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## Living as a Chameleon

A Guide to Understanding Girls' Anger  
For Girl-Serving Professionals



As Told to  
Cheryl van Daalen-Smith  
RN, PhD  
By 65 Canadian Girls  
2006

# Living as a Chameleon

## A Guide to Understanding Girls' Anger For Girl-Serving Professionals

Dear Girl-Serving Professional:

*In your hands is a start. It's a beginning dialogue about girls' anger and their lived experience of its dismissal. In listening to the voices of 65 diverse girls, I heard about countless and discounted experiences of judgment, dismissal, disrespect, pathologization, denied agency, expectations to self-silence and an eventual disconnection from this important emotion.*

*You now have an opportunity. You can create space for girls to come to voice about their lives in a climate that is anger-affirming. Anger brings with it important messages - messages that girls, women, boys, and men must be permitted to hear.*

*The girls whose lives inform this work learned to live as chameleons - as ultra adaptive creatures who, by necessity, had to change depending on the circumstances or gender-based expectations they were faced with.*

*As a girl-serving professional, you've heard their stories. Like me, you've been an "anger-story listener". As a girl-serving professional, you hold a privileged spot in society, one that can help girls know their true selves, hear their hushed voices, and affirm anger as a gift that brings with it lived authenticity. Not only do I wish this for the girls whose lives you bear witness to ... I wish this also for you.*

*This has been a humbling experience,*

*Cheryl*

### Anger Denied

Anger is a necessary human emotion. Yet narrow beliefs about femininity continue to erode and deny young women of their right to feel and express anger. In Canada and other Western cultures, some continue to link anger to aggression, and define it as a sign of mental instability. Countless young women now list being prescribed an anti-depressant as a component of their adolescence.

When anger is dismissed or silenced, young women, out of fear of judgement, violence or rejection, take on chameleon-like lives, learning to change themselves in order to blend in and protect themselves from harm. Like the chameleon, they live not for their own color, but for the color of their surroundings, striving to become undetectable, moving quietly and cautiously as they attempt to read their ever-changing surroundings.

*Living as a Chameleon* is a groundbreaking collaborative study conducted in partnership with girls, girl-serving professionals and organizations in communities across Canada. Interviews with a diverse group of 65 girls were conducted to better understand what generates anger, how they are permitted to express it, its relationship to depression, and to develop girl-driven recommendations that enable girls to live authentic lives.

young women's depression - anger - yielded compelling links between denied anger, denied authenticity and depression. Service providers who wish to prevent young women's depression will benefit from the recommendations put forth by *Living as a Chameleon*. The depression of girls is a real world issue and this innovative research addresses one neglected and misrepresented component: anger.

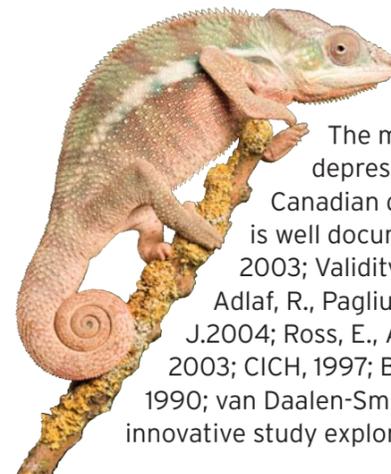
Emotions provide us with important information about what is going on around and within us. Emotions are messages about our experiences and the experiences of others. Gilligan (1990) asserted, "anger is the political emotion - par excellence - the bell weather of oppression, injustice, bad treatment, [and] a clue that something is wrong in the relational surround" (p. 527). Denied anger, therefore, prevents girls from both protecting and knowing self - two key components of mental health and quality of life.

