
What is Depression?

"Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

- Unknown Depression

What is depression? What is this thing that would come and steal a person's life? For that matter, what brought 500,000 teenagers in the United States last year to the point where life was so unattractive that death became an option? When you're 13 or 16 or 19, there is everything to look forward to. There are games, dances, graduation, college, career, getting a car, marriage, having children, buying a home, and traveling. Teenagers have their whole lives ahead of them. What brings a person to the point that he or she no longer wants to live? To look at and to understand depression, it must be examined in its most basic, simple form.

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Gresham Union High School

Becoming depressed is exactly like catching a cold. When you catch a cold, it comes in stages. First you get what we call the sniffles. When you get the sniffles the worst thing that can happen is sitting in an English class taking a test, with the only sound in the room the scrape of the pencil on the paper, all of a sudden you develop ... post-nasal drip.

You're sitting there in class, you're looking for a kleenex, and you don't have one. There is no noise, no one is talking, and finally you know you're going to drip on the test, and the teacher is going to frown on that. So you do the only thing left for you to do. You do this: Sniffffff.

Everyone else is wondering, "Did he swallow it?" Now don't think I'm being gross, because every one of you has thought about it at one time or another.

You ever see a little kid, two years old? You know, I've got four kids, and when they get runny noses they just don't care. If they've got it coming out one side or the other, it just doesn't matter.

But no one ever died of the sniffles. You'll never see a doctor's report that says, "The patient was admitted to the emergency room at 6 a.m. He died at 10 a.m. because his nose ran to death." It doesn't happen. But what happens if you don't treat the sniffles? What happens is that it turns into a head cold.

You come downstairs and your mom says, "How are you?" You say, "I feel awful."

She looks at you and says, "Well, maybe you'd better stay home from school today."

For a moment you say, "Oh, good idea," but then you realize that it's Friday and if you stay home from school she's not going to let you go out tonight. You say, "No, I'm fine." You grab a Contac and away you go.

So you're running around and you're pushing yourself. You go to the game and go out afterwards. You're running around, you're not getting the sleep, the food, the rest, the nutrients, the vitamins

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you need, all the stuff your body craves. You're just running around, and the cold gets worse.

No one has ever died of the sniffles. But gradually the cold gets worse and worse and worse to the point that you have pneumonia, and lots of people die of pneumonia. No one dies up here. (Points to nose.) Lots of people die down here. (Points to chest.)

Depression works exactly the same way.

Depression is gloominess, sadness, or dejection. People say they're "feeling down" or "feeling bad." How often have you heard people casually say they feel "depressed" about their job prospects, wardrobe, or checkbook balance? But real depression is a larger, deeper hurt. Depression is an emotional heartache. As adults, most of us do not need depression explicitly defined, for we have lived through any number of rounds of it. We are able to deal with depression more easily than teens because adults are generally considered emotionally mature. Yet even with a maturity advantage, every year thousands of adults seek counseling, have nervous breakdowns, or commit suicide because of depression that is not treated. How much more confusing is it for young people who have never dealt with depression? Not only do they feel bad, sad, and hopeless, but they aren't sure how they arrived at that state or if they will ever find their way out of it. They don't realize that depression will pass.

To teenagers, depression is a comment on their mental health. It worries them because they feel mentally unstable. "I must be nuts," they say to themselves as they become more depressed. They're sure of it when they start having suicidal feelings. On top of that they feel the pressure of conformity. Teenagers want to be accepted above all else. The last thing they want is to be different, and being mentally ill would certainly make them different. They understand that they are feeling badly, but they don't know how to label what they are experiencing.

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Teenagers need to understand that they are experiencing depression, that it's a normal part of life, and that depression is an emotional state, not a mental illness.

Once depression deepens and teenagers decide - mistakenly - that they are mentally ill, they usually don't seek help. They don't tell anyone how they are feeling. And just like a common cold that is left untreated, the depression gets worse.

Learning About Depression

Teenagers are children in transition. They need to learn about depression and how to deal with it, just as they learned spelling and math. It is hard for parents to remember this, because teens may look physically mature and yet be emotionally immature. That six-foot-tall, 180-pound Hercules who bears your son's name has a birth certificate that says he is 17 years old. But he may feel and act 10 years old emotionally. The four aspects - mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional - mature at different rates. As with a strapping 17-year-old, physical maturity often comes before emotional, mental, and spiritual maturity.

The most powerful method that parents have to help their children through depression is to tell them that it is O.K. to hurt and to teach them how to deal with the pain they will experience. Often kids turn to drugs or alcohol because they don't understand what is wrong or how to fix it, and chemical highs temporarily ease the emotional pain.

It is important for teens to know that *depression has a beginning, a middle, and an end.* Coming out of depression can take just as long as entering it. What has taken months to build will take weeks, maybe even months, to heal. Realizing that one is depressed, and why, opens the door to recovery. If I may borrow an example from the Gresham Union High School program, a diagnosis of pneumonia is often the first step toward feeling better. Even if you still feel physically like death warmed

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over, you feel emotionally relieved. ("Something was wrong after all!") Just knowing that depressed feelings will eventually pass is the beginning of recuperation.

