TOO BROKE GIRLS

Young women are cracking under the pressure to be 'perfect'

by ANA HOMAYOUN

When Natalie and I first met, she talked a mile a minute. An overachiever in every sense of the word, she told me how she juggled water polo with student government and volunteering at the local hospital, and that her weekends were often busier than her school weeks. She kept her daily schedule on her computer, neatly color coordinated and organized, with more than a few time slots that were double- or triple-booked.

As I noticed her winding down, I asked a simple question: "What do you like to do for fun?"

After 10 minutes of bubbly effusiveness, I was met with silence. She furrowed her brow, and looked at me quizzically. "What do you mean, for fun?"

"If you had a day to yourself to do whatever you wanted, what would you do?"

I had rendered her speechless, at least for the moment. "I don't have a lot of free time," she started slowly, trying to make a statement but unable to be definitive.

I pressed on, asking what she would do for fun if she had a few free moments or days — not for a résumé or an obligation, but just for pleasure.

Quietly, she recoiled — she was a senior in high school, with good grades in fairly challenging classes and an extracurricular activities résumé more than a mile long, but she had no idea what she liked to do for fun. She was excessively concerned she wasn't doing everything she possibly could to get into the "right" college. Everything she was involved with had an agenda behind it; it was all about receiving another accolade or getting to some next level of achievement. Her frenetic conversation style was caffeine-induced; her eyes revealed a level of exhaustion common among the sleep-deprived.

By many measurable standards of achievement, girls like Natalie are doing amazingly well today. Many junior high and high school principals flatly acknowledge that the majority of top students in their classes are female. Compared to their male counterparts, young women perform better on standardized tests, outnumber men in college, have better college graduation rates, and now frequently out earn men in the marketplace. All these indicators suggest a radical shift in the kinds of large-scale cultural freedoms girls and young women can now claim in both the classroom and the workplace.

Over the last decade, significant efforts have been made to empower young women to be leaders, encouraging them to drive fearlessly toward their goals and to refuse to take no for an answer. Certainly, today's girls have opportunities available to them that would have been unheard of just one or two generations ago, and without question, there is still progress to be made.

But, even as girls are moving forward in all sorts of measurable ways, many are now hypercritical of themselves for even the slightest deviation from what they consider to be the social or academic norm. Some take life so seriously that it is nearly impossible for them to ever feel a sense of satisfaction or personal fulfillment.

Others are stuck on a treadmill of never feeling good enough and become convinced that happiness will come with the next set of accomplishments or achievements or after they have gained a certain level of social attention or perceived popularity.

Social media, reality television and our changing academic landscape bombard girls with conflicting messages regarding what they should do, how they should be and what they should look like. High-level club sports, with hours of practice and long weekends spent at high-intensity tournaments, are sometimes no longer functional exercise. Instead, the intense strain put on developing girls' bodies produces high rates of injuries that could have long-term ramifications well into their adult lives. Somewhere along the way, the empowering notion that "You Can Do it All" has morphed into the impossible ideal of "You Should Be Able to Do It All, Perfectly, All the Time." Now, not being successful at everything is akin to failure.

It is no coincidence that today's girls are more anxious and struggle with greater mental-health issues than ever before. Compared to boys, girls have higher rates of mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety.

Research shows that girls between the ages of 15 and 20 have more than double the rates of depression than that of their male counterparts. Girls often grapple with eating disorders and negative self body image. There is an epidemic of meanness from girls directed at girls — which in many cases continues into adulthood. Some girls use alcohol, prescription drugs or other narcotics, and/or self-mutilation to cope with the intense pain and pressure from trying to meet a revolving carousel of external and internal expectations. More than one in five high school girls has seriously considered committing suicide. In general, teenage girls seem to be experiencing achievement-driven success and certain kinds of acute unhappiness at the same accelerating rates.

Though statistics about teenage girls with mental and emotional disorders suggest a dire situation, there is still hope for today's overachieving and overstressed girls.

When Maggie, an incoming high school junior, first came to my office, she had spent her sophomore year getting between five and six hours of sleep per night, contributing to her irritability and anxiousness. She seemed resigned to spend the rest of her high school experience in stress overload, but we worked together to find organization, time management, and wellness strategies that actually empowered her to find time to authentically create, explore, rest and relax.

Over the next two years, Maggie transformed from a stressed out student to an engaged young woman. By taking one less advanced placement (AP) class, getting eight hours of sleep every night, and regularly spending time doing things she enjoyed, she felt both relaxed and fuller in her life. She could sometimes read for pleasure, or spend a few hours baking on Sunday with her mom, or take the dog for a long walk on a Wednesday evening. She discovered a new interest through a volunteer position that led her to take computer science classes, sparking a new interest that she pursued because she truly enjoyed it. In her senior year of high school, she gained admission to one of her top choices for college — not in spite of, or exactly because of, but beautifully in consequence of a healthier perspective of the integration of her school and life.

If we really want girls to be empowered, we need to shift the conversation from focusing on achievement and ambition to highlighting the importance of overall personal wellness, purpose, and fulfillment.

Maggie's story suggests that encouraging girls to define their own core values, discover what is truly important to them, and cultivate their interests without a fear of failure can actually allow to dream bigger, go further and feel better than they ever have before. Indeed, it is only when girls are emotionally, physically, socially and spiritually healthy that the real empowerment begins.

Excerpted from Ana Homayoun's "The Myth of the Perfect Girl: Helping Our Daughters Find Authentic Success and Happiness in School and Life" (Perigee), out this week.