*Health is the increased becoming of who we are most deeply.*

Anonymous

### Community Partnerships and Methodology

The first phase of this initiative involved extensive national consultation with girl-serving professionals and organizations such as Big Sisters of Canada, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, The Women's Directorate, The YWCA, Health Canada, The Canadian Teachers Federation, The Canadian Association of Pediatric Nurses, Youth Net, CAMH's Validity Project, Ottawa's Native Women's Centres, and The Spina Bifida Association of Ontario. Throughout these consultations one main theme emerged: nothing like this had been done before and its' time was long overdue.



### Background

The magnitude of depression experienced by Canadian girls and young women is well documented (Youth Net, 2003; Validity Project CAMH, 2006; Adlaf, R., Pagliuz, A. & Beitchman, J.2004; Ross, E., Ali, A. and Toner, B., 2003; CICH, 1997; Brown, 1998; Gilligan, 1990; van Daalen-Smith, 2004). A two year innovative study exploring one component of

From there, access to diverse groups of girls was provided including teen mom groups, rural young women, Native young women, Lesbian and bisexual young women, young women with spina bifida, homeless young women, young women of colour and daughters of newly immigrated working class Asian parents. Several focus groups were held across the country - some occurring only once, and others being convened between two to seven times. Following the focus groups, the participants were encouraged to contact the researcher if they were interested in having one-to-one interviews to further discuss their lived experience of anger and the impact of its denial on their mental health. Nine diverse young women were subsequently interviewed two to three times. In addition, three young women served as consultants to the researcher, assisting with focus group content, interview questions, and thematic data analysis.

### Talking for the First Time

While the young women in the study had continuously heard that they needed to learn how to *manage* their anger, they had *never* been asked to describe their experiences with expressing anger, or the emotional impact of having their anger suppressed.

Many of the women interviewed named the same generators of anger in their life experience, including abuse, harassment, dismissal, devaluation, denied rights, being made to feel unimportant, unappreciated, and not good enough. The spirit-eroding experience of constant judgement stood out as pivotal in the emotional demise of these women. They described being judged for what they did or didn't do, who they were or weren't, what they said or did not say, and for adhering or not adhering to Western notions of femininity.

Young women face an apparent no-win situation when it comes to anger. All of the study's 65 young women, whether they had or had not expressed their anger to others, faced some sort of loss as a consequence. They either lost their connection with those they spoke to about their anger, or they eventually lost their connection with their authentic selves by suppressing their anger. For all, the lived

experience of anger brought with it a powerful lesson: Do not be angry.

Figure 1.0 Girls' consequences of expressing anger



*Girls are forced to become subordinate to the selves they're expected to be.*

### Self Silencing as a Consequence of Suppressed Anger

The lived experience of anger in these girls' lives eventually led to a process of self-silencing. The experience of being devalued, dismissed, judged, ignored, disrespected and having many of their rights denied within their various relationships, led to anger. In an attempt to speak of their anger and its source, the girls were subsequently dismissed, abandoned, judged, pathologized and medicated, disbelieved, criticized and/or further marginalized (and this was regardless of how they spoke of their anger).

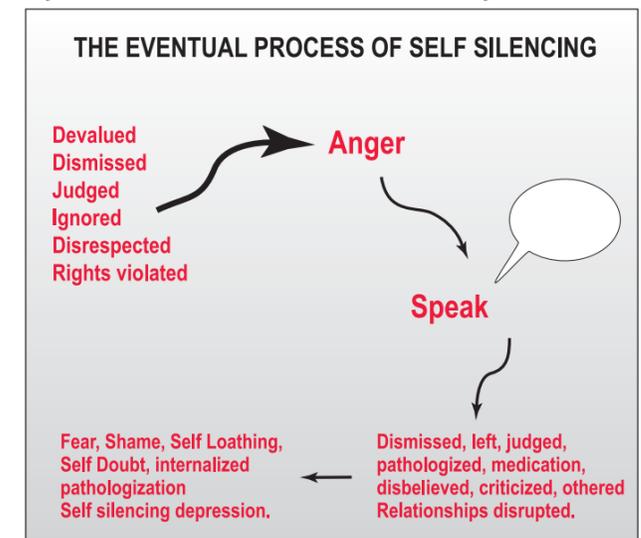
Gilligan (1990) demonstrated that young women are taught to define themselves in terms of their relationships and that mental health disturbances arise from disconnections in relationships. It makes

