



# *Girls' and Women's Wellness*

*Contemporary Counseling Issues  
and Interventions*

*Laura Hensley Choate, EdD, LPC, NCC*

*Louisiana State University*

*With Contributors*



AMERICAN COUNSELING ASSOCIATION

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*Girls' and Women's Wellness*  
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## *About the Author*

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## *Preface*

### *Abigail's Future*

I was 8-months pregnant with my daughter Abigail when I signed the contract to write this book. My husband Michael, my 2-year-old son Benjamin, and I were looking forward to welcoming a baby girl into our lives. Not long after her birth when I began to write these chapters concerning the current sociocultural climate for girls and women, I reflected on how these cultural trends might influence my daughter's life. As Abigail approaches her second birthday, I am aware that she will encounter many of the issues described in this book. I am both excited and apprehensive about what her future will bring.

I am excited for Abigail's future because girls and women are thriving as never before. Girls have high levels of academic success and are currently achieving higher grades and graduation rates when compared with boys (Halpern, 2006). Further, girls are becoming stronger and more physical; girls' sports participation is at the highest rate in history, with almost 3 million girls participating in sports at the high school level (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2006). They are also highly adept in the latest technological advances and know how to stay well connected with one another through various forms of technology.

Girls' progress extends well beyond the adolescent years. There are now more women than men enrolled in postsecondary institutions, and half of all medical and law school enrollments comprise women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Major social changes have led to increased opportunities and choices for women around work, motherhood, and household division of labor (Goodheart, 2006). More women are successfully working outside the home, owning their own businesses, and negotiating for better salaries. Employers are more supportive of women's desire to balance family and career by

offering more flexible, family-friendly work environments. Today's women are encouraged to view their midlife years as a time for creativity, spiritual development, and psychological growth (Meyer, 2006). In addition, advances in women's health research have improved women's lives in their older years. These indicators are only a sample of the encouraging trends for today's girls and women.

However, other issues raise great concern for Abigail's future. One area is the clash between traditional and contemporary socialization processes for girls. Many of today's girls continue to be socialized according to traditional norms that encourage them to value themselves primarily for their appearance, to conform to a narrowly defined standard of beauty, and to be overly concerned with pleasing others (often at the expense of authentic self-development and self-expression). At the same time, they receive pressures to excel academically, engage in multiple extracurricular activities, and achieve equality with boys (Goodheart, 2006). Today's girls are struggling with how to best meet their needs for achievement while also meeting traditional cultural standards for femininity (Tryon & Winograd, 2003).

Further, while pressures for girls to be increasingly thin and beautiful are not new (particularly for White, middle-class girls), there is a contemporary cultural trend for girls also to appear "sexy" (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007). From a young age, girls are exposed to highly sexualized merchandise, media, and advertising marketed to their age group. Among these items are Bratz dolls dressed in sexualized clothing such as miniskirts and fishnet stockings; thongs sized for 7- to 10-year-olds printed with slogans such as "Wink Wink" and "Eye Candy"; video games with sexy girls toting guns and wearing tight jumpsuits; and TV programs marketed to young adolescents like "The Pussycat Dolls Present: The Search for the Next Doll." These cultural pressures are confusing and damaging for girls as they navigate the complex waters of adolescence.

Other disturbing trends include various forms of violence involving women. Despite heightened public awareness around these issues, sexual assault and intimate partner violence remain threats for many women, and drug-facilitated sexual assault and cyberstalking create new challenges for women. Today's girls and women also are more likely to be perpetrators of violence than in previous years, with sharp increases in bullying and physical fighting in schools (Underwood, 2003).

Women are challenged by the multiple roles they manage in today's fast-paced society. Even though women have more technology available to them that is designed to make their lives more efficient, women spend much of their time multitasking and feel more rushed and stressed than in previous decades (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006). The time saved by technological advances is filled with more responsibilities and more role juggling. Even in midlife, when many women expect an easy transition into the retirement years, today's women find themselves in the "sandwich generation," called upon to care for children or grandchildren as well as aging parents (AARP, 2001). This trend is expected to increase

exponentially in the near future as the baby boomer generation reaches old age (National Council on Aging, 2006).

After reflecting on cultural trends that represent both progress and problems, the questions remain: Are today's girls and women flourishing or are they floundering? Specifically, how do these trends affect the lives of girls and women? As a mother of a daughter, I am very interested in pursuing the answers to these questions. As a counselor and counselor educator, I am equally interested in uncovering the implications of these changes for counseling girls and women. It is clear that counselors need up-to-date resources to assist girls and women as they navigate these uncharted territories.

