between us, the glitter that had been stirred up in transport soon settled to the bottom. We were looking at a jar that we could see right through. Skeptically, I listened to what the counsellor shared next.

"When the girls come to my office in a panic," she continued in her Dallas drawl, "and I can tell that they're just a wreck, I get out my glitter jar and I do this." She picked up the jar and shook it fiercely the way one shakes a snow globe. The placid water immediately became a sparkling purple tempest. "And then I say to the girl, 'Right now, this is what it's like in your brain. So first, let's settle your glitter.'" The counsellor set the jar down on the table between us and I stared at it, completely mesmerized. As the swirling slowed and the glitter storm abated, I realized that these counsellors had created a terrific model of how emotions act on the adolescent brain.

You see, somewhere between the ages of twelve and fourteen, the teenage brain undertakes a spectacular renovation project. It trims those neurons that are dead weight and matures into a nimble thinking machine that can poke new holes in old arguments, spin ideas around to view them from multiple perspec-

as happily following the antics of the Kardashian family while articulating a detailed and devastating critique of their lifestyle choices.

For better or worse, this neurological overhaul unfolds in the same order in which the brain developed in utero; it begins in the primal region that sits near the spinal cord and proceeds to the sophisticated area located behind the forehead. In practical terms, this means that the brain's emotional centres, which are housed in the primitive limbic system, are fully upgraded before the brain's perspective-maintaining systems, which are located in the highly evolved prefrontal cortex. When a teenager feels calm, her capacity for logical reasoning can equal or outstrip any adult's. When a teenager becomes upset, her supercharged emotions can hijack the whole neurological system, unleashing a blinding glitter storm and turning your otherwise rational daughter into a sobbing puddle on your kitchen floor.

My personal hang-ups about glitter have kept me from purchasing the supplies I would need to make glitter jars for my private practice or my office at Laurel. This, however, has not stopped me from enthusiastically encouraging friends and colleagues who also care for adolescents to make glitter jars for themselves. But my encounter in Texas has changed how I respond, both at home and at work, to girls who are spinning in a cyclone of distress. In my head, I actually hear the words of that counsellor saying, "First, let's settle your glitter." I now start by asking if a drink of water would be helpful or, should I have access to it, perhaps a snack. I force myself to be patient and to hold myself steady while wondering aloud, and without any urgency, if it might feel good to stretch our legs with a short walk, or to work on some colouring pages I keep handy.

It is not easy to restrain my urges to jump in with reassurance, suggestions, or questions about how the girl got herself into

on making space for the turbulence in her brain to subside, two critical events occur.

First, the girl can see that I am not frightened by her feelings. This may not seem like much, but we need to remember that her prefrontal cortex is hobbled by emotion and cannot possibly, at least for the moment, take an objective view of whatever happened to trigger her frenzy. When adults respond calmly and without being dismissive, girls can see that we are taking the situation in stride. This is a lot more reassuring to adolescents than a frenetic, all-hands-on-deck reaction, which signals that their crisis scares us as much as it scares them. Plus, as most parents have learned the hard way, pressing advice on a girl who already feels overwhelmed, or asking her what she did to land herself in the crisis, usually seems to be the equivalent of shaking her mental glitter jar.

Second, once the glitter storm subsides, a girl's rational cortex comes back online. Now clearheaded, she can think about how to tackle the source of her overwhelming anxiety or conclude that the problem isn't so bad after all. This explains the bizarre, yet common, sequence of events that occurs in any home with a teenager. First, the adolescent falls to pieces. Next, she rebuffs any help or suggestions her parents offer before retreating, in an agitated fit, to her room. Her parents—who are now in pieces themselves—frantically consider packing their daughter off to the psychiatric A&E, asking the local vicar, imam or rabbi to stop by for an emergency consultation, or relocating to a new area where their daughter can start from scratch.

Eventually, the girl reappears in a completely reasonable state of mind. She shares her thoughtful response to her predicament with her utterly befuddled, yet sincerely relieved, parents. Or she seeks their advice. Or she is in good spirits and acts as though nothing has occurred at all. It's a good rule of parenting to re-

ter to settle almost always either solves the problem or at least makes solving the problem possible.

That said, weathering a teenager's glitter storm may be one of the most taxing events in all of parenting. It does not matter that a girl's feelings are, at these times, overblown or irrational; they are very real to her and to any loving parent in her presence. When your daughter loses perspective, it's easy for you to lose perspective, too. Accordingly, it often helps to have an advance plan for these moments. A friend of mine keeps a large stash of tea in the pantry for when her daughter becomes overwrought. To keep herself calm while her daughter's glitter settles, my friend pulls out the tea collection and studiously lays out the choices before her daughter. Might herbal tea be best, or would some caffeine help? What flavour sounds good? Might milk or honey make the tea even better?