sense, then, that girls and young women will avoid relationship disruptions in order to avoid relational losses. Because of how their anger was received, their relationship with this emotion became one of fear, self-loathing, and internalized pathologization. They learned to suppress it, disregard it, divert it. They learned to silence it, and in so doing, were systematically taught to silenced themselves. Self-silencing is not something new nor solely related to anger, and Jack (1991) has dedicated her entire career to illustrate how women's health is negatively affected by societally-induced self-silencing.

Cox, Stabb and Bruckner (1999) illustrate anger's role in self-definition, but also demonstrate the paradox associated with it. Anger brings with it the potential to assist us to define and know the self, but because of powerful patriarchal expectations that women should not be angry, anger also demands a diversion or a disconnection from the self. Miller (1985) believes that anger is a reaction rooted in authenticity, and that authenticity, self-determination and power are crucial to mental health. She asserts that anger is a political emotion that has self-protective qualities.

The findings of this study support this claim. The overall lived experience of anger in the lives of the young women led to an erosion in their ability to live authentically. To be disconnected from anger is to be disconnected from self. Knowing oneself, being valued intrinsically and living according to one's values and purpose is wholly linked to mental health and a positive quality of life.

Figure 2.0 The Eventual Process of Self-Silencing



### Living as a Chameleon: The Mental Health Impact of Denied Authenticity

As time progressed, the experience of loss, dismissal and reprisal stemming from their attempts to reveal their anger and its sources, led to a disconnection from the emotion. In so doing, the young women became disconnected from many of their own needs, beliefs, feelings and strengths. We might conclude that to be disconnected from the message that anger brings, i.e. that your (or others') right to dignity, justice and health is being impinged upon, creates a dangerous disconnection from self and can eventually deny one's ability to be authentic - to be who one is most deeply.

Many girls are forced to detour their direct, honest relationship with anger in favor of some less authentic experience or expression ... [creating] cloudy lenses through which to view self and the world at large. Unfortunately the detours and compromises also become unconscious defining principles themselves - containers into which many young women must contort, bend and compress their experience to fit and be stored indefinitely. (Cox, Stabb & Bruckner, 1999, p. 3).

*Girls stop being and start seeming.*  
Pipher (1994)

The overall impact of their lived experience of denied anger was a denial of authenticity: of knowing themselves and being themselves. They learned to live as gender-prescribed chameleons, adapting, silencing, ignoring, diverting and suppressing their true selves, so as to not be judged and to safely blend in.

*If anger fosters ego-focused adaptation and a sense of one's individual rights and integrities, its suppression necessarily ushers in the potential for problems with self-protection. The girl becomes a part of the overall societal reinforcement for women's anger suppression as she learns to quiet the stirrings of her self.*

(Cox, Stabb & Bruckner, 1999, pp. 83-4)

It is dangerous to be defined solely in relation to what you are for others, because the development of an authentic self demands an autonomous awareness of one's existence as an individual with needs and rights - as well as - one's inherent connectedness to others. The health of a girl, without knowledge and affirmation of her anger, is gravely at risk. But girl-serving professionals can avoid this.

*To know one's anger is to know one's self.  
Anger is lived authenticity.*

## Relevance to Canadians

Countless girls now list being prescribed an anti-depressant as a component of their adolescence. Being pathologized and medicated sends a powerful message to young women - cope and move on.

Canada's girl-serving professionals *know* differently. They know that girls need to be heard, affirmed and nurtured, and the rampant use of anti depressants does nothing to assist young women to authentically journey through their adolescence. Authentic self-knowing is critical to mental health. Rather than accepting a *pill-for-every-ill* mentality, girl-centered professionals can listen, advocate and stop the cycle of denied anger, depression and widespread use of anti-depressants as an anti-dote to societal gender straightjacketing.