### *Counseling Girls and Women*

I know from my own training and teaching experiences that many counselor education programs do not provide up-to-date information in this area. I became acutely aware of this gap several years ago when I had an opportunity to develop a course on girls' and women's issues in counseling. When I began my search for topics and readings to include in the course, I quickly recognized that few books addressed this specific area in our profession. Books in other mental health disciplines (most notably in psychology and psychiatry) focused on the mental health needs of women, but I found few books for counselors-in-training that reflected contemporary trends or that highlighted the profession's emphasis on developmental, wellness perspectives. Furthermore, I recognized that although theory-based books are necessary, today's practicing counselors need a current, accessible resource to guide them in their daily practice with girls and women.

This book focuses on relevant counseling issues and interventions for girls and women in contemporary society. In writing this book, I attempted to create a resource for counselors, regardless of their gender, that is different from many other texts in several ways. First, I draw upon the lived experiences of girls and women, noting the impact of sociocultural influences (including the experiences of women of color, lesbian/bisexual/transgendered women, and women living in poverty) on the current issues that they face. The chapter topics, ranging from childhood issues to older women's concerns, provide an in-depth journey through selected contemporary issues that many girls and women will encounter.

Second, I take a developmental, holistic perspective. Rather than assuming a pathology-driven model for working with women, I assume that clients are basically healthy people who are in need of support, empathy, and information to better navigate their lives. To this end, the book emphasizes client empowerment and focuses on their strengths and abilities to develop resilience for coping with current and future life transitions or obstacles. These approaches fit well with the counseling profession's emphasis on wellness models that encourage girls and women to develop and value their strengths in multiple life domains.

To this end, the wellness model of Myers and Sweeney (2005) is emphasized throughout this book. Each chapter adheres to a wellness philosophy and suggests prevention and intervention strategies that focus on more than merely resolving a particular client concern. The chapters emphasize the importance of enhancing multiple wellness dimensions in order to improve clients' overall life satisfaction. This focus helps clients to note their many strengths, work to develop life dimensions that have been neglected, and cope more effectively with future life demands.

Third, I believe counselors must go beyond knowledge of current research and implement these findings in their daily practice. Therefore, this book is designed to be as practical and detailed as possible. The chapters contain multiple examples, client handouts, workshop outlines, and strategies for both assessment and interventions. To enhance the readers' understanding of the material, each chapter contains at least one case example with study questions; additional activities, recommended readings, and Web site resources are provided at the end of each chapter. Further, because counselors' work begins with self-awareness, exercises to promote self-exploration are emphasized throughout the book.

### *Overview of the Journey: Girls' and Women's Counseling Issues*

In Chapter 1, I begin by preparing readers for the journey that unfolds in the chapters to follow. I first introduce a sociocultural model for understanding girls' and women's socialization and life experiences. I then focus on counseling approaches, including Myers and Sweeney's (2005) model of wellness, which serves as a guide for informing counselors' work with girls and women. These approaches emphasize client empowerment and the importance of sociocultural influences in conceptualizing client concerns. The socialization processes and empowerment/wellness approaches described in this chapter provide the foundation for the topics explored throughout the book.

In early adolescence, a girl's physical appearance becomes increasingly important to her overall sense of self-worth. At the same time, her body begins to change in ways that are increasingly discrepant from the media-generated beauty ideal. As a result, it is not surprising that many adolescent girls are vulnerable to low self-esteem, body image dissatisfaction, and eating-related problems. I explore these issues in Chapter 2 by describing the process of body image development in girls. I then outline a theoretical model of body image resilience based on factors that can protect girls from body image dissatisfaction. I also provide specific prevention and counseling strategies that counselors can use to promote positive body image in adolescent girls and include a detailed outline of a workshop designed to promote body image resilience.

Girls also face challenges regarding their relationships with one another. Relational aggression (RA), or the act of hurting others through manipulating or harming their relationships, is explored in Chapter 3. I explore the socialization processes that drive RA, including the connec-

tion between RA and girls' pursuit of popularity. I also describe recent trends that indicate an increase in girls' relational and physical aggression. The chapter concludes with a tiered approach to the prevention of and interventions for reducing relational aggression, including (a) strategies for systemwide change in schools; (b) interventions for administrators, teachers, school staff, and parents; and (c) a guide for working directly with students.

To conclude the journey through girlhood and adolescent issues, a cognitive behavioral group model for building girls' self-esteem is described in Chapter 4. Kimberly Anderson and I emphasize the importance of enhancing self-esteem to assist girls in coping with the complex challenges of adolescence. Ideally, the group setting can become a natural learning environment for improving girls' self-esteem by assisting them to connect with others in healthy ways, to speak authentically about their thoughts and feelings, and to cope with life demands more effectively. We review developmental and cultural influences on adolescent girls' self-esteem and then describe a cognitive-behavioral model for understanding self-esteem development, maintenance, and change. Finally, a detailed 8-week group counseling protocol designed to enhance self-esteem in adolescent girls is outlined.

