

Memorandum

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FROM: Fern Chertok and Rachel Minkin

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SUBJECT: Findings on Interests and Concerns of Teen Girls in the Atlanta Jewish Community

Teens today face many pressures around schoolwork, friendship groups, social media, and expectations from parents and society. A recent Pew Research Center study found that seven-in-ten teens see anxiety and depression as major problems among their peers (Horowitz and Graf 2019). This memo describes the topline findings of research conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies to explore the needs and concerns of female-identifying teenagers in Atlanta-area Jewish households.

The research team took a qualitative approach to this exploratory study of the concerns of Jewish teen girls. This included key informant interviews conducted with and professionals working with Jewish teen girls including youth group leaders and college counselors. We also conducted focus groups with teen girls ages 14-19 drawn from the local chapter of a national Jewish youth group and two Atlanta-area Jewish high schools. The first school is a coeducational and pluralistic Jewish community high school ("Coed HS"), and the second school is a Bais Yaakov high school for girls ("Girls HS"). Full details of the project's methods are provided in the Appendix.

Findings

Sources of Stress

The teen girls that participated in our discussions were, for the most part, doing well in their lives at home, at school, and with peers. Nonetheless, almost all expressed concern over the stressors they face, most of which were tied to school and academic performance, their developmental stage of life, and the expected changes and choices they face.

Pressure to Succeed Academically

Pew found that the source of pressure most cited by teens is academics with the majority (61%) indicating they felt strong pressure to get good grades (Horowitz and Graf 2019). At the heart of academic anxiety for many teens is what some have called the "College Application Industrial Complex—a swirling mix of anxious parents, obsessively checked online grading systems, college counseling, and my-life-is-over-if-I-blow-my-SATs terror" (Simmons, 2018: 1). The Pew study found that over a third of girls are worried about getting into the school of their choice (Horowitz & Graf, 2019).

Echoing this research, one of our key informants told us that, in recent years, she has seen students feeling more and more stress that “I’m not good enough for colleges I want to get into.” This key informant also told us that students start building their resumes for college in 9th grade and for the rest of their high school years, “everything they do is for college.”

Many of the teen girls in our focus groups, especially those in the second half of their high school years, expressed anxiety about getting into the “right” college or seminary. These teens felt that where they gained admittance for post-secondary education would irrevocably define them and their future possibilities. In other words, not being accepted to an elite or well-regarded school or seminary would substantially limit their expectations for future success.

I think right now you can go into any room and anyone's asking, ‘what college do you want to go to? What are you applying to?’ I think people feel pressure to say some big school or something like that. I think people feel pressured to get in to a good school and tell your friends and family about it. Right now as seniors, that's our whole conversation. At Rosh Hashana, all they'd ask is ‘where do you want to go?’ (Youth group)

Why am I having to choose my career and major and have to worry about financial need, student debt and all these things? I should be focus[ing] on working for a test tomorrow. (Coed HS)

I was thinking about a bunch of different seminaries. I felt like where I went defined who I am in the future. To me, it was very real then and just deciding who I wanted to be, where I wanted to go, and also dealing with all the pressures that I was getting from mentors, my family, friends. (Girls HS)

At my school, it's super competitive. It's not did you get a really good job and what do you want to do after college? [It's] what college can you get into? The pressure of getting into the really good school out of state. It's supposed to be ‘what do you want to do with your life?’ And it's never about that. (Youth group)

I don't even know if this is really true, but people just think that the rank of your school says something about who you are, where you stand or what kind of intellectual level you're at. So you feel like if you can say, ‘Oh, I went to Harvard University’ for the rest of your life, then that will always help you get places. [There are] stigmas around certain universities. (Youth group)

All your four years in high school is kind of discounted if you don't get into a college you want because [it's the] end all, be all and everything. (Youth group)

Teens also told us that they are concerned that, no matter how impressive their resumes are, they may not be enough to achieve admission to their desired schools. Teens described an

almost Herculean challenge of having to gain outstanding grades and test scores, and accumulate numerous extra-curricular activities and volunteer engagements.