Young people who are emotionally immature - or, better yet, emotionally growing - are impatient for results. Once they understand that they are experiencing depression and that it will end, they want instant recovery. In this age of microwaves, fast food, and jet airplanes it is easy to get discouraged if we don't feel better immediately. I tell students that life is a series of experiences; there are no instant answers. Becoming depressed is a gradual process, and it takes a gradual process to recover from depression.

Bad Days

One cause of depression is the bad day, or what I call the "emotional cold." Certainly everyone has bad days, and when they happen once in a while they are as harmless as the sniffles. But when a bad day follows one bad day upon another bad day, depression takes a strong hold on a person's emotions. Certainly an occasional bad day will not kill anyone, but a pileup of bad days, leading to depression and suicidal feelings, kills thousands every year.

For a teenager, a bad day can be caused by a number of things. Teens are changing more rapidly than they did even as young children. Not only are they changing hormonally, causing rapid physical changes, but they are also striving to grow emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. They are like a pendulum swinging from one extreme to another. They are discovering new ideas, new feelings, and new attitudes. But they still want to be taken care of and nurtured.

Teenagers feel driven to search for their own ideals, heroes, and thoughts. Teens are looking for their own identities and taking the first steps toward adult responsibility. They want to assert their individuality. If mom and dad believe in anything,

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that thing is suspect. But young people still look up to their folks and come to them for advice. This mix of child and adult emotions, maturity and immaturity, makes everything a big deal.

New experiences cause bad days. It is hard for adults to remember that what seems old hat to them - a kiss, a date (or the lack of a date), a failing grade, or flunking a driving test - are first-time experiences for the adolescent. This gives these things an importance and a significance that adults tend to overlook.

Lack of success, another first for many young people, also plays a large role in teenage depression. Failing is never easy, and if you've never done it before, it takes a big emotional toll. Compound a few bad days with intense first-time experiences and confusion about growing up, and it is no wonder that one hundred percent of teenagers feel depressed at one point or another.

Pressures Behind Depression

Depression didn't start with the current generation of teenagers, nor will it end even when teens and adults understand what it is. Depression is a by-product of a changing and confusing society. We live in a high-pressure world, and teenagers, and younger children as well, are very much aware of these pressures.

Parental pressure is one of the most common and harmful pressures with which all young people live. Often we don't realize how much we are pressuring our kids, even as we do it. We want our children to succeed and if possible to do better in life than we have. We expect them to stand out in school, excel in sports, or shine in the arts. It is not wrong to expect children to do their best, but many parents lose sight of the person they are raising and look only at the awards the student has or has not received.

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We can teach kids to work hard without teaching that perfection is the only acceptable result. Being a good sportsman and enjoying sports are more important than winning or being the best player on the team. Having a well-rounded education and a love of learning is better than being unable to take risks because of fear of failure. Parents do not need to add the pressure of high expectations to their children's daily stress in simply making it through school.

Teenagers pick up parents' expectations and then act as their own worst critics. They want to succeed in order to please mom and dad, but they may already be working at their maximum capacities. When they disappoint their parents, or when they *think* they'll disappoint their parents, kids get discouraged and depressed. They should always be praised for successes, however small, rather than scolded for not living up to their parents' possibly unrealistic hopes. Most kids are harder on themselves than adults ever dream of being.

Seventeen-year-old Jennifer committed suicide on the first day of her senior year. She was an "A" student, captain of the track team, and had been a beautiful homecoming princess the year before. Jennifer was pretty and popular, but she came to the conclusion that life was not worth living. She could not handle the pressure of being "perfect" any longer.

By anyone's measure, this teenager was a success. But the cost of success was her life. The fears Jennifer kept inside about school and failing, fears she couldn't deal with, led her to commit suicide at the beginning of a year that held the promises of her future. When will the pressures stop? Who will teach teenagers that it is O.K. to be second-best or average if they are doing all they can?

School is a source of pressure because it often pits student against student. We live in a very competitive society, and competition is built into the school system. We like to reward "the best." Less than the best is nothing. We emphasize winning and losing, starting with such seemingly innocent events

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as Spelling Bees and Field Days. In a Spelling Bee, one out of 30 children will be the winner. All the rest will label themselves losers. Field Days are supposed to be end-of-the-school-year celebrations. But when you give out ribbons for the winners and nothing for the losers, these events can make the school year end painfully for a majority of kids. Competition in small doses is healthy, but too often competition is overemphasized, and our children suffer.

Children are thrown into a pressure cooker at school in other ways as well. For example, in third grade they are expected to learn multiplication tables. Not only must they learn all the tables in a prescribed length of time, but they must also perform on command by spitting back the information within a specified time limit. Children feel the pressure of this task, especially if they are among the last to accomplish it. Multiplication tables are important, and children can and do learn them, but the pressure adds to their sense of helplessness. School is necessary, but it's not often easy.

