



**Adolescent Girls in Crisis: Intervention and Hope.** By Martha B. Straus. New York: W.W. Norton & Company; 2007; 240 pp, \$35.00 (hardcover).

As early as 1970, the famous developmentalist Urie Bronfenbrenner warned that without thoughtful and coordinated action by whole integrated communities, we would begin to witness increased antagonism and indifference in the younger generation from all segments of society—the middle-class and the disadvantaged. Since then, a growing number of scholars, pundits, youth advocates, parents, and policy makers have sounded the alarm. Alongside theories about the decay of youth morals and the growing epidemic of parental ineptitude comes the charge that corrosive elements in popular culture and social processes are simultaneously thwarting the potential for positive youth development and the capacity of important socializing agents (families, neighborhoods, schools, and communities) to buffer youth from caustic effects in the larger environment.

There is hope, however. Although the 1990s and early part of the new millennium can be accurately described as a time devoted to taking stock of the various deleterious effects of the unique alchemy between modern-day life and adolescent development, the polemics have given way in the past several years to constructive dialogue about how to cope with the fact that there is no going back—although the idea of a healthy, happy, and largely stress-free adolescent life remains very much alive, such a life remains largely un-lived by contemporary teens. Martha Straus's book, *Adolescent Girls in Crisis: Intervention and Hope* successfully weds a comprehensive review of the difficulties posed to girls by the modern era with a series of concrete, ecologically grounded, and, most important, useful strategies for therapists who work with adolescent girls.

Straus's book is divided into two parts. The first four chapters comprise the first, smaller section of the book and chronicle female adolescent development and the trends and historical tides with which modern-day girls must contend as they make their way from childhood to adulthood. This is detailed

through a set of chapters that focus on the secret lives of girls (daily life, hidden and not-so-hidden emotions, and the complexities and contradictions of being a girl in contemporary America), the nuts and bolts of adolescent development (physical, brain, social, emotional, and cognitive development), and the challenges particular to being an adolescent girl (e.g., disordered eating, mental illness, abuse, pregnancy, delinquency, etc.), characteristics of the settings girls occupy (families, schools, communities), and the unique cultural and social challenges girls face (e.g., Western emphasis on beauty, early sexualization of girls through the media, developmental asynchronicities, social pressures, and the cultural ambivalence with which adolescent girls are regarded). Straus essentially argues that the challenges of growing up as a girl (presumably in the Western world, although she never states this explicitly) presents girls with unique threats, such as those which come from the pressure to be simultaneously autonomous and dependent, invincible and vulnerable, and perfect and carefree. These, she asserts, often render them vulnerable to a variety of negative influences—inside and outside themselves. Whether self-inflicted and expressed through mental illness or self-damaging behaviors or socially and culturally expressed through deeply contradictory messages about a woman's body, power, and place in society, the net result, Straus argues, is a "war" on girls stemming from deeply rooted social and cultural ambivalence, confusion, and neglect. Although not explicitly contrasting male and female child and adolescent development in the modern era, Straus does suggest that girls face a set of challenges uniquely different than those faced by boys, a set that may ultimately place them at heightened risk for negative outcomes.

The first section is primarily intended to lay the groundwork for the second section of the book, which, comprised of the remaining 10 chapters, is dedicated to an exceptionally thorough and action-focused summary of specific categories that she terms "troubling behaviors." It also includes chapters on the use of psychotropic medications (the only chapter written by someone else, presumably because it falls outside of her area of expertise), hospitalization, and out-of-home treatment, and a chapter entitled "Reasons for Hope." This section, particularly because it includes very useful practical tips based on the author's 30 years of experience as a clinical psychologist and her "in-the-trenches" experience as a parent, is reason alone to buy the

book. Straus's close consideration of all of the most common, although not all commonly considered, mental health challenges faced by adolescent girls is extraordinarily helpful—for therapists and anyone in regular daily contact with teen girls, such as teachers, mental health professionals, medical professionals, and other youth-serving providers. The troubling behaviors chapters are divided into five distinct categories: affective and anxiety disorders; eating disorders and self-mutilation; attachment and trauma problems; social aggression, attention-deficit disorder, and oppositional-defiant disorders; and sex, conduct disorders, and substance abuse. Included in each of these are helpful descriptions of various disorder categories and case presentations and concrete examples of assessment areas and questions one can ask teen clients to gather critical information and heighten a client's capacity for self-reflection and inquiry.

Peppered throughout the book are excerpts from case studies based on the author's clinical practice and helpful strategies for how to handle difficult but common client situations (such as girls resistant to therapy, girls with disengaged parents, or girls with multiple risks and little or no external support). The identification of specific question ideas for effectively broaching important but often emotionally loaded issues is particularly useful for therapists and others dedicated to assisting girls in difficult situations. For example, her suggestions for raising and dealing with NSSI, such as asking girls to share the personal meaning of self-injury, and asking important but not overly loaded assessment questions such as, "Where in your body do you feel the tension?" and "What physical sensations do you experience?," provide helpful guidance for clinicians and others with little experience in this area. Similarly, the chapter on psychotropic medications by Dr. Robert Racusin is a helpful survey of how medications are approved, the general principles of their use in adolescent girls, and classification and general descriptions of common medications. Although perhaps overly basic for seasoned therapists familiar with the adolescent mental-illness medication landscape, this chapter is a very helpful addendum to the previous chapters on categories of mental illness and of immense use to those less familiar with pharmacologic options and uses.

The strength of this book is in the breadth of information and the fact that it is likely to appeal to multiple audiences. And, as is often true, this strength is its primary limitation. With its breadth

comes some sacrifice on focus—particularly in the introductory chapters, which attempt to blend a historical account of the social construction of youth, developmental basics, a summary of the nature and effects of prevailing forces in the lives of contemporary teens, and key considerations of the way the setting characteristics interact with development (usually, the author offers, to the detriment of healthy girl development). Such a broad-brush approach masks the fact that each one of these areas could and have been the subjects of entire volumes and are not easily reduced to the predominant message that female adolescents, as a group, are victims of the worlds they inhabit. Not only does such selective storytelling oversimplify a complex set of interacting phenomena, it eclipses the important and potent ways in which adolescent girls are active agents in their own lives, social settings, cultures, and historical milieus.

That said, the ecological and practical focus of *Adolescent Girls in Crisis: Intervention and Hope* represents an important step beyond the common social toxicity diatribe. Girls, even adolescent girls in crisis, are agents in and co-creators of their lives and it is through understanding and effectively harnessing this agency that they will ultimately learn to navigate the sometimes turbulent waters of adolescence and the unavoidable vicissitudes of human suffering, even when they seem overwhelming. Helping girls to identify and fully capitalize on their internal (personal strengths and assets) and external (supportive individuals, activities, and other opportunities for feeling productive and engaged) resources is an imperative part of helping them to overcome challenges and to thrive. Straus's book takes readers beyond the external world and into the sometimes murky waters of adolescent girls' emotional development and inner lives where fears, unmet needs, and the challenges of navigating the complex and contradictory messages of the contemporary world leave wounds in need of care and redress. With admirable comprehensiveness, this book provides a well-constructed life raft of knowledge and skills for anyone willing to wade into the waters with them. Everyone, from seasoned therapist to first-time parent of an adolescent, will find more than enough tools—and hope—to warrant reading.

**Janis Whitlock, M.P.H., Ph.D.**  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, NY  
[jlw43@cornell.edu](mailto:jlw43@cornell.edu)  
DOI:10.1016/j.jaac.2010.05.010