I'm just stressed about where I need my scores to be and where I need my grades to be and to have time to study for that. So that's definitely the biggest challenge and stressor for me. (Youth group)

I do well in school, I have good grades, great SAT scores, but I'm still terrified for the college process. (Coed HS)

Pressure to be Perfect

Our recent report on the challenges facing Jewish working women in the Atlanta area noted that many women “are motivated to do their best in all aspects of their lives and meet or exceed the expectations of employers, co-workers, spouses, children, and extended family” (Chertok et al., 2020). Many of the teen girls we spoke with echoed this pressure to be perfect in all areas of their lives. Whether it be their performance in academics and extracurricular activities, their relations with friends, or their personal appearance and how they conduct themselves, these teen girls felt the pressure to not just do well but to excel. Some teens noted that social media only exacerbated comparisons with peers whose posts portrayed an ideal version of themselves and their experiences. A key informant that works with teens summed the situation up saying “everyone curates their lives online, it’s only good stuff.”

Little things are taken into such big consideration by people these days. Like if something very minor happens, people will think about it and dwell on it for a really long time. Even wearing an outfit to school that people didn't like, like that turns into a big problem for some people and they think about it a lot. It gets them down. So it's a lot of like the tiny stuff becoming more prevalent in people's lives and people thinking that minor things that people don't agree with is a reflection of them rather than just a disagreement between them. (Youth group)

There's a lot of pressure from every direction you could say from school, grades, things like that. Sometimes from family, sometimes even from friends, just you know, friendly competition they call it. But it is pressure to do your best in school pressure to, you know improve your talents and pressure to just sometimes be a good person, you know, be a good friend to be good all around. Cause we're all striving to be our best. But, and then that's really the most, the pressure we put on ourselves and pressure, you know, brings all these things like anxiety and when you don't live up to your expectations of yourself the depression you get from that. (Girls HS)

On social media, a bunch of people edit their posts. It's just like people judge others more frequently on social media posts than if there wasn't social media. I think people always

compare [themselves] to these edited posts. And people think that they actually have to look like that. But in reality you don't. (Youth group)

Many teen girls told us that mistakes and performances that were less than excellent were personally unacceptable. They feared that any deviation from the ideal would irrevocably color how others see them or limit their options. Some commentators have noted that this desire to excel in all aspects of their lives can dampen the curiosity and healthy risk taking of teens (Simmons 2019).

In this day and age, we can't make mistakes. It's like a pressure of not making a mistake because you want to impress. But in reality, if you don't make these mistakes, then later on we're going to make the mistake and it's going to be a bigger deal than making them as a teenager. (Coed HSI)

I guess it's the way that the world is right now... if you haven't cured cancer by the time you're 12 then you're a failure. (Girls HS)

I always feel like you make one mistake and that's it. Like you're branded as that forever and that's how people see you. There are so many consequences for like little mistakes (Girls HS)

In talking about the sources of their focus on perfection, teens often described feeling that they had to work as hard as they could to meet the high expectations set by for them by parents and teachers. When asked what they wished the adults in their lives understood, many teens mentioned that they are thankful for the support they get from parents and teachers (discussed in more detail below), but would like these adults to appreciate the pressures they experience and the seemingly momentous decisions they face.

They want me to do like 10 extra-curriculars. They think that I'm much more able to manage all of it than I actually am. (Coed HS)

I think like parents and teachers forget how much pressure it actually is. Everything that you have to do and everything that's always on your mind when you're supposed to be thinking about 16 different things. (Coed HS)

I wish my parents would be more calm and would recognize the amount of work that we put in. I have it under control. My whole life is very organized. Every single night I plan out my day to the minute and I'm kind of insane but, I have it under control. So when they [parents] doubt that I am doing everything on time, it's kind of frustrating. (Youth group)

I think that a lot of the adults in my life don't understand the pressure that we're under. As much as they say they do, their actions don't really match up with their words. My parents always tell me that like they're so proud of me for what I do and in my schoolwork and they don't care what grades I get. But when I don't do well in school, it becomes a problem. (Girls HS)

