

# ROUGH CUT

Stressed-out girls are taking **dangerous measures** to cope. *Teen Vogue* investigates **self-harm's stranglehold**.  
**Photographed by Jenny van Sommers.**

† o say that 17-year-old Audrey\* has a crazy schedule would be a major understatement. "I'm in student council, head of the Spanish club, and on the varsity lacrosse and golf teams," the high school junior states. "I also take two AP classes and two honors courses. I'm pretty social, too, so I have to balance the things I need to do with the things I *want* to do." Because Audrey seems to have it so together, friends even come to her for advice. "I put a lot of pressure on myself to live up to their assumptions," she says.

The constant stress of high expectations brought Audrey to a breaking point last May, when the possibility of failing her chemistry class felt like too much to handle on top of everything else. "That was the first time I cut myself," she confides. "It was an outward sign of how stressed I felt; it wasn't just in my head anymore."

Audrey isn't alone in feeling overwhelmed—27 percent of teens admitted to being extremely stressed during the past school year, according to a 2014 report from the American Psychological Association—and, scarier yet, she's not alone in how she's chosen to cope. A recent study from King's College London shows that one in 12 teens reported having self-harmed, and that more of them are girls.

Why is such destructive behavior so widespread? According to Allison Kress, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist in California who specializes in cutting, it takes hold because "girls can secretly cope while still seeming like they're OK to everyone else." The problem with cutting

*\*Name has been changed.*

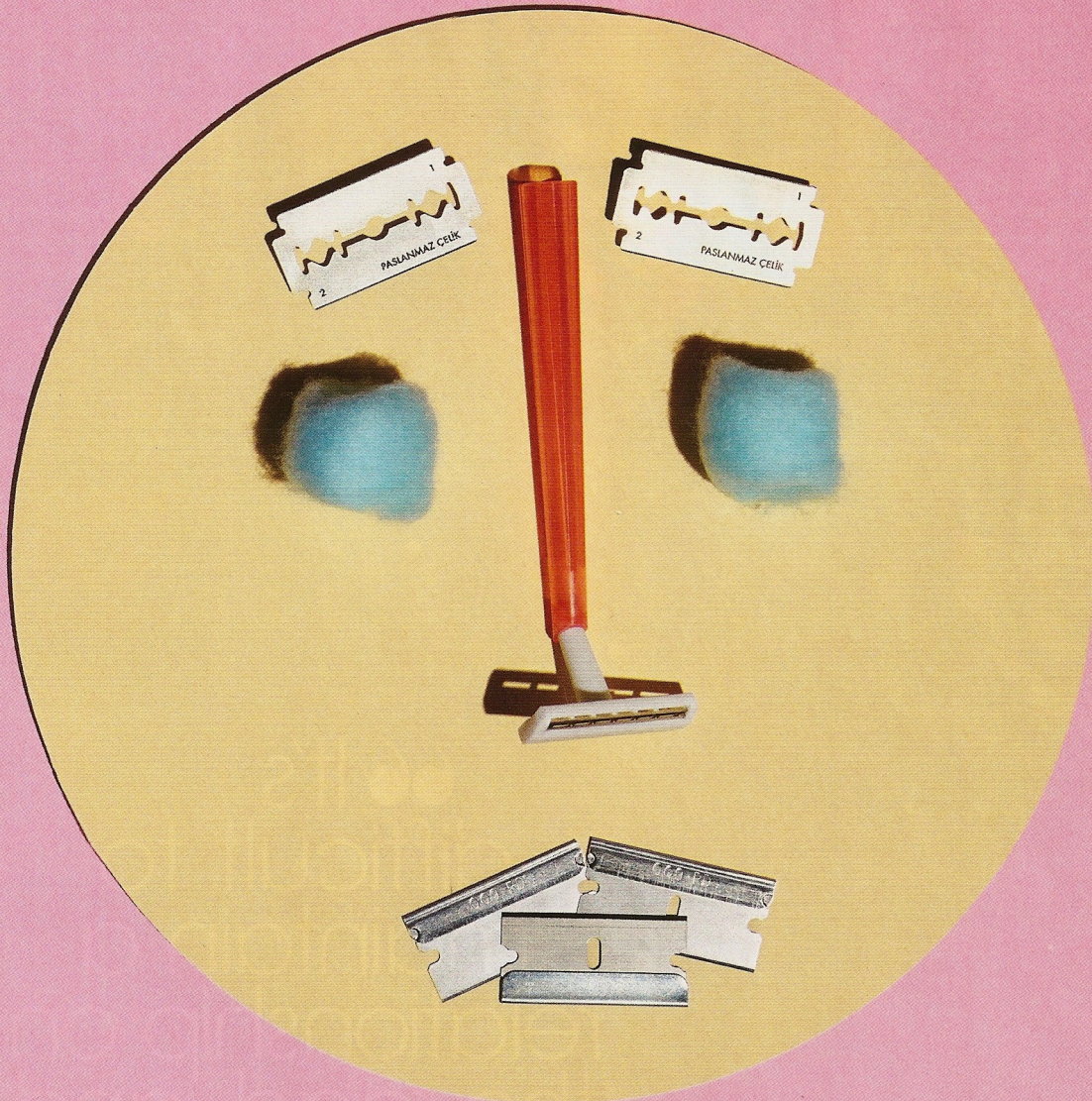
as an emotional outlet is that it's just a quick fix—and a dangerous one at that. "It distracts you from what you're feeling, but it doesn't actually confront the deeper problems you're dealing with," Dr. Kress says, adding that many of her patients are exactly the kinds of girls you *wouldn't* expect: the valedictorians and star athletes, the well-rounded high achievers whose lives seem picture-perfect.

