



OLIVERIAN

How Alternative Boarding School Helps Teenage Girls Find Their Voice

Teen girls are at a sensitive and stressful time in their lives, but Oli's teachers and counselors can help them deal with that stress safely and constructively.

For some, to call the teenage years a turbulent time is an understatement. Between increasing academic pressure in high schools, looming college applications, and the social anxiety that often accompanies burgeoning self-awareness, the challenges of adolescence can feel like overwhelming burdens.

Research shows that stress among teenagers is on the rise, but in addition, reports indicate that girls are particularly vulnerable. Teenage girls report that they experience symptoms of stress, and that stress negatively affects their happiness a significant amount, in higher numbers than do their male peers.

While stress can stem from a number of causes, girls tend to suffer from a pervasive sense of inadequacy. 62 percent of girls aged 8 to 17 feel insecure about themselves, and 75 percent of those with low-self esteem turn to destructive coping mechanisms such as self-harm, substance use, and disordered eating in response to their negative self-perceptions.

Fortunately, a safe and healthy environment that allows teen girls to find their footing can be a powerful tool in the fight against undue stress and insecurity - and can help guide girls' development into happy, self-assured adults. That's why Oliverian counselor Sarah Hallwood, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW), believes our campus is a uniquely healthy space for girls who haven't felt comfortable in their skin for a long

time.

Learning to Accept Yourself

At Oliverian, we aim for nothing less than holistic wellbeing. That means academic pursuits never come at the expense of mental and physical health - and, in fact, scholastic achievement usually follows in the wake of a calm mind. In an educational hybrid that combines the best of high school and home, Oliverian's alternative boarding experience provides intellectual stimulation and agency as an academically-focused institution while using therapeutic approaches to prioritize student wellness and growth.

"Students at Oli are so bright, and often they come from traditional schools where they've just been lacking one element that can give them the confidence to succeed," Hallwood explains. In traditional high schools, Hallwood says, that one element can stand in the way of teen girls' self-acceptance. "I work with many teenage girls on self-compassion, which is accepting who you are - everything that makes you unique, including flaws."

Hallwood prefers "self-compassion" to "self-esteem" as a tool for benchmarking wellness because esteem is "inherently evaluative - it can be deemed 'high' or 'low,' good or bad," she says, and can create a sense of competition between individuals. In this way, pushing girls to have "high" self-esteem can unintentionally cause more anxiety, making teens feel like they're failing another test when they have difficulty seeing themselves in a positive light.

Conversely, the praxis of self-compassion beckons teen girls to be gentle with themselves. It asks them to recognize that they, like all humans, deserve love and help when they need it. By urging students to embrace who they are fully, on the best days and the worst, Hallwood and Oli's other counselors legitimize and destigmatize the complex emotions many teen girls experience.

Empowering Peers and Staying Strong through Community

Oli students do not take this first step alone. Equipped with the practice of self-compassion, they apply the sensitivity with which they evaluate themselves to their classmates, encouraging one another along journeys to recovery, climbs to new academic heights, and bridges between newfound friends who become family.

As a small, attentive boarding school, Oli provides adolescent girls the opportunity to develop their interpersonal skills within a caring community. Living in such proximity to one another, students can't avoid issues that arise between them, and they acquire clear communication skills to express and address conflicts.

Further, Oliverian prides itself on the heterogeneous culture it has cultivated. Our students explore who they are in an environment that is

representative of the world beyond school. Hallwood explains, "The primary advantage of co-ed learning environments is valuable social experience - there's an opportunity to develop strategies for interacting with the opposite sex and learning to work together. At Oliverian, students see male and female role models in their teachers and their peers."

Especially as the world changes rapidly in the modern era, students fully engaging their empathy and acting as allies for one another reap the benefits of a strong community. Though day schools have trouble managing the ubiquity of social media and the rise of cyberbullying, Oli is so cohesive that any misuse of technology quickly becomes apparent and is subsequently - and carefully - handled by faculty, rather than remaining hidden off-campus.

Navigating digital media, with its onslaught of impossible beauty standards and unrealistic lifestyles, can be particularly challenging for teen girls. However, at Oli, they find a community of authentic people that accepts them for who they are and supports them as they conquer their personal struggles and adapt to the landscape of an evolving world.

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