[If] we fail a test. It's not cause we don't care about your class, it's because there's so much more going on.. So as much as you think, Oh, I'm just being mean to my sister because I don't like my sister. No, it's not just because I don't like my sister. There's so much, there's lots that goes into it. And I think even more so because we're teenagers. If adults could recognize that they can't just let us off the hook for being horrible people, but they could understand that we're coming from somewhere and that it's sometimes it's not even personal if we're obnoxious or un-empathetic. It's just because we're trying to figure out so many things at once. (Girls HS)

Challenge of Balancing Responsibilities and Needs

Our report on the concerns of working women in Jewish households in Atlanta noted that the challenge most frequently mentioned was the struggle to achieve and maintain balance between demands at home and work (Chertok et al., 2020). The majority of these adult women worried that in trying to meet their responsibilities to work and family, they missed out on time to be with friends, to relax with family, and to take care of themselves. We heard a very similar set of concerns from the teen girls in our focus groups. Many realized that in the midst of working hard to meet the high bar they set for themselves, they could lose sight of their goals and needs.

I would say my biggest problem is putting myself first because I tend to prioritize how other people are going to feel, which is important, but I find myself doing a lot of things that make me unhappy or that I don't want to do just to appease other people. And I'm starting to realize that like it's my life. I can do things I like and want to do. (Youth group)

I feel like a lot of it stems from just overworking ourselves. Like we all feel like we have so much to live up to. Whether it's like sibling comparisons or our parents putting pressure on us academically, and then also doing sports and extra-curriculars. So people realize that they're losing themselves. (Youth group)

It's very hard to balance everything. So just getting that good balance. Even for practicing now for the future. Making sure I have some me time and time to exercise, time to draw or whatever it is and then also being there for other people. When I'm a mom hopefully and have kids, like also being there for them while also juggling maybe a job and other stuff. So just making sure you're very balanced. (Girls HS)

Teens also mentioned that they want to have space in their lives to experience being a teenager. Teen girls described envying the freedom and lack of pressure experienced by many of their parents during their own adolescent years. The teens we spoke with felt they needed to work hard to preserve their free time with friends.

I just wish they [parents] understood our level because when they were going to school and applying it was [a] completely different space. They went through the college process but the stakes were much lower. We're fortunate enough they're gonna help pay for some of college, but, it's a much different space from when they were young. (Youth group)

As much as I do want to please all the adults in my life, and I do want to make the good marks and everything like that, I also want to be a teenager. Like I want to do teenagery things. (Girls HS)

We also have to have time to be a kid and not just focus on work. (Coed HS)

Coping with Age-related Choice and Change

The teen girls we interviewed were well aware that they are in the midst of a period of personal growth and change typical for their age. Several acknowledged that the life choices they face about who they want to be and how they want to lead their lives, represent the start of their transition to young adulthood. They are also reexamining their friendship groups to see how well they fit their evolving sense of identity. Teens felt the weight of the decisions and transitions before them.

Even having a lot of good choices can be challenging because at some point you have to make a choice and then anytime you choose one thing, you're choosing not to do something else. (Coed HS)

I think something that I hear a lot is just identity and knowing who you are and figuring out all of that. A great part about being in a school environment is that you're given all these opportunities to learn about different people and different careers and different things that people do and how they make an impact in their lives. It makes you wonder who you're supposed to be and, what you want to do. It's really hard to know who you want to be and what you want to do. (Girls HS)

I think that at this age, a lot of people are breaking off of their old friends and trying to find their new bubble to, just hang out with and you have to leave some friends behind because people are really changing around 16, 17 and 18. And it causes little pieces of drama here and there. (Youth group)

In high school you're part of a class and you just move along with them and maybe you associate yourself in a certain way just because of what's comfortable or what's easy or what makes sense. But when it's time to leave you have to kind of figure out what you want and where you want to be. You have to figure out what's good for you and what's not. Maybe the excuses I've been making this whole time I have to let down and I have to just kind of really evaluate. (Girls HS)

For teens in their senior year of high school, an expected but substantial source of stress was their impending departure from familiar and much loved schools, friends, and home communities. The unknowns in their future loomed large and they were both excited by and fearful of the changes they were about to encounter.