As adolescent girls reach late adolescence and early adulthood, many choose to enroll in postsecondary institutions, encountering new challenges to their growth and development. In Chapter 5, Susan K. Gardner and I focus on the changing campus climate for today's women. For the first time in U.S. history, women outnumber men on college and university campuses and receive more degrees than men. However, despite enormous gains, women experience significant challenges on campus, including current dating and relationship norms, sexual violence, and body image dissatisfaction. We provide prevention and intervention strategies for working with college women around these issues, including detailed resources for developing effective campus programs.

Many women graduate from college and begin their careers right away. Other women stay home to begin a family and return to the workforce when their children are older. Still others enter the workforce directly from high school. Regardless of their life situation, women are striving to find a balance between their work and family lives. In Chapter 6, Rita R. Culross, Marla J. Erwin, Jie Yu, and I first discuss issues important to working women, including gender discrimination in the workforce, opportunities for pregnant and working mothers, and sexual harassment. We then turn to some of the challenges that dual earner couples face, such as asynchrony in career development, caregiving concerns, and problems with the division of household tasks, and provide suggestions for counseling dual earner couples. Counseling issues specific to working mothers, including the benefits and challenges of managing both roles, are also explored. Finally, we discuss women's need for self-care, an aspect of life that is often sacrificed by women who are faced with the many demands of work and family. We conclude the chapter with counseling

strategies for helping women to conceptualize self-care as an essential coping strategy for functioning optimally in relationships and work and for achieving a balance between the two.

While women are succeeding in the workforce in record numbers and have made great advances in changing social norms regarding women's equality, they are still disproportionately affected by the threat of sexual violence. There is a high probability that any woman will experience some type of violence in her lifetime, and the latest National Violence Against Women survey demonstrates that over half of all women report an experience of attempted or completed rape or physical assault. It is unfortunate that most mental health professionals report a lack of training in working with women survivors of violence in general and of sexual assault and intimate partner violence in particular. Chapters 7 and 8 are dedicated to bridging this training deficit by addressing contemporary issues and interventions. In Chapter 7, I discuss several treatment considerations that serve as a context for providing effective treatment for survivors of rape. I then describe a multimodal treatment approach for women who are experiencing chronic PTSD symptoms resulting from rape-related trauma.

In Chapter 8, I describe intimate partner violence (IPV), or violence perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner that is aimed at establishing control by one partner over the other. Women who are abused by an intimate partner are reluctant to seek counseling, and when they do they are often in crisis. Even then, IPV might go undetected if the counselor is not trained to properly assess for it and to work with these issues. In this chapter, I describe the various forms that IPV can take: physical abuse, sexual abuse, stalking, and psychological abuse. Because women do not intentionally enter into abusive relationships, I also explore the dynamics of abuse and how women can become entrapped in relationships characterized by this type of violence. Finally, I present a four-phase treatment model for working with women who experience IPV, including counselor preparation, strategies for engagement and assessment, interventions for working with women currently experiencing IPV, and approaches for working with postseparation issues such as stalking, safety planning, grieving, and eventual recovery.

Women across the life span are increasingly turning to spirituality as a resource for coping with many of the life transitions and obstacles described in this book. In Chapter 9, Gerri Miller, Catherine Clark, and I emphasize spirituality as a central component of optimal health and well-being. Because women are more likely than men to turn to spiritual practices to address life problems and to integrate spirituality into their daily life routines, we highlight the importance of counselors' openness to the spiritual dimension when working with women. We provide an overview of developmental theoretical models of spirituality that counselors may use in addressing counseling concerns and discuss sociocultural factors that may affect spiritual awareness and growth such as culture, sexual orientation, ethnicity, social location, and age. Finally, we provide counseling techniques that can enhance spiritual resilience.

The journey concludes with Chapter 10, in which I explore the lives of women as they reach midlife and their older years. As contemporary women approach midlife and beyond, they will become part of a diverse, rapidly growing group. Older persons are expected to increase to 20% of the total population by the year 2030 (National Council on Aging, 2006). Most counselors receive little information about the specific issues that women face as they age, so I provide an overview of significant counseling concerns for older women. The focus of the chapter is on assisting counselors' work with women in strengthening their coping resources for adjusting to new life roles in six areas: changes in appearance, changes in role status, adapting to the loss of significant others, transitioning to menopause, becoming a caregiver, and becoming a grandmother. The chapter concludes with a discussion of qualities women need to age optimally and ways in which counselors can promote these dimensions of wellness in older women clients.

It is my hope that readers will benefit both personally and professionally as they explore these selected counseling issues and interventions. In today's rapidly changing cultural climate, girls and women are often left without a roadmap for coping with emerging experiences and challenges. With support, I believe girls and women have the strengths and resilience to forge a new path through contemporary life demands. This book is designed to assist counselors as they accompany their clients on this journey.

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