The way in which we teach can also increase pressure on students. In many classrooms teachers are supposed to grade on a curve, which means someone will get an "A" but someone else will fall under the curve and flunk. Rarely are teachers allowed to grade on improvement shown or take into account different learning styles. Yet we want educators to teach our children *and* understand their differences. This is an unrealistic expectation to place on the schools. This system forces many students constantly to struggle to reach standard achievement measures that don't consider individuality.

With today's emphasis on careers and "making it to the top," students are feeling pressured into life decisions earlier and earlier: "What college will I attend? What career will I pursue?" Thus we make them grow up faster - often faster than they are able. Most teens can't decide what to wear in the morning, let alone what job they want to hold for the rest of their lives. (For that matter, most adults don't know what they

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want to be "when they grow up" either.) Twelve-, 14-,16-, and even 18-year-olds need freedom to explore many different careers and life options without being expected to stick forever to any one "career" decision.

The pressure of emphasizing school over everything else harms our kids. What happens when you emphasize the mental growth of maturing human beings without providing equal nurturing for their spiritual and emotional needs? You produce unhappy, hurting children. If we overemphasize test scores, grades, and getting into an elite university, we do so at the expense of personal growth. Young people need to learn how to deal with disappointment and failure along with learning good study habits.

School not only brings to bear the stresses of academics, but also the intense drive to be liked and accepted by one's schoolmates. Because kids are willing to make almost any sacrifice to find acceptance, peer pressure can cost: it is directly related to drug use and alcohol consumption by teenagers. We can blame peer influence for early sexual activity and shoplifting, too. ("I'll do it if you'll do it. Come on, I dare you!")

One reason for the popularity of gangs in inner cities is that a gang provides kids who have little other support with a group that accepts them. Even when the group's activities are illegal or immoral, young people and adults join because the gang offers a place where they can belong, where they are accepted. Peer pressure is felt on a group level as well as on an individual level. Every high school demonstrates this with a unique social climate. As I go from school to school, it is obvious what is "in" at each community. At one school it is socially acceptable to be punks. At another, everyone dresses like cowboys, and at a third, all the kids look like preppies. Each school has a dress and behavior code that is accepted by students as the norm.

The results of group peer pressure can be dramatic. If the most popular students are drug users and say that drug use is

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cool, then everyone believes it and drug use becomes rampant. At my high school in Detroit, it was death to your popularity to be a virgin past your thirteenth birthday. That is peer group pressure.

People generally fall into two groups: leaders and followers. The vast majority are followers. Peer pressure certainly can be responsible for setting positive examples, as with Students Against Drunk Driving and peer counseling groups. But problems arise when the leaders do things that are harmful - using drugs, drinking, or promoting casual sex, to name a few - because the followers follow. In some areas, entire neighborhoods and cities fall under the spell of strong leaders who support immorality.

Students quickly learn that to be different from the group means ostracism by a large portion of the student body. And no matter who you are, rejection hurts. Conforming to peer pressure is one way to protect oneself against rejection.

No matter how tough teenagers look or act - and gang members, punks, and bikers can look pretty hardened - they are not tough inside. On the inside they are crying out for love and acceptance. Teens are confused by the changes they are going through, by the fluctuation of their feelings, by the pressures from parents, school, and peers, and by their struggle to deal with all of this. Social and personal pressures chip away at their lives, and too often depression is the result.

Susan

Fourteen-year-old Susan came to see me after a Dare to *Live* program at her school. Her parents were divorced. She lived with her dad and had not seen her mother in years. "My father doesn't understand me," Susan began.

"Do you ever try talking to him?" I asked.

"No, he won't listen to me. He only wants to think I'm

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sweet and innocent, and a perfect, obedient child. I'm not. I sneak out every Friday and Saturday night. I drink, I sleep with guys, and I use drugs."

Susan then looked at me and asked, "What do you think of me now?"

"Does it matter what I think?" "Yes," she said, "it does."

"I think you're a little girl who is hurting," I answered. "I think you've done things that you wish you hadn't. I think you are still doing things that you wish you didn't have to do. But you're doing them because you have to be accepted. I want you to know that I accept you the way you are, and I care." Susan's eyes filled with tears. "No one has ever said that to me before."

If children are not told that they are loved and lovable no matter what they do, they will constantly test the boundaries. Susan's life was a desert with no love in sight. She had no evidence that her mother loved her, she had not seen her for seven years. Her father's love was based on an image of her being a "perfect," obedient child, which was something Susan knew that she was not and could not be. Susan looked for acceptance from the only group that seemed to give her the unconditional love she craved: her peers. Because of her desire to be accepted, she participated in things she knew were wrong.

Social Pressures

In addition to pressures from parents, school, and peers, teenagers are very much aware of the changing social climate and the uncertainties of life on this planet.

Since the 1940s social changes have accelerated phenomenally. During World