The idea of all of us leaving each other—it's just getting sucky. I think that's pretty much [what] this year is going to be like. Just knowing that we're leaving [in] like seven months or whatever. (Youth group)

I think it's also about adjusting to change because right now I'm so happy with my life and I'm so happy with my school and I'm so happy with my friends and like everything just feels like this is the way that it should be. So, in terms of thinking about what I'm going to be doing next year, what I'm going to be doing after that, [I] just face a lot of fear. I have no idea what's coming and I have to adjust to a whole new thing when I don't necessarily want to change. (Girls HS)

Sources of Support and Resilience

Teenagers moving through the life stage of adolescence learn to cope with emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes, upheavals and impulses. Resilience and self-regulation are learned responses that can help teens cope with these changes (Murray et al. 2015). Learning skills of self-regulation and self-compassion can be positively influenced through peer, parent, and mentoring relationships (Murray et al. 2015; Spencer & Liang 2009; Simmons 2019). The young women in our focus groups spoke of several key sources of support as they navigate their teen years. These included parents, teachers, and friends.

Parents

Many of the teens we spoke with described supportive relationships with their parents. They saw their parents as sources of advice and comfort and often turned to them when stressed.

My mom--I pretty much talk through every decision or thing with her. And that's usually who I would go to if I'm really stressed. (Youth group)

Every person has an individual background that is specific to them and nobody really knows that better than your family. (Girls HS)

At the same time, many teens told us that because of their own and their parents' packed schedules, they spent little time together, especially during the school week. Teens did not want parents to replace their friends, but they wished they had more time with parents to relax and just talk, especially over meals.

I guess I wish I could just like have a conversation with them. I know they're busy and I'm busy. But, I just felt like that time where we can both sit down and have dinner or something. (Youth group)

We eat in front of the TV. We talk when we watch TV, but we don't have deep conversations a lot. We watch Jeopardy. (Youth group)

Really all I want when I come home it's like a really good dinner. Like I know that sounds small but like we put in so much work throughout the day and we have so much work on our plate and we have college apps and school and I had [sport] season. All I wanted was like a really good dinner and like a conversation with my parents that had nothing to do with school or college. (Youth group)

I don't get home until six and I do a bunch of homework. I don't really see my brother that often. My dad I'll see for a little bit at dinner and then that's really it. I don't really see my family, not much, if I think about it. (Coed HS)

Adult Mentors

Research on a mentorship program for adolescent girls paired with a female adult found that these intergenerational relationships provided emotional support, a relief from stress, and the opportunity to develop new skills and a sense of personal agency (Spencer & Liang 2009). Mentoring relationships provide teen girls with an older woman with whom they can talk and share things they may not feel comfortable telling another adult.

In our focus group discussions, several teens described how important it was to them to have an adult, outside of family, in whom they could confide. They mentioned teachers, coaches, therapists, and Jewish youth program staff as valuable sources of support and encouragement.

Sophomore year was a really bad year for me and [I] was in that position that I needed someone to talk to. The first person I [was] able to talk [with] and help me realize I really needed help was one of my teachers. I was grateful to her. (Coed HS)

My coach and I became like best friends and to this day, we go out to lunch, we talk about everything, I'll text her [if] I'm having a bad day or something. She's like one of my best friends. (Coed HS)

When I [have] a problem with people like my age, I like to tell someone who's either a couple years older than me or my age. For a lot of it, I talk to my camp counselors. (Coed HS)

Many teens also mentioned that they wished they had a mentoring relationship with an adult woman outside of their family, but have been unable to find someone to fit the bill. For some, the issue was that they wanted to maintain their positive standing with teachers, who they will call on to write letters of recommendation, and feared that honest conversations about their challenges would alter those impressions negatively.

