

## IS SEX MAKING STUDENTS SICK?

AS DEPRESSION, ANXIETY AND EVEN SUICIDE BECOME MORE COMMONPLACE ON CAMPUS, EVERYONE IS ASKING: WHAT IS GOING ON WITH KIDS?

by Kate Fraher



DR. MIRIAM GROSSMAN IS A CAMPUS PSYCHIATRIST AT UCLA. SHE ATTENDED NEW YORK UNIVERSITY MEDICAL SCHOOL AND DID HER RESIDENCY IN PSYCHIATRY THROUGH CORNELL UNIVERSITY. HER BOOK, **UNPROTECTED: A CAMPUS PSYCHIATRIST REVEALS HOW POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IN HER PROFESSION ENDANGERS EVERY STUDENT**, IS BEING RE-RELEASED WITH HER NAME ON IT. INITIALLY WRITTEN ANONYMOUSLY, FOR FEAR OF PROFESSIONAL FALLOUT, DR. GROSSMAN HAS SINCE REVEALED HER IDENTITY – AND STRESSES SHE IS CRITICAL OF INSTITUTIONAL, POLITICALLY-CORRECT ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUAL ACTIVITY AND SAFE SEX; WHILE AT THE SAME TIME ACKNOWLEDGING THE HARD WORK AND DEDICATION OF HER COLLEAGUES IN STUDENT HEALTH AND COUNSELLING.

**IMFC:** From your experience as an on-campus psychiatrist, what sorts of issues are young people struggling with most these days?

**MIRIAM GROSSMAN:** Depression and anxiety are the most common diagnoses. The most common sorts of problems are people complaining of symptoms of anxiety, which would consist of excessive worrying, inability to fall asleep at night, worrying about either academics, relationships, the future or something that has happened, and depression as well – people who have some feeling of loss, frustration, sadness, for whatever reason. Everyone is asking – educators, parents – what is going on with kids? Why are so many of them depressed and even suicidal? Why are there up to 1,100 completed suicides a year on our campuses? Most commonly the answer given is college kids are overwhelmed by the following things: Stress from academic and extracurricular responsibilities, family problems, finances and health issues. They may be concerned about things going on in politics and society, for example, for a while the job market was not good, then there are substance-abuse issues, parental expectations. I'm not questioning any of that and I'm agreeing those are all contributing issues. But I think it's a mistake to neglect the effects on our students of the culture of casual sexual behaviour and hooking-up and of the epidemics of sexually transmitted diseases and abortion.

**IMFC:** In your book you state that health education as it stands now is 'ideology-driven.' What does this ideology look like?

**MG:** Part of that ideology says that there is such a thing as casual sexual behaviour without consequences: That you can basically have the lifestyle of Friends and Sex in the City and not pay dues. I'm arguing that we are not doing a favour to our young people, especially to our young women, by giving them that impression. I have had many patients who followed the guidelines – the guidelines being to use condoms, get tested frequently, limit your partners – and they still have the very difficult experiences of a diagnosis of herpes or HPV or an unwanted pregnancy, not to mention the emotional fallout from some of these casual relationships. We're not treating these health issues the same way that we treat other health issues, such as cigarettes or alcohol. We do that in a very direct and no-nonsense kind of way. We make it clear that we have expectations that people are going to make smart decisions. We assume that young people are capable of self-control and delayed gratification but when it comes to sexual health, we have another standard.

**IMFC:** Do you think promiscuity among young women or what some refer to as the 'hook-up' culture is damaging?

**MG:** I absolutely think it's damaging. I think that it's damaging for both men and women but in particular for women. In the book I provide different stories of patients that came to me. One young woman came down with depressive symptoms – was often crying and isolating herself in her room and couldn't figure out what that was all about. The psychologist she saw previous to seeing

me also couldn't pinpoint anything. To make a long story short, this young woman had entered into a "friends with benefits" relationship and she really liked the young man. She wanted to do other things with him. She wanted to go out and have dinner and go to the movies but he wouldn't do that because that was too much of a relationship for him. She just hadn't put the whole thing together and understood that she was attached to him emotionally and she

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was suffering as a result of his complete lack of interest in spending time with her. . . . More importantly, what young women need to know in college is that oxytocin [a hormone] is released during sexual behaviour. This does strongly suggest that sexual behaviour can promote feelings of attachment – emotional attachment – as well as trust. There were other studies showing that oxytocin is related to trusting one's partner. These are things that people should be educated about, along with all the education about contraceptives and birth control and the availability of abortion.

**IMFC:** Is the hook-up culture part of mainstream campus culture?

**MG:** Oh, absolutely, it seems to be. The research is showing that between 40 and 80 per cent of students have participated in a hook-up, defined as an unplanned sexual encounter between two people who have no plans to see each other again.

**IMFC:** What can parents do to make sure that their kids are "protected," in the sense that you mean, by the time they reach university age?

**MG:** The first thing the parents can do is educate themselves. It is very different [today] than when they were in college and dating or hanging out. At that time, of course, there was the one night stand and there was promiscuity but these were [behaviours seen in] a minority of people. In addition, at that time you didn't have a promotion of casual sex by universities. For example, parents should go to [www.goaskalice.com](http://www.goaskalice.com). It's Columbia University's health education website. . . . Universities are advising students on such behaviours as threesomes and foursomes and clubs where this sort of thing is going on. . . . They also discuss subjects such as sexual sadism and masochism and go into details of how to find others that are interested in that sort of behaviour. . . . I don't come from a moral point of view. I'm arguing that from a health point of view, it's simply irresponsible to encourage multiple partners when we know that's what is fuelling the epidemic. Parents should read my

book. They can also read the book *Unhooked* by Laura Sessions Stepp. Hopefully the relationship is open and honest enough that parents can say to students after they've arrived on campus: How is it going? Have you found a group of friends? Tell me about them. Are you comfortable with them? Do they make good choices? Try and slowly get into these areas that have to do with risky sexual behaviour.

**IMFC:** Limiting access to sex, or even the mere suggestion that young people limit the sex they have is often criticized as either limiting lifestyle choices or clamping down on women's rights. How would you respond to either of these criticisms?

**MG:** Again, I look at it as a health issue. And I believe that genuine feminism protects women and girls. We have our current disaster of tens of millions of people with sexually transmitted diseases – these are conditions that can affect finding a spouse, conceiving a child and carrying a pregnancy to term. This is to say nothing of the fact that this lifestyle of multiple casual partners distracts women and men from what they seem to really want. A poll done of freshman at four-year colleges reported in the January issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* asked what their most important goals are. The top goal, 75.5 per cent of freshmen said, was to raise a family. When I am accused of being anti-female, being a prude or limiting



people's lifestyles, what I answer is this: Who's really looking out for women here? And who has a social agenda? Women and men are telling us that their most important life goal is to raise a family. . . . Exactly how is this lifestyle advancing or facilitating the hopes and dreams of our young women and men in college? To the contrary, the hooking-up culture and the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases and emotional problems that result are only going to, if anything, become obstacles on their path to achieve their dream. ✍️