For 14-year-old eighth grader Carly\*, there are few things more stressful than change. And between switching middle schools last year and trying to get into private high schools this year, her whole world feels different. "Everything became so overwhelming that it pushed me over the edge," she says of the first time she decided to cut herself a year ago. Eventually, Carly started self-harming every day. "I was sick of feeling that pain and stress in my head," she says. "When I felt physical pain, it took that away. I knew it wasn't a good thing, but I thought the stress I was feeling was worse."

The road to cutting is often like Carly's: It's less about a specific desire to do harm than it is about desperation for some kind of outlet. With situations of high stress, "teens aren't explicitly taught how to cope," says Nancy Rappaport, M.D., an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. "The key is noticing changes in your body so you can recognize the signs. If you start biting your nails or picking your eyebrows, that's a signal to look for alternative ways to manage your emotions before you get to a point where you might want to self-harm." *continued* ► 145

## BLADE RUNNER

Research shows that approximately 12 percent to 24 percent of young people have self-harmed.



## ELLA UNPLUGGED

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thrift shopping (or “op shopping,” as they call it in New Zealand), Ella jokes about her mostly black wardrobe (“It’s a real problem”) but insists she’s branching out. Whether she trades noir for neon, it’s her stage presence that’s evolving even quicker than her style. “Before I started performing in August, I didn’t know how to carry a show or how to be a performer, so I’ve learned a lot real fast,” admits Ella, who cites Portishead, Massive Attack, and Talking Heads as only a few of her influences. “Before, I was tense the whole time. Now I really enjoy it and can relax a bit more. I feel like I have sure-fire, tried-and-true tricks that work and keep things spicy.” She pauses. “I’m definitely not revealing them!” But all the tricks in the world can’t prepare even the most seasoned performer for the Grammy Awards. “I don’t want to throw up on anyone,” she says of the big day. “I’m not going to throw up!”

A few weeks later, Ella calls me right before the Austin, Texas, launch of her first major North American tour. Even by phone I can tell she’s still glowing from her dual Grammy wins (Song of the Year and Best Pop Solo Performance). “The whole day felt like this weird, dreamy fantasy. You spend an eternity getting ready, and then all of a sudden everything’s happening and it’s all gone,” she explains. “They film you the whole time to get reactions, and you can’t really watch the show without worrying, Am I dancing enough? Do I look like I’m good? Is someone going to destroy me for not liking someone’s performance?” All eyes were indeed on Ella, but for all the right reasons. “After winning Song of the Year, [co-writer Joel Little and I] went underneath the stage, and Pharrell and Daft Punk were right next to us, and everyone was milling around. And I thought, This is it. We kind of just made it. This just happened.” Even with the fairy-tale win, this reigning teen queen isn’t letting it go to her head. “I’m really flattered, but I don’t think of myself as any better of an artist, or think I’m really cool as a result of the wins,” she says. “I wish I felt like I was cooler, but I don’t!”

That can’t be said for the rest of the world, but to her family, Ella’s exactly the same. “My family doesn’t treat me differently,” she states. “That’s what’s so awesome about families. They really don’t care—they’ll treat you just the same if you’re doing really badly or if you’re doing well. That’s the one part of my life I can completely rely on.” She knows it’s an important asset, especially considering how fickle the music industry can be. “I don’t take fame or current popularity or anything too seriously, because I was there when I was a loser, and I’m here now, when I’m less of a loser, and I’m going to be there when I’m a loser again. I figure every-

thing that’s happened to me has been so fast, and a lot of the people who like me now might not like me next year.”

With foresight in spades, it’s clear Ella’s poised for even more massive success—when she’s ready for it, that is. “I don’t want to be playing huge stadiums right now with a crazy stage production with a hundred dancers, because I need something to expand into if I want to go there,” she says. “I definitely think about how I want to grow and evolve all the time.” Lorde only knows what’s next. □

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College senior Amy, 22, has struggled with crippling stress—and the resulting urge to cut herself—since eighth grade, especially with the pressure of having a “supersmart” older sister. “I was always compared to her, and if I didn’t get the grades she did, I’d get yelled at when I got home,” she says. Amy thought cutting was the only way to get through it. “Between the stress at school and the stress from my family, if a problem came up, I would take it out on myself. When people saw the scars, I’d tell them I fell, or that a dog scratched me, or that it was a sports thing. I never really knew how to say, ‘There’s something wrong, this is what’s going on, what do I do?’” she admits. “I had no sense of control in my life, but cutting made me feel in control of something.” Over time Amy came to learn that the control she felt was both fleeting and false. According to Dr. Kress, cutting “only creates more problems. You have the initial thoughts and feelings that make you do it, and then the stress of dealing with what you’ve just done to yourself. That spirals into *more* stress, lower self-esteem, depression, and isolation. Then you have to ask yourself, Who’s really in control: Cutting or me?”

When it all got to be too much for Carly, she confided in a close friend, who immediately told their school’s guidance counselor. Opening up about stress and self-harm can be scary, and may feel as if you’re admitting a weakness or a failure—which is especially hard for people who want to seem like they’re totally on top of things. But “cutting thrives on secrecy and fear, so the most important way to get help is to share what you’re doing with someone you trust,” Dr. Kress advises. “In fact, stepping up and taking care of it shows your strength.”

Cutting to cope is not the answer, and it never will be. Says Amy, “It’s kind of like putting on a bandage when you really need stitches. In the end, you have a scar, not a solution.” —ASHLEY MATEO

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