

OPINION

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Anxiety in the Age of Barbie

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Billie Eilish's song "What Was I Made For?" has become the anthem of anxious and depressed young women. [Mason Poole](#)



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It was “the summer of girl power,” a tour de force by a glittering troika. With pink dream houses, songs and sequins, Barbie, Taylor Swift and Beyoncé buoyed the economy and sent women’s confidence soaring.

So I felt sad, talking to friends dropping daughters at college, to hear of rampant anxiety, campuses awash in S.S.R.I.s — serotonin boosters found in drugs like Prozac and Lexapro — and long waits for therapy.

It is a major topic among moms: daughters struggling with anxiety or the effects of anti-anxiety medications, which can include weight gain and loss of libido. Many young college women are ping-ponging between anxiety, without pills, and numbness and body insecurity, with them.

These young women seem to have everything, yet they are unable to fully enjoy a stretch in their life that should be sizzling with adventure and promise.

“Back-to-school was always a time of excitement about where the future was headed — new notebooks, fresh supplies,” mused a friend, the mother of a teenage daughter. “But it feels like people are disappearing into sadness. Everybody’s looking for a shrink instead of a sharpened pencil.”

Billie Eilish’s song in the “Barbie” movie, “What Was I Made For?,” became the anthem of anxious and depressed young women, partly because Eilish [has been open about](#) her struggles between the ages of 12 and 16, her suicidal thoughts, self-harming and body dysmorphia.

On the surface, the lyrics are about a doll morphing into a human, but Eilish, 21, says [they also reflect](#) her own agonizing journey.

I used to float, now I just fall down
I used to know but I’m not sure now
What I was made for. ...
I don’t know how to feel
But someday, I might. ...
When did it end? All the enjoyment
I’m sad again, don’t tell my boyfriend
It’s not what he’s made for.

Adolescent despair has been copiously analyzed in recent years: the harm from social media, microtargeting algorithms that inflame envy and conflict and divisive politics, [unending school shootings](#), Covid sequestration, a planet

devoured by flames and floods, a “[never enough](#)” achievement and consumer culture, anxious adults creating a jittery atmosphere, a digitally connected yet emotionally disjointed and spiritually unmoored society.

“Young people are taking in a lot of alarming information, and due to digital devices, they — like many of us — are taking the information in all day, every day,” Lisa Damour, the author of “The Emotional Lives of Teenagers,” told me.

It goes beyond the young. The Wall Street Journal ran a front-page [story](#) on “The Booming Business of American Anxiety” that began: “A search for ‘anxiety relief’ on Google pulls up links for supplements in the form of pills, patches, gummies and mouth sprays. There are vibrating devices that hang around your neck and ‘tone your vagus nerve,’ weighted stuffed animals, bead-filled stress balls and coloring books that claim to bring calm.”

The cover of Newsweek tells “a generation gripped by climate anxiety,” “Don’t Lose Hope.” The Calm app added meditations and lectures on anxiety, including “Felt Piano for Anxiety,” in which the pianist adds felt between the hammers and strings for a more soothing sound.

Even romantic comedy is affected. In a preview for “What Happens Later” with Meg Ryan and David Duchovny, Duchovny’s character shares, “I was diagnosed with anticipatory anxiety.”

Laurence Steinberg, the author of “You and Your Adult Child,” said that anxiety rises sharply among women in the first half of their 20s, when the brain is still plastic.

He said young women and men are distraught about the cost of housing, climate change, racism and prejudice, and young women are also affected by threats to their reproductive health. (The historian Adam Tooze says the world is in “a polycrisis.”)

“A lot of my friends with adult children have themselves had to get into therapy because they are so stressed out because of their kids’ problems,” Steinberg noted.

He said that coping mechanisms must be taught. “I don’t think that we should just be handing out pills and thinking that that’s going to take care of it,” he said.

Perhaps women get hit harder because they are more intricately wired on emotions, and more focused on conversation, relationships, intimacy, nurturing and feminine community, as we see from hunter-gatherer times to Jane Austen novels to “Real Housewives.”

A friend’s 19-year-old daughter, who was on Prozac for a time, explained: “Covid happened just as we were entering the world and first starting to see each other as sexual beings, as your own person, your own woman. All we were able to do was obsess over TikTok, which is full of misinformation. The world was apocalyptic outside, while at home our world was also a little apocalyptic because we were losing a sense of ourselves.” But, as she texted her mom Friday: “We will be OK. Women tend to make it.”

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/02/opinion/columnists/anxiety-women-barbie.html>

It might be easy to dismiss this as “just rich spoiled kids going off to college” but what is the case for them reverberates with the plight of girls (and boys) of all stations in life. The elite drivers who have fashioned this world have not left us with futures for our children that they can feel confident or secure in. The rich may feel their children have had advantages (e.g. schooling, lifestyle enrichment, universities where the next generation of elites form pacts) that will make the difference for them But not every “blue blood” believes it or is up to it. A recent article from a psychotherapist/psychiatrist effused over Taylor Swift, describing how she uses Taylor and her songs in her work with young women. Maybe we need Taylor Swift and Billie Eilish to help with this, but how much can we trust them to not keep stoking the fires that make them popular and rich? This has long been a pop culture, pop music (of all persuasions) problem. TJB