I feel like there's like a shortage of adults in the world. There's your parent, your principal, maybe like a teacher or two, but, you want somebody you could just vent to. You could talk to your principal about one thing, but you can't talk to her about that. You can talk to your mother about one thing, but you can't talk to her about that. Other people find great therapists and great teachers or whatever to meet up with, but I haven't found the adult that I click with yet. (Girls HS)

As much as I adore my teachers and the other adults in my life, a lot of the times when things come up, I just feel too embarrassed to come [to] those people because I want them to have a view of me that means that I can't come to them with these problems that would make me feel like they see me in a different way now. (Girls HS)

Having someone who's had experience and who understands my faith and who understands what I'm going through and things like that and that I can really get real advice from. When I come to my friends with those kinds of things, as much as I'm getting advice from them, it's like okay, but we're in the same position. What makes your advice better than what my brain is telling myself? (Girls HS)

Friends and Safe Peer Spaces

As part of our focus group, we asked teens who they would want to thank for the support they have received. Almost all of the teen participants mentioned their friends. Friends were seen as a source of unconditional acceptance as well as comfort and support in dealing with stress.

If you're struggling at a certain moment, there's a good chance that there's a friend nearby who can lend an ear and lend some advice. So I find that friends, especially in our school are a really good source for support (Girls HS)

I'm in a class with girls who love each other and I'm in a school with girls who love each other. And just the knowing that you have that support, then on a lonely night when you don't go out with friends or you failed the test that day, that's okay because I have people in my life who want what's best for me and care about me even when I'm obnoxious and teenagery. I would like just thank my friends for existing really. (Girls HS)

Focus group participants described the important role played by their friends from Jewish youth groups or camps and from other extra-curricular activities such as sports or theatre groups. The shared characteristic among these groups was that they provided a setting and a social network apart from school. When interacting with peers in these settings, teens could escape from the pressures surrounding their academic performance and prospects for college. Youth groups and camp networks are where they felt fully accepted regardless of how well they were doing at school. One key informant who works with a national Jewish youth group described these settings as an “antidote” to the pressures that teens face elsewhere in their lives, a perspective that was shared by the teens in our focus groups.

It definitely takes a toll on some people if they don't have a source of freedom and comfort, like kind of how we have [at Jewish youth group]. They're always stuck in a cycle of thinking what college they want to go to, then applying, then hearing back and just keep on thinking about college. (Youth group)

The thing that helps me relieve my stress with school is if we have a long weekend, I normally go and see my camp friend. It helps a lot because I know I have some other people I can talk to. Not actually talk about school. I can talk about how much we miss each other and how exciting it is to see each other again and school isn't even on my mind. (Coed HS)

I usually go to either my middle school friends or some friends that I've made through various other programs that I've done. So like some friends I've made at AIPAC conferences or over the summer at different camps that I've done. Volunteering. (Coed HS)

If you're stressed or if you're dealing with a school drama, you come here (Jewish youth group) and you feel better. You just have fun and yes, we go through a lot of stress here too. We always [do] so much work, but it's good work. No one feels pressure. Let's say you mess up or you do something wrong here. There's no pressure. Our friends who don't have this, they go home. Their parents expect stuff [and] their friends expect stuff. We have this and I think that helps manage all of our stress. (Youth group)

We all go to different schools. I think a lot of our friends from school have a youth group, but it's all school friends. That means they're taking everyone from school. When they get away, they're not getting away. (Youth group)

Summary

The teen girls with whom we met were articulate and candid in their descriptions of the stresses they encounter and the resources they have or wish they had for coping with these challenges. They described lives filled with academic work and extra-curricular activities, but also with concern over their ability to gain admittance to the “right” post-secondary institutions. Teen girls were thankful for the support of parents and teachers, and especially of their friends, but wished they had more opportunities for adult mentorship and interactions with parents and peers where academic performance was not the central focus.

In several striking ways, the stressors described by teen girls echoed those expressed by adult women from Jewish households in the Atlanta area. Both teen and adult Jewish women described setting near-impossible goals for themselves and seeking to excel in all areas of their lives. Both groups also struggled to find balance between the demands of school or work and those of family and friends while still finding time to take care of their personal needs for reflection and relaxation. The current research does not allow us to know the extent to which these similarities are the result of younger Jewish women modeling the attitudes and choices of the adult women in their lives, or whether both teens and adult women are responding to societal and communal influences in similar ways. The findings do suggest that there are a set of issues and stressors that Jewish women experience at least from their teen years onward, and that deserve further research and communal attention.