As parents we want to respond, but not react, to our daughters' meltdowns. Weighing tea options allows my friend to offer her full presence and support without becoming caught up in her daughter's swirling yet fleeting emotions. Other parents accomplish this delicate balance by listening quietly to their girl before discreetly turning to their partner, a trusted friend, or a seasoned parent for support or guidance. Still others hold themselves to a twenty-four-hour rule: they refrain from taking any action in response to their daughter's torrential distress until at least a day has passed. All parents need strategies for riding out their daughter's glitter storms; give yourself time to find an approach that works well for you and your girl.

How to React to Overreactions

Even when they're not in a full-blown panic, girls of all ages

"I won't have anyone to sit with at lunch tomorrow," or "I'll never get a role in a school play," or "I'm not going to get into uni." I have heard all of these claims and more from girls who are well liked, talented actors, or on the cusp of being admitted to several universities. Our natural instinct, in these moments, is to offer reassurance. We say, "Of course you will!" and hope to leave it at that.

Our daughters would not be as stressed and anxious as they are if responding this way typically worked. Occasionally, of course, our tender words do succeed in vanquishing an anxiety for good. More often, however, offering reassurance can feel like playing that old arcade game, *Whac-A-Mole*. Up pops the plight of the moment and down comes our padded mallet of optimism. We bang that worry back into its hole and a fresh concern pops up elsewhere. We bonk that one on the head only to discover that the original worry has since reappeared.

Why doesn't reassurance work, especially in response to irrational concerns? Because it doesn't take the problem, however silly it may seem, seriously and thus strikes girls as dismissive. If we want to get rid of a worry for good, we must earnestly engage it.

To do so, we have some options. Your knowledge of your daughter and the context of her concerns will help you decide how you want to proceed. Sometimes I ask girls playfully, "Are you up for a game of 'Worst-Case Scenario'?" If the girl is agreeable, I'll begin with, "Okay, let's say that you're right—that there won't be anyone to sit with at lunch tomorrow." I offer this in a tone that falls somewhere between neutral and upbeat in order to convey my total acceptance of this unpleasant possibility. "If that happens," I ask, "what will you do then?"

Modelling the ability to tolerate a bad situation helps our daughters to do the same. From there, we can figure out a way

concerns that we view as overblown, helps them to feel calmer and more in control.

"I don't know," one girl told me, "maybe I'll ask someone early in the day if she wants to eat lunch together."

"Good idea. And what if that doesn't work? What else could you try?"

"We have the option of taking our lunches to a quiet study area if we want to."

"Do you want to?"

"Not really, but I like some kids who usually go to the quiet study area. I could see if they want to eat lunch together in the cafeteria the next day."

And so on.

When I suspect that offering to play a round of "Worst-Case Scenario" might come across as a bit glib, I often turn to a closely related approach that can work just as well. For this approach, I start by reminding myself that the stuff of life can be divided into three categories: things we like, things we can handle, and things that constitute a crisis. Anyone who spends time with young people knows that when children and teenagers become upset, they can forget about that middle category. They sometimes believe that when things don't go the way they want, they are facing a crisis. It falls to adults to help them see the situation otherwise.

One evening in late October, a Year 12 student named Molly reminded me how very stressful it can be to feel that there is no margin between a desired outcome and a disaster. Because basketball season had just started, Molly's appointment at my office had moved from our regular 3:30 P.M. time to 6:00 P.M., so that we could meet after practice. When I went to retrieve her from my waiting room, Molly looked absolutely spent. Her slumping shoulders and the stony look on her face told me that her troubles—whatever they were—went beyond the fact that we were

We greeted each other and Molly followed me to my office. Unlike my den under the stairs at Laurel School, my space at my private practice has large windows on two of the four walls. I almost never turn on any lights during the day. But by early evening in late October the sun had nearly set. For the first time in the five months we had been working together, Molly and I met in the glow of the overhead fixtures and table lamps I use when the natural light fades.

"What's up?" I asked, making it clear that I was happy to let her set our agenda for the appointment.

"Basketball is killing me," Molly replied in a tone of utter defeat. "I'm not even kidding about this: I think that I may end up being the only Year 12 in the reserves."

"Oof, that doesn't sound so good," I said sympathetically. "Why?"

"I almost made the team last year and I had a good season, so it shouldn't even be an issue. But an ankle sprain that was bugging me over the summer has started to hurt again. My coach knows that I'm doing as much as I can"—Molly paused as discouragement clouded her face—"but I have to sit out a lot."

"What does the athletic trainer say about your sprain?"

"He seems optimistic about it. He thinks that if I go easy on it now, I may be okay pretty soon. But I can tell that my coach is already trying to prepare me for being a reserve." Molly's voice tightened. "She's been talking about how many good Year 13s there are—and of course they'll all be on the team—and telling me that I can still be a leader regardless of how they sort out the teams."

