

STRESS AND GIRLS

FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

If she holds it together all day and falls apart the moment she gets home, you are not doing it wrong. You are the safe place. Your job in that moment is not to fix the day — it's to be steady while she puts it down.

Validate-then-support sequence adapted from Emotion-Focused Family Therapy (EFFT); worksheet by J. Ashley T. Booth, LCSW.

ELEMENTARY

- Friendships that shift week to week
- Sibling rivalry and competition for your attention
- Any change in the family — a move, a job, a separation
- Losing a pet or a grandparent
- Early school pressure she can't yet describe
- Not enough sleep, skipped breakfast

MIDDLE SCHOOL

- A new campus and a new social order
- Group chats that never turn off
- Grades that suddenly feel permanent
- A body changing faster or slower than her friends'
- Comparing her appearance to everyone, constantly
- Trading sleep for homework

HIGH SCHOOL

- College pressure — real and imagined
- A calendar with no empty space in it
- Romantic relationships and sexual pressure
- Tension between the adults in her house
- Needing to be exceptional at something
- Running on five or six hours of sleep
- Using substances to manage feelings

01 The ten minutes when she opens up

- **Ask what she needs first.** "Do you want help with this, or do you want me to just listen?" It takes five seconds and prevents most arguments.
- **Pick the side-by-side moments.** Driving to practice, folding laundry, lights out. Face-to-face interrogation shuts it down.
- **If she says "nothing," believe the timing, not the word.** Come back in an hour without an agenda.
- **Let silence sit.** Most girls fill it themselves within about thirty seconds.

02 Validate first, then support

- **Step 1 — Validate, and show your work.** "I could understand you might feel..." then three because statements. Keep it tentative — "I could imagine you..." "No wonder you..." — and guessing slightly wrong is fine; the visible effort is what lands.
- **When you can't find the words, use the 3 H's:** it's hard, it's heavy, and it hurts. That one sentence does most of the work.
- **Step 2A — Emotional support before solutions.** Comfort. Reassurance. Belief: "I know you're doing the best you can right now." Togetherness: "we're in this together."
- **Step 2B — Practical support, only if she wants it.** "Why don't we..." — a walk, a plan, a limit, something off her plate. Often, once she feels understood, nothing more is needed.
- **Your face and voice carry it** — the backdrop of love and sincerity matters more than the exact words.

THE SCRIPT, START TO FINISH

"I could understand you might be dreading tomorrow. Because you've carried it all week, because you don't know how they'll react, and because you're worn out. That's hard, it's heavy, and it hurts. We're in this together. Do you want to figure out one small piece with me, or do you just want company?"

03 Lower the load at home

- **Protect sleep like a subject.** Teens need 8–10 hours. Phones charge outside the bedroom — including yours, so it isn't a punishment.
- **Feed her in the morning,** even something small in the car. Skipped breakfast makes an anxious brain worse by third period.
- **Count the commitments.** If the calendar has no white space, something comes off. Ask her which one, and mean it.
- **Keep one ungraded thing** in her week — something no one is evaluating and no college will ever see.
- **Check your own volume.** She is reading your face about her grades far more closely than she reads the report card.
- **Let her be bored.** Recovery doesn't get scheduled; it happens in the leftover time.

04 When you're part of the stress

- **She can be stressed by you and still love you.** Both are true at once, and hearing it isn't evidence you've failed her.
- **If she says you pressure her, get curious instead of defending.** "What does it sound like when I do that?"
- **Repair out loud.** "I was short with you last night — that was mine, not yours." Watching you repair teaches her more than never rupturing would.
- **Keep adult conflict out of earshot.** Overheard tension gets filed as her fault and her job to fix.

Signs it's more than ordinary stress

- Stomachaches or headaches with no medical explanation
- Pulling away from friends and activities she used to love
- Sleeping far more or far less for two weeks or longer
- Grades sliding at the same time her mood does
- So afraid of doing it wrong that she starts nothing
- Anger or tears that seem far bigger than the trigger

Don't wait: if she mentions hurting herself or not wanting to be here, stay calm, stay with her, and get professional help the same day. The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is available by call or text, 24/7. Asking her directly does not plant the idea — it tells her you can handle the answer.