The findings described in this memo are preliminary. Nonetheless, it is notable that we found substantial consistency in the opinions and perceptions described by key informants and teen girls from a wide spectrum of settings and organizations. This triangulation of sources suggests that a wide variety of Jewish teen girls and the professionals that work with them are seeing the same stressors facing teen girls. At the same time, this study did not explore the needs and experiences of Jewish teen girls who identify as LGBTQ or as persons of color, social identities that are associated with additional stressors and challenges. These findings do suggest key areas for further exploration and development around teen challenges, support, and mentorship.

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Appendix: Research Method

The research took a qualitative approach to exploring the challenges and stresses facing teen girls from Jewish households. Three focus groups were held with teen participants. The first focus group took place in-person at a Bais Yaakov high school for girls on April 8, 2019 with 8 participants. Two additional focus groups were conducted via Zoom video conferencing. One included five participants from a local chapter of a national Jewish youth group and was held on October 17, 2019. The third focus group, conducted on November 12, 2019, included seven students from a coed Jewish community high school. The focus group protocol is provided below.

Five key informant interviews were also conducted by phone or in person. The individuals interviewed were professionals whose work includes contact with teen girls including college counselors, youth group leaders, and staff of Atlanta area programs for Jewish teens. The key informant interview protocol is provided below.

Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed for analysis or documented with detailed note taking. Interviews and focus group data were then analyzed using a grounded theory approach. In this method, findings are derived from themes that inductively surface. Data is analyzed by grouping recurring ideas into a series of categories and concepts. Conclusions are drawn from the analysis of category frequency and the relationships that emerge between concepts.

Teen Focus Group Protocol

1. What are some of the things you care about and spend your time on? This could be your school electives or afterschool clubs and programs, sports, or youth group, your interests and hobbies, and leadership opportunities you may have.
 - What do you enjoy about these things?
 - Are there things you hope to accomplish through these activities and interests?

2. Let's imagine an average teen girl in your community.
 - What does she hope for in the future/what are her dreams?
 - What does she find challenging in her life?
 - School and grades?
 - Getting along with family?
 - Getting along with friends and peers?
 - Stress?
 - Feelings about her body or her health?
 - Anything else that she finds challenging?

3. How are you similar to and different from this average teen girl?

4. Complete this sentence: "The biggest challenge I've had this year was....."

5. What are the sources of support and comfort in your life?
 - Who do you talk to?
 - What do you do
 - Where do you go

6. What are the sources of support and comfort that you wish you had?

7. What do you wish the adults in your life understood about what you have to deal with in your life?

8. If you could say 'Thank You' to people who have been helpful to you, who would you like to thank and what would you thank them for?

Key Informant Interview Protocol

Background

1. What is your role at [organization] and what was the path that led you to that role?
2. What do you see as the primary responsibilities and goals of your organization [your work]?

Organization and focus areas

1. What is your understanding of the issues facing Jewish teens in the Atlanta area?
 - What are the secular issues they face?
 - What are the issues they face within the Jewish community and Jewish institutions?
 - What are the issues particularly relevant to teens?
2. Are there subpopulations (SES, sexuality, etc) that are less well served/resourced in addressing these issues?
3. Are there geographic areas that are less well served/resourced in addressing these issues?
4. How does your organization [your work] touch on these issues?
5. How successful have these efforts been?
 - Which programs/approaches have made a difference in addressing these issues?
 - Which programs/approaches have been the least successful?

The field generally

6. Thinking about the Atlanta Jewish community broadly, how would you describe the resources available to address these issues?
 - What issue areas are well covered and which get less attention?
 - About which issues is there consensus about causes/strategies and which issues are less well understood?
 - Are there areas—either geographically or populations--you see as missing resources?
7. How do the culture/norms of the Atlanta Jewish community influence which issues are addressed and how they are addressed?
8. How much collaboration is there between organizations seeking to address the issues faced by Jewish teens? Is there a community of practice in this field?
9. What are the next “frontiers” in programming in Atlanta related to these issues faced by Jewish teens?