"I'm so sorry," I said, "and that really stinks about your ankle." "Right?" said Molly. "It's making me nuts. I'm so stressed about it that I'm not even paying attention in class. Instead I'm thinking about when I can get it iced and wrapped again. Instead of doing my work, I'm looking online for information on how to

"Look, I know that being on the bench this year is the last thing you want to have happen."

"Yep," she said before adding with some unexpected levity, "I might as well be babysitting since I'll be the old lady of the team."

"But even if it's not something you want, I think it's something you can handle."

There are two words I find myself using a lot with kids and teenagers who are stuck in stressful situations: *stinks* and *handle*. When they first share their bad news, I find that responding with a heartfelt, "Oh, that stinks," lets young people know that I won't try to talk them into feeling better. Though it doesn't seem like much, this gesture alone provides a surprising amount of support. Indeed, I'm reminded of the near-magical healing powers of simple and straight-up empathy every time I use it.

When still more help is needed, I turn my attention to addressing how the girl would like to play the cards she's been dealt. To me, asking a girl how she wants to handle something feels like a vote of confidence. It gives her some say in her misery and moves her out of the position of simply hoping the problem will go away. If it turns out that there actually is something she can do about the situation, all the better. If she's stuck, we can fall back on what we have learned from the research on managing intractable stress: first she must find a way to accept the situation, then she must find a happy distraction.

"I can handle the idea of being a reserve," said Molly. "I just don't want to."

"Understandably," I said, "but it sounds like being a reserve may be a done deal." Molly tilted her head in response and made a face that communicated her reluctant acceptance of this likelihood. "What if you don't fight it?" I asked. "What if you lean into the idea that you won't be having the basketball season you hoped for?"

After a pause she replied, "I can live with being a reserve, I guess. And I can make sure that my ankle is in really good shape before next year."

"Is there any part of being in reserve that might be okay? Is there a way to make it more bearable?"

"There are some fun Year IIs on the team—I actually like them better than some of the girls my age. Since I'll probably be stuck with the Year IIs, I might as well enjoy them."

Getting anyone to accept an unwanted situation isn't easy. But when we can tolerate our daughters' emotional discomfort, we help them to withstand painful circumstances. Despite its instinctive appeal, offering rapid reassurance—"I'm sure being a reserve will be great!"—can sound a lot like, "Your distress makes me uneasy." In contrast, acknowledging that a situation *stinks* and will need to be *handled* sends a powerful, stress-reducing message: "I'm truly sorry about what you are facing. The good news is that this is not a crisis and that I'm here to help you manage it."

Our reassurance reflex never kicks in harder than when girls express totally absurd concerns. I have practically pulled self-restraint muscles when met with statements such as "Mocks might actually kill me!" or "I'll spend weekends alone the rest of my life!" In these moments, we need a handy reply that neither dismisses nor indulges their fears. Lucky for you (and my overworked self-restraint), I've stumbled upon a reliable solution: empathize with how wretched it must be to feel that way.

The next time your daughter hits you with, "All of my teachers hate me!" try offering a heartfelt response such as, "Oh honey . . . it must feel awful to even think that." For, "I'm going to fail algebra!" try, "Well, I don't think that will happen, but in the meantime, it sounds like today was rotten." If you find yourself trapped in an exchange that leaves you feeling utterly helpless (as in, "There's nothing *anyone* can do to help me through algebra!"),

daughter know that she has effectively communicated her emotional state. Tenderly offer, "I know you're feeling helpless, and I can only guess how miserable that must be."

Actively empathizing with our daughters' distress is not only effective, it's also far superior to the alternative of offering reassurance. Think about it this way. A girl who insists that all of her teachers hate her knows, at some level, that this cannot be true. What she is really trying to communicate is that she feels very, very upset. If we quibble about the facts or respond with cheery optimism, we're missing the point. Your daughter will let you know that you are off the mark by becoming increasingly dismayed. But when we make it clear that we get it—that we can accept the reality that she feels just awful—our daughter can take comfort in our compassion. From there, she can decide to move toward a solution or simply let go of the problem altogether.

Snit Happens

If you are parenting a normally developing girl, she will sometimes have meltdowns. Nothing you do can prevent this. The good news is that her emotional eruptions, in and of themselves, say very little about her overall psychological health.

All the same, it's not easy to be standing there when a girl unleashes a raging storm of frustration, becomes so stressed that she snaps back rudely when you ask what she wants for dinner, or doubles over in distress while sobbing. These moments ask a lot of parents and often require a great deal of patience to handle well. While you cannot control the fact that your daughter will sometimes become undone, you have a lot of say about how you react.

Decades of research tell us that our daughters read our

for cues that will contain, or increase, their own discomfort. Fretfully rushing to rescue girls from manageable threats, trying to reason away their glitter storms, attempting to vanquish their concerns with hollow reassurances, or responding with anger can, unwittingly, fuel our daughters' fears. In contrast, offering a measured and calm response can have a powerful, positive effect on girls' immediate and long-term distress.