## Recommendations to Girl-Serving Professionals

Denied anger prevents girls from both protecting and knowing themselves - two key components of mental health and quality of life.



We cannot continue to allow narrow beliefs about femininity to erode and deny girls of their right to a full range of emotions - including anger. For girls to be denied a healthy relationship with this all-important emotion is troublesome, but to then deny them of the right to voice their anger is to

deny them of their right to freedom, identity, safety, voice, choice and health (United Nations, 1989).

Girl-centred professionals must listen, advocate and contribute to stopping the cycle of denied anger, depression and widespread use of anti-depressants. *The most critical intervention for girl-serving professionals is to affirm girls' anger.*

## Reframing Anger

As girl-serving professionals, we need to reframe anger from something that is negative, sinful and wrong, to something that is valuable, important and brings with it the opportunity to be authentic. To know one's anger is to know one's self, for anger brings with it a message about what we (and others) need, and how we believe we ought to be treated. It is not *how* a girl or young woman expresses anger that behooves girl-serving professionals to unpack the lived experience of anger - but rather what it is that causes it in the first place, what girls and young women are permitted to do with the emotion and the overall impact of dismissal and silencing that is important. Anger must be unhinged from aggression. Anger is an emotion. Aggression is a behavior. To reframe anger as a valuable emotion with an important message has far-reaching mental health implications, for anger brings with it agency, affirmation and authenticity.

## Standing Beside and Bearing Witness

Asking girls and young women to speak about their anger from a position of authority and within a climate of anger-affirmation is a mental health enhancing act in and of itself, but assisting girls and young women to come to voice about its antecedents, and affirming their stories is not only ethical but demonstrates a willingness to bear witness to the real life of today's girls. Brown (1998) explained that when adult women turn away from young women's anger, it sends a confusing and dangerous message. To turn away from young women's anger when in as powerful a position as a girl-serving professional, reinforces the silencing and is complicit in the erosion of young women's

boisterous selves during early adolescence. Encouraging the knowing of young women's anger and all the politics surrounding both its causes and its suppression, Brown (1998) states, is a radical act with potentially transformative consequences. Canada's girl-serving professionals can lead this transformation of not only how young women's anger is viewed, but how it is heard and understood.

The 65 wise girls whose narratives inform this study expressed a desire that someone would listen and not leave their side as they expressed their anger. When I asked them how nurses and other girl-serving professionals could best support their mental health, they asked that they not be judged, that they be believed, that they be allowed to be angry, and that we demonstrate that we care about their lives. They want our assurance that they will not be dismissed, seen as weak, or mentally unstable. Together we can stop the cycle in which girls and young women are taught to be chameleons, and free them to become who they are most deeply.

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## Acknowledgements

- The 65 girls who shared their life narratives with me with courage and conviction
- Youth Net Ottawa
- Big Sisters of Canada
- The Spina Bifida Association of Ontario
- The Ottawa native women's Centre
- Dawn Walker, RN (CICH) (Government of Canada)
- The Status of Women Canada
- The Canadian Teacher's Federation
- Our Place Peel, Mississauga Ontario
- The Validity Project, CAMH Toronto/Hamilton
- Dean Rhonda Lenton, Atkinson Faculty of Liberal and Professional Studies, York University
- Lisa Webb, Account Director, Account Direction, Marketing & Communications, York University
- Doctors Helen Lenskyj, Ardra Cole, Martha Rogers, Magda Lewis and Bonnie Burstow
- Maggie Waligora, Gayle Pilling and Kathe Macdonald
- The Jean Baker Miller Training Institute
- YWCA Canada
- Child and Youth Bureau , Govt of Canada
- Women's Bureau, Govt of Canada

...and to the girl-serving professionals who have for years asked me to develop this grass roots guide for them to have in their desks, brief cases, day books etc so that they may refer to it daily. I wish you courage as you confront problematic notions about anger and girls.