



## THE BODY SPEAKS LOUDER THAN WORDS: Bridging The Gap Between Anxiety Symptoms and Solutions

Laila Murgo

### **Abstract:**

This article explores the personal experiences and challenges high school girls in New York City face when being diagnosed with and managing anxiety. Although anxiety is common in this age group, many girls report being misdiagnosed or feeling dismissed by healthcare providers, which may leave them without necessary mental health support. This op-ed investigates how high school girls recognize their anxiety symptoms, what barriers they encounter when seeking help for them, and why some feel they are not getting the care they need by using a personal narrative to highlight these challenges. To advocate for a healthcare system that is more empathetic, responsive, and accessible to this population, it is critical that we first understand the lived experiences of those seeking care within it. By bringing attention to the unmet needs of young women, this paper aims to inform the development of better practices to ensure mental health care is accessible and effective for all, regardless of gender, age, or health literacy.

In the 7th grade, I vomited every morning of the school week like clockwork. It began one morning, when I woke up unexplainably nauseated. I sat in my tub, feeling knives stabbing at my chest, preventing my ability to breathe. I was a shy kid, a bit of jitters didn't scare me; however, I could not identify why I felt this overbearing pain. This was before the pandemic, at a time when the conversation around teen mental health wasn't as open as it is now. The inability to diagnose myself was infuriating and depressing.

After visiting multiple doctors, I was diagnosed with iron deficiency. For months, I forced down the disgustingly sour daily liquid iron shots. When my ongoing complaints of relentless physical pain did not abate, another visit to the doctor revealed that I now had a stomach ulcer. I was advised to improve my diet and take stomach medicine every morning. The pain I continued to endure, however, never seemed to align with the doctor's diagnosis. I was left wondering if this feeling would ever truly go away.

After a lot of denial, it eventually became clear that I was experiencing anxiety. This came not from a medical professional, but none other than my mother, who thought that I may be stressed about something subconsciously. This sudden realization took me by surprise, as I had never struggled with my mental health before. Putting the pieces together, however, made me realize just how off-base all my previous diagnoses had been. Being able to finally identify that I was suffering from anxiety filled a diagnostic hole that I was unable to close for far too long.

Anxiety is particularly [common among teenagers](#) and is estimated to affect [31.9% of adolescents](#). Contrary to popular belief, anxiety disorders do not just present as sweaty palms and red cheeks. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V, some lesser-known symptoms of anxiety include; difficulty breathing, nausea, dizziness, fatigue, chest pain, vomiting, and stomach issues.

Undergoing this type of physical pain, and not being able to understand why or how it was occurring, was an eye-opening experience as a 13-year-old girl. It led me to wonder why people, including myself, struggle with such intense physical symptoms when the cause seems rooted in our thoughts and feelings. How can something that is happening in the mind manifest so physically and aggressively? After years of battling unexplainable anxiety symptoms, I'm eager to understand how these two parts of myself—my mind and body—are connected. More importantly, I want to understand why it took so long to figure out that this relationship was at the heart of my pain. Being repeatedly misdiagnosed inspired me to dig deeper into how high school girls like me struggle to recognize their own anxiety, face barriers to getting help, and feel misunderstood by the healthcare professionals meant to treat them. My experiences led me to question not only the relationship between my brain and my body, but also the relationship between myself and my doctor. How could I clearly describe my symptoms and still face misdiagnoses for months?

In a [2018 study](#), researchers found that several disadvantaged groups, including women, are more likely to experience anxiety symptoms—but this doesn't necessarily mean they'll get a diagnosis. As the authors demonstrate, no matter how evident your symptoms are, the system can still overlook you. For those living in poverty or unsafe environments, the [gap between symptom onset and diagnosis](#) can be even greater, leaving many stuck without proper treatment or acknowledgment. I saw this reflected in my own life—I, too, felt overlooked, like my symptoms were being brushed aside. It made me hesitant and unsure if I could trust my doctor

to understand what I was going through. I found myself never making appointments, assuming they would only give me half-answers and a bill my family couldn't even afford. It started to feel like getting real help wasn't even an option, and seeking a second opinion felt pointless. It was easier to just give up. My attempts to seek treatment for my anxiety impacted my relationship and trust in my doctor for the worse.

I have friends with anxiety who, like me, were led to believe they were suffering from stomach ulcers or menstrual pain. It wasn't until we shared our experiences with each other that they were able to identify the source of their own struggles. Many faced intense physical manifestations of anxiety yet were repeatedly met with misdiagnoses or prescribed surface-level solutions such as stomach medication or breathing exercises, which failed to address the underlying condition.

Anxiety has no cure; however, one can tame it. [Existing literature](#) indicates that anxiety symptoms, particularly aggressive physical reactions, are closely linked to the central nervous system and immune system. Beyond the biology of the condition, however, a key issue remains underdiagnosis and barriers to accessing care. According to [an analysis by KFF](#), data from the Teen National Health Interview Survey from July 2021 to December 2022 shows that 20% of respondents reported not receiving the mental health therapy they needed because of cost, fear of what others would think, and/or because they didn't know how to get help. Notably, this effect was more pronounced among females.

To further explore this issue in my own community, I conducted an informal pilot survey using my Instagram story (4,053 followers) to target high schoolers in New York City. I received 65 responses—78.5% female and 21.5% male. In the survey, I asked questions about participants' relationship with their healthcare providers, their comfort discussing anxiety, and whether they felt supported by their families. Many respondents—despite experiencing symptoms—felt their concerns were not taken seriously by healthcare professionals. The results also suggested patterns of overall misdiagnosis or avoidance seeking help. Additionally, most respondents felt supported by their families, but fewer said they felt heard by their healthcare providers. Most reported that even if they were diagnosed and treated for anxiety, it did little to resolve their anxiety-related symptoms. This small but insightful sample implies that the same barriers I experienced to getting treatment for my anxiety were common amongst my peers.

My preliminary results suggest how often anxiety, especially its more aggressive form, goes untreated, mismanaged, or misdiagnosed among young people. While [recent studies](#) demonstrate that women are generally more likely to be under-diagnosed by medical professionals, the experiences of under-diagnosed high schoolers are still underrepresented in the scientific literature. This important but often overlooked group—young girls who may not even know they have anxiety, let alone understand how to navigate the healthcare system to access the appropriate care—should be a focus of future research. I want to make sure other high school girls don't have to go through what I did, and developing an understanding of their experiences is a critical first step.



COVID-19 has further [exacerbated existing mental health disparities](#), likely making it harder for teens to receive proper healthcare. Although new technology stemming from the pandemic increased the accessibility of healthcare for some, tools such as Telehealth are not always a [feasible or accessible](#) option for all. One needs internet access, a working device, as well as technical skills to use it effectively. In the wake of social distancing and online schooling, adolescent access to mental health care has become a more pressing issue than ever.

Teenagers today are facing a mental health crisis. In 2021 it was reported that [one in two teenagers in America](#) have had a mental disorder in their short lifetime. Whether it's about homework or climate change, relationships or politics, personal and global stressors are likely to continue piling up. These issues are unlikely to go away, making it vital for teens to raise their voices and for doctors to truly listen. By understanding and advocating for our health and experiences, adolescents can set a new standard of care and awareness for the rising generations.

The first step is to make young people's voices heard, because real change starts with understanding a problem. We need to create a healthcare system that listens so that girls like me feel seen and understood by their providers, and so they don't have to wait years for answers like I did.

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