But just as one drowning person cannot rescue another, so it is impossible to respond to meltdowns calmly when our own nerves are frayed. If you are feeling overwhelmed by stress or if you often experience high levels of anxiety, make sure that you are getting the support you deserve, both for your own sake and for your daughter's. Again, research shows parents who are very nervous themselves are more likely to have children who become easily afraid and struggle to manage stress.

To be clear, we need not—and certainly should not—parent as though we are placid Zen masters who greet emotional chaos with detached profundity. And when we do react to our daughters in ways we later regret (such as losing our cool with a girl whose stress comes out as snarkiness), we can remember that our daughters are pretty resilient and do not need for us to be perfect.

All the same, we should reflect seriously on our baseline levels of emotional strain and take steps where we can to reduce the tension in our own lives. Our girls are deeply attuned to our psychological states and the emotional atmospheres we create in our homes. So, let's turn our attention to the concrete things parents can do to first secure their own oxygen masks so that they can react helpfully when their daughters seem to be suffocating from stress.

When the News Frays Our Nerves

While employing psychological defences sounds like a bad thing, this is not always the case. It's never a compliment to say that someone is "being defensive," but none of us could get through the day without our automatic psychological shields. We call on our defences to withstand distressing emotional experiences often without even being aware of it. For example, if we miss the bus and say, "Oh, well. It's always good to get a little extra exercise by walking," we are using the defence of rationalization to make the best of a bad situation. And when we are mad at our boss and take our anger out by going on a long, hard run, we are relying on sublimation to channel a dark feeling in a productive direction.

Defences can be harmful if we deploy the same one all the time or if they distort reality, such as when people refuse to acknowledge events that have actually occurred (denial), or persistently ascribe their own unwanted feelings—such as lust, hate, or envy—to others (projection). But so long as we use a variety of defences and avoid the ones that warp the truth or damage relationships, these mental shields make it possible for us to withstand the psychological slings and arrows of everyday life.

Compartmentalization is a relatively unheralded, but valuable, psychological defence. It can best be described as the "I'm just not going to think about that right now" defence, and we use it regularly in daily life. For instance, drivers know that at any intersection a person coming the other way could run the red light and cause a serious accident. But we would not be able to get behind the wheel if we actually *thought* about this possibility all the time. So we just don't think about it as we hop into our cars to get to where we need to go.

Being in touch with the bad news of the world takes an emo-

devices that can keep us updated on happenings from around the globe—makes it harder than ever to “just not think about” upsetting events that occur outside of our daily sphere. There has always been bad news in the world, but it was so much easier to compartmentalize it back when we were limited to reading the newspaper in the morning and watching television news in the evening. There is, of course, a lot to be said for having a broader, deeper, and at times up-to-the-minute awareness of what is going on in the world. Undoubtedly, there’s value in being an informed person. Even more, knowledge of current events and empathy for the suffering of others can spur us toward valuable action and remind us not to take our own good fortune for granted.

All the same, we must recognize that having constant access to the news can come at a cost, especially when the news is stressful. A steady stream of upsetting updates can scrape our nerves raw and leave us compulsively checking our devices for the latest developments.

We should also remember that the media, by nature, highlight unfortunate events that *are* happening, not unfortunate events that *aren’t* happening. This lopsided picture can unnecessarily amplify our fears. While the world may seem to be more war-ridden now than in decades past, objective evidence suggests that conflict-related deaths were much more common in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s than they are today. In a similar vein, surveys conducted by the American Psychological Association tell us that more adults feel highly stressed by concerns about personal safety now than at any time in the past decade. Whether or not these concerns reflect reality almost certainly depends on the individual in question, but the overall spike in worries doesn’t align with data demonstrating that rates of violent crime and homicides in the United States have fallen sharply from where they were ten years ago.

that when we hear about teenagers, we usually hear alarming news. This can leave parents feeling unduly worried, especially given that we are now raising the best-behaved generation of teenagers on record. Compared with teens of past generations, our adolescents are less likely to have ever tried marijuana, cocaine, or hallucinogens, or to have tried or abused alcohol, or to have smoked cigarettes. They are more likely to wear bike helmets and seatbelts and to refuse to ride with drunk drivers and less likely to have had sex. When they do have sex, today’s teenagers have fewer partners and are more likely to use condoms. Our teens do face emerging perils, such as e-cigarettes and opioid abuse (which, incidentally, is much more common among adults than teens). The bottom line is clear. Today’s kids, as a group, manage themselves better than we ever did.

Needless to say, that doesn’t mean we should stop worrying about our teenagers—that is what parents do. Nor should we dismiss or ignore the real human and environmental catastrophes that unfold around us on a daily basis. But we should recognize that the media and the digital platforms that bring us the news share the single aim of grabbing our attention. Obviously, it has never been easier for our attention to be grabbed now that most of us carry a news delivery device around with us during every waking hour.

