A TEEN EPIDEMIC

Growing Anxio

After a childhood steeped in anxiety and depression, Kaylie Rosen found happiness away at school—then the pandemic sent her home.

By Sandra Sobieraj Westfall and Wendy Grossman Kantor

Photographs by Aundre Larrow
As a small child, Kaylie Rosen was her family’s “social butterfly.” She easily made good friends and good grades, and she relished being onstage with her dance team. But at age 7, she first felt the pull of depression, and insomnia set in by the fourth grade. Or so she thought. Now 17, Kaylie recalls agonizing over whether those feelings were real—or whether she was just a little sister trying to be like her big sister Talia, who was then in treatment for depression and anxiety so severe that she was unable to get out of bed for weeks. “Everyone was seeing me as the perfect one in the family, but nothing on the outside matched what I was feeling on the inside,” Kaylie says. “I thought, ‘I can’t be depressed because...
that’s Talia’s thing. It kept me from talking about my struggles for a very long time.”

With therapy and medication (and tears and persistence), the Rosen sisters eventually found an even keel. Talia, 20, just finished her sophomore year at Barnard College in Manhattan, 20 miles from the family’s home in Roslyn Heights, N.Y., and Kaylie is a rising senior at the Brewster Academy boarding school in New Hampshire. But the COVID-19 pandemic, with its campus closures and quarantines, has both young women back at home, confronting familiar demons. They are hardly alone. Anxiety was already on the rise among adolescents—up 20 percent between 2007 and 2012, with the suicide rate among teenage girls at a 40-year high—and experts are expecting a steeper spike amid the upheaval of the pandemic. In a May survey by the Harris Poll, 70 percent of American teens reported mental-health struggles this spring. “There’s a lot of fear,” says Joseph F. McGuire, Ph.D., an expert in adolescent anxiety at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. “Parents need to know that anxiety is common. It’s a normal response to things going on in the world—and it’s treatable.” (See box, opposite.)

On paper Lisa and Jeffrey Rosen appear especially well-suited to helping their daughters cope. Lisa, 51, is a neuropsychologist who suffered from depression in college. Jeffrey, 53, an orthopedic surgeon, has a history of anxiety in his family. “They were involved parents,” says their son Jacob, 23, a chef in Rhode Island who has no anxiety issues of his own. “My mother was very ‘let me sit you down and have a deep conversation analyzing everything.’” Lisa says she and Jeffrey “thought we could out-parent the genetic predisposition. We were wrong.”

When Talia fell into depression at age 12, “I panicked and became hypervig-
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3 things parents can do to help

Joseph F. McGuire, of Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, offers advice:
1. Talk, ask specific questions—and listen. “Say, ‘I noticed you have a lot of nervousness before school,’ or, ‘You have a lot of stomachaches. Is anything bothering you?’”
3. Share. Kids and parents need to know anxiety is common and treatable: “Let kids know it’s okay and they can get through it.”

For more information, go to ADAA.org

‘It was hard for Talia and me to see each other struggle. It became our struggle’
—KAYLIE ROSEN

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Healing Together

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Crisis, says he has let go of the need to fix things. “Sometimes they have to sit with how they feel until they feel better. It doesn’t always mean the world will fall apart because you feel sad,” he says. Talia works at supporting Kaylie with a simple “That sucks, and I’m sorry, and I’m here to listen.” At the same time, she has learned to be kind to herself about her own continuing struggles. “There are ways to say, ‘I’m not going to stay in bed all day, but I’m going to sit on the couch and read a book,’” Talia says. “You can push one thing a day and that’s enough.”

And Kaylie, who took over her brother’s room rather than moving back into her own (“it reminded me of lying on the floor unable to move”), is on a medication regimen that’s working, and she keeps a list of intrusive thoughts on her phone to make them feel manageable. She recognizes the onset of paralyzing panic and can call out to Siri to dial a friend for a calming chat. Both sisters muse about careers helping others—Talia as a therapist or social worker, Kaylie as a pediatric physical therapist. “Hope is a big thing for me,” says Kaylie. “For the first time in my life I’ve been happy, and I know now what will keep me happy.”

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You know what time it is.

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