Choosing how much to know about world events is a highly personal decision. But it is a decision that modern technology now requires us to reflect upon and make, especially when the cost to our mental health starts to outweigh the benefits of staying current. It is all too easy to assume that if having information is good, having more information is better. While this may be true for some people, it’s not true for everyone. If knowing too much about the news of the day turns us into an overreactive bundle of nerves, our own anxiety will inevitably spill over onto

bad news about teenagers causes us to treat our own sturdy and steady daughters as if they are fragile and reckless, we owe it to our girls to reconsider our relationship with the news cycle and, perhaps, to decide to engage in some conscious compartmentalization.

Collecting Emotional Trash

Just as we now have more anxiety-provoking information about the world at large than ever before, so also do we, thanks again to digital technology, know more than any generation of parents before us about the details of our own children's lives. Here, too, we should not assume that having a steady stream of information, especially about the moments when our children are feeling upset or anxious, is always a good thing.

Psychologists have long understood that teenagers sometimes deal with painful feelings by handing their unwanted emotions off to their parents. Before the dawn of the mobile phone, adolescents did this by casually dropping bombs at the dinner table—as in, “Oh, by the way, the car needs a new windshield”—then protesting that their parents were overreacting in becoming upset. In truth, the teenager likely spent all day feeling horrible about the events that caused the cracked windshield but eventually came to the limit of her ability to tolerate her discomfort. So she dumped her distress on her parents in the same way one gets rid of a piece of trash; she tossed it off and wanted nothing further to do with it. This timeworn approach works well for the girl who feels relieved of her emotional rubbish, but not so well for the parents who are now stuck holding it.

Mobile phones, it turns out, are the world's handiest trash chutes. Indeed, the following scenario should be familiar to al-

at her disposal. It starts when an adolescent sends a preposterous, yet still worrisome, midday text, perhaps something along the lines of, “Just an FYI, I’m dropping out of school.” In response, her loving parent sends a curious reply along with a concerned emoji-face—“Oh, no! What’s up?”—which the teen refuses to acknowledge. From there, the parent carries on with the day, dogged by concerns about what could possibly have triggered the alarming text, maybe even reaching out again and still finding him- or herself unable to get any more information from the daughter. Why? Because the girl simply wants to be rid of the emotional trash, not discuss it with the parent who is now carrying the horrible feeling that used to belong to her.

When the parent and daughter see each other at day’s end, the reunion could go any number of ways. But the most likely outcome is that the daughter felt better the moment she digitally dumped her emotional junk. In short, it usually turns out that the parent worried all day about a problem that the girl hardly remembers, or at least has no interest in addressing, by the time she gets home.

A friend of mine came up with a brilliant way to improve upon this interaction after enduring several nail-biting weekdays fielding texts sent by her fourteen-year-old. My friend bought a beautiful notebook and gave it to her daughter, saying, “Let’s try this. Anything you want to text me during the day, write it down in here. Then, at the end of the day, you can show me what you want me to know.” Her daughter did, indeed, use the notebook as a repository for the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings that popped up at school. By the time the evening rolled around, she rarely had any interest in sharing any of her notes about events that were, by then, barely visible in her rearview mirror. From time to time, however, she did come home eager to tell her mother about some wrinkle in the day.

at once. First, it halted the teenager's barrage of worrisome texts without being the least bit dismissive of her concerns. Second, without even saying as much, my friend communicated to her daughter that nothing could possibly happen during the school day that would require her mother's immediate intervention and that, if it did, she trusted that she'd hear about it from an adult at school—in other words, the notebook served to remind the teenager of that massive “stuff I can handle” category that teenagers sometimes lose sight of when they become upset. Finally, on the occasions when the girl did have a concern to share, she was now discussing it with a mother who, thanks to that blessed notebook, had not *already* spent the entire day fretting about her daughter. Without question, this made it a lot easier for my friend to respond to her girl's concerns in the calm, measured way we know to be most helpful.

Parents Can Know Too Much

Parenting in the digital age means that we have access to a stunning amount of information about our children's lives beyond what they elect to share with us. If we choose, we can read their conversations with friends, see how they participate in the milieu of social media, know what they searched for online, and even track their physical location.

I have found that I cannot come up with a one-size-fits-all answer to the question of how much parents should monitor their kids' technology use, or use technology to monitor their kids. There are too many variables at play, such as the child's age, impulsivity level, track record, and so on. But if we approach our children's digital lives from the perspective of managing our own parental anxiety, I think that we should acknowledge that it is

clear to me one afternoon in my practice when a friendly and thoughtful seventeen-year-old named Hailey described a blow-out she'd had with her father.

Clearly irritated, she said, “My dad lost it with me this weekend. It was awful.”

“What happened?” I asked without hiding my surprise. She was as well-behaved as any girl I knew, so I was curious what had caused the eruption in her father, a kind man whom I knew to be a quite anxious and doting parent.

“Homecoming was on Saturday night and the big after-party was over at Trina's. She's not a close friend of mine, but we hang out with a lot of the same people and all of my friends were headed there after the dance. My parents didn't want me to go because they had heard stories about how it's always crazy at Trina's house.”

I nodded to indicate that she did not need to explain further. I am well aware that most secondary schools have at least a few students whose homes are known to be notoriously light on adult supervision.

“I agreed not to go, which kinda bugged me,” she said, sounding at once frustrated and resigned. “But everyone else in my group was going and I was one of the drivers. So I dropped my date off at Trina's house and hung out on the front porch for about five minutes with Trina's older sister who was back from college.”

“When I walked in the door at home, my dad went ballistic. He had been tracking my location on my phone and was super pissed that I had gone to Trina's. It didn't matter that I hadn't stayed, and he didn't care that I hadn't even gone in.”

“Oh,” I said somewhat feebly, while trying to figure out how to respond without taking sides.

“He calmed down a little bit once he let me explain that there

party." Crestfallen, Hailey then added, "He thinks I should have called to let him know I'd be stopping by Trina's—and he said that now he doesn't feel he can trust me."

"Oh," I said again before asking, "Does he usually track you on your phone?"

"Honestly, I don't know—and I don't think that he was trying to catch me or anything. I think he just gets worried when I'm out at night and wants to know that I'm safe."

As I listened to her story, I found myself feeling awful for Hailey, who truly had done nothing wrong. I also felt terrible for her father who, because he had more information than was helpful, was now looking back on a rough weekend and ahead at a strained relationship with his daughter. Sitting with Hailey and other teenagers who have gotten into trouble with their parents over activity our own parents never would have had a way of knowing about has left me thinking about a parallel situation in medicine: the availability of whole-body computerized tomography.

CT screening, as it is often called, provides a highly detailed X-ray of the body and has been touted as a way to catch the early signs of grave diseases in apparently healthy individuals. Yet most physicians feel that scanning people who have no signs of disease does more harm than good. The Food and Drug Administration actually forbids the makers of CT systems from promoting their machines for the symptom-free, because normal results can be misleading, and "false positives" (hints of illness that turn out to be inaccurate) can trigger further unnecessary and risky tests. For parenting, mobile phones aren't altogether different. Like CT scans, they can provide a ton of information that stands to be both anxiety-provoking and difficult to interpret.

While there are plenty of good reasons to monitor a kid's technology use, I think that we should proceed with caution when we

often happens that parents who scan their child's text messages or social media banter are surprised to discover that their daughter and several of her friends speak fluent profanity. This news can be received in a few different ways. Parents might worry that their daughter's swearing represents the tip of a naughty iceberg, wonder where they failed in her moral upbringing, and start to regard her with relationship-straining suspicion. Alternately, they might remember that irreverence and boundary-pushing are actually signs of normal and healthy development in teenagers and that, when we were teens, most of us tried out colourful language in changing rooms, in the back of the bus, and in the notes we passed in class.

While it can be tempting to whitewash our memory of our own teenage years, it's probably more accurate and useful to recognize that the biggest difference between our generation and our kids' is that our parents simply had no way of knowing what we were up to when we weren't home, how we spoke with our friends, or even where we were. And they probably slept better for it.

With this perspective in mind, another possible response to discovering a trove of online obscenity would be for the parents to separate *what* they found from *where* they found it. They might say, "We get it that you and your friends swear when you're not around adults—no problem there. But you're breaking the 'don't post anything you wouldn't want Grandma to see' rule you agreed to when you got your phone. If you need to tell your friends that the online swearing ban comes from us, feel free."

Obviously, this approach presumes that the parents have been transparent about monitoring their daughter's technology use. I'm not usually a very prescriptive psychologist, but if you are checking up on your girl's digital activity, I think it's best to let her know. For one thing, telling your daughter that you've re-

bump that might slow her down when she's tempted to make a bad choice online. For another, it means that you can readily talk with your daughter about any concerning information you find. In practical terms, if a CT scan were to discover a spot on your liver, you'd want to find out quickly how worried, or not, you should be about it. If something in your daughter's digital profile makes you nervous, talking with her about it will almost always be the best way to address your own discomfort.

With the CT scan metaphor in mind, the question certainly arises about whether it makes sense to monitor a well-behaved teenager's technology at all. That decision is as individual as the choice we make about how closely to follow the news. But the critical issue is the same: it's not always better to know more.

If I had a simple solution to the challenge of supervising digital denizens I'd offer it. Until then, I can tell you that decades of being a practising clinician have convinced me that the most powerful force for good in a young person's life is having a caring, working relationship with at least one loving adult. As modern parents, we need to ensure that the time we spend monitoring our girl's technology doesn't get in the way of or threaten to take the place of that connection.

To safeguard our relationship, we should remember that supervising our daughter's digital activity cannot keep her safe if we don't also have a clear and direct line of communication with her. When parents do find themselves relying heavily on digital surveillance to feel that they have a link with their daughter, I always recommend that they work to reboot their relationship with their girl, recruiting the help of a counsellor if necessary. Furthermore, we should stay alert to the possibility that what we learn online might, without any benefit, add to the worries we feel as parents and contribute to tense, unhelpful interactions at home.

Putting Slack in the System

Every day I get to walk my younger daughter to our neighbourhood primary school, and once I've dropped her off, I usually spend the ten-minute walk back to my home catching up with other parents who follow the same routine. One spring, I found myself in a series of morning conversations with a dad who lives near me and who also has two daughters. His older girl attends our neighbourhood school and, at the time, his younger daughter went to a different school about fifteen minutes away by car. My friend and his wife were trying to decide if they should move their younger girl to our neighbourhood school for Year 1 in the coming autumn or if they should have her stay one more year at her current school, before moving her to the neighbourhood school for Year 2.

Ten minutes at a time, we weighed their family's dilemma. There were pros and cons to both decisions, and the more we talked about it, the more apparent it became that one choice was not clearly better than the other for their daughter. Finally I asked, "Is there a choice that would make life easier for your family—that would put more slack in the system?"

"Oh, yeah," said my neighbour, "it would be easier to have them both at the same school. They'd have the same holidays and snow days, and we wouldn't have to drive to pick up our little one."

"If it's otherwise a wash," I replied, "and moving her for Year 1 makes life easier for you and your wife, then I think that's the best choice for your whole family."

This, I can say, is a lesson I've learned the hard way. Personally, I happen to enjoy being very busy. Unfortunately, my preferred volume of activity rides very close to an amount that overwhelms me. In my early days as a mother, I would see just how many

wedge in an extra art class for one of my girls, or I'd rustle up a babysitter so that I could give a talk on a night when my husband also had to be out. When it was time to send birthday treats to school, I'd get it in my head that they needed to be healthy, delicious, and homemade. I would spin ten plates in my own slightly manic fashion and it would all seem to be going reasonably well.

Until someone threw up.

Or my car refused to start.

Or a babysitter had to cancel.

Then the plates would come crashing down and my activity dial would jump from bustling to toxic. In half a panic, I'd try to reconcile my tightly packed schedule with the needs of a sick child, to figure out how our family could do its hectic hustle with only one car, or to find a last-minute babysitter.

I was about three years into this mothering mania when I first encountered the research on daily hassles, thanks to the fact that I was coauthoring a textbook with a colleague. I'm constantly reading studies in my field, but I can point to only a handful that have inspired me to make real changes in my own life. The news that the stress of minor hassles can be as significant—if not more significant—as the stress of true calamities fit with my experience. When one of my daughters came down with the flu, the problem was not that she was sick. The problem was that everyone's calendar was so jammed that her illness created an avalanche of scheduling problems. In hindsight this seems obvious enough, but once I learned to build slack into our system (a luxury, I'm aware, that not all families have), it turned out to be a really effective antidote to the unexpected and unavoidable stresses of daily life. Whenever possible, I've tried to stop asking myself, "Can I squeeze this fill-in-the-blank into the week?" and to wonder instead, "Should I?"

Of course we can't know ahead of time if our scheduling cal-

my old overbooking habits. Every time this happens life finds a way to remind me, again, that it's best to try to set our family's baseline activity levels at about 75 percent of what we can actually accomplish.

When we're not operating at maximum capacity, everyone in the family feels less stressed and anxious. Chronic frenzy is replaced by relative calm, and, when things go wrong, we're dealing with a frustration, not a crisis. There are now times when I sheepishly deliver shop-bought doughnut holes to school knowing that I had plenty of time to make something healthier (not that that would have been the kids' preference). But now there are also times when a sick day isn't a disaster, just a call for me to shuffle my duties into the openings in my calendar so that I can stay home and watch movies with the vomiter of the moment.

When things are going well, having time on hand also creates room for spontaneous delights. One day, during a downpour, my younger daughter thought it would be great to put on all of our rain gear and walk to school instead of driving as we would normally do when the weather is bad. I went along with her plan only because I happened to have time to come back home and change into work clothes after I dropped her off. Our puddled-pocked walk was actually so much fun that we continue to reminisce about it three years later.

Our time with our children is short, and every caring parent feels pressed to make the most of it. This can lead us to think that we make the most of time by *filling* it, especially with structured activities with clear goals such as pursuing sports, or taking lessons, or making adorable homemade cupcakes. I have to work against my own nature to appreciate that, often, we make the most of time just by *having* it. Deliberately underscheduling my family—always against my own instincts—continues to prove itself a reliable strategy for reducing the strain in our lives, and

Money Can Buy Stress

Just as we might choose to be less tightly scheduled so that we can better absorb the inevitable calamities that come with family life, new research suggests that kids actually feel less pressure when their parents elect to live more modestly than they can afford. We have long known that growing up in poverty causes unrelenting stress. But in the last decade, studies have clearly established that affluence may not always be as good for children and teenagers as one might think. In fact, psychologist Suniya Luthar and her colleagues have done an excellent job of documenting the elevated rates of emotional problems among young people with prosperous parents.

Surprisingly, Dr. Luthar's work has found that teenagers from wealthy families are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and substance abuse than young people being raised in lower tax brackets. To explain these unexpected but well-established findings, experts have noted that growing up in a context of abundance can create intense achievement pressures for children. Furthermore, research suggests that wealth can create physical and psychological distance between parents and children, as high-earning parents often work long hours and may turn their children's care over to nannies, tutors, or after-school programmes.

Recently, however, psychologists Terese Lund and Eric Dearing approached the bad news on affluence and adolescent well-being from a new perspective. They wondered whether simply coming from money created problems for young people or, instead, if their mental health was compromised by choices that wealthy parents alone are empowered to make. To address this question, they teased apart two variables that had been lumped together in previous research, namely, how much the parents

By studying an economically and geographically diverse sample, Lund and Dearing found that prosperity, in and of itself, posed no risk to healthy psychological development. The affluence of a family's neighbourhood, however, *did* matter, and it mattered a lot. Remarkably, girls raised in the wealthiest neighbourhoods were two to three times more likely to report symptoms of anxiety and depression than girls living in middle-income areas. In parallel, boys in the most upscale communities were two to three times more likely to get themselves into trouble than their peers living in middle-class neighbourhoods.

There's another cardinal rule in psychology: under stress, girls collapse in on themselves and boys act out. In other words, while the girls and boys living in wealthy neighbourhoods had different problems, the nature of their troubles (girls caving in, boys misbehaving) suggests that both groups were suffering from the pressures related to where their parents had chosen to live. Who, you might be wondering, were the least stressed kids in the study? Those residing with wealthy parents in middle-class neighbourhoods.

These remarkable findings encourage us to consider two important issues. One is that the affluent adults living in middle-class communities were electing to put financial slack in their systems by living below their means. Their homes may have been smaller and less opulent than what they could afford, but they also had cash on hand to absorb large and unexpected expenses, such as needing a new roof. There are certainly wealthy families living in upper-class communities who can easily afford to replace their roofs if they have to. But there are also plenty of families who stretch themselves to their limit to live in the most upscale communities they can afford. When their roof needs replacing, and their children, will feel the strain of a financial crunch.

means may also feel less stressed about their own futures. Almost everyone aims to live at least as comfortably in adulthood as they did in childhood. This means that young people raised in the lap of luxury can feel pressed to figure out how they will independently maintain their costly lifestyles.

In my work, I have been surprised to discover that ambitious adolescents from wealthy families can seem preoccupied with their own future professional success, focus on only a few careers (such as those in business or finance), and consider only a few major American cities where they might want to live. In contrast, I often find that teenagers from middle-class backgrounds are more likely to talk about a wide range of jobs they might do and places they might land. Over the years, there have been several moments in my practice when I've been struck by the irony that teenagers from wealthy families often seem more strained and constrained when thinking about their futures than teenagers coming from more modest circumstances.

Looking at it this way, we can see why kids from affluent families living in middle-class neighbourhoods would find themselves in the low-stress sweet spot. They may worry less about their futures because, for them, adult success is not a narrowly defined target. Alongside this, they likely enjoy the stress-reducing benefits of affluence: the atmospheric ease that comes with having a financial cushion, living with parents who don't have to work over-the-top hours just to make ends meet, and being able to graduate from university without debt.

As parents, if we are fortunate enough to have financial choices, we can't learn about this research without reflecting on the ones we make. Our decisions about where we live, how we holiday, what we drive, and all of the other ways that we spend money on or around our children are, to be sure, highly personal. This is also true of how much we choose to know about the news

children's technology. These are not choices we make once, but at many points along the way.

We can take steps to contain our own anxiety and our daughters' by taking a fresh look at these decisions. It's too easy to fall into the assumption that when it comes to having information, scheduling activities, or enjoying personal luxuries, more is always better. Surprisingly, it is sometimes true that we can ease the stress that we, and our daughters, feel by deciding to know, do, and spend less.

As parents, we should work to manage the strain that we feel in our own lives, both for the sake of ourselves and because our own emotional tension can contribute to an anxious climate at home. And a tense atmosphere at home makes it harder for our daughters to feel at ease on their good days, and likewise harder for us to be the calm presence they need on their bad days. Next, let's turn to a topic that is often a source of distress. At some point along the way, every one of our daughters will feel uneasy about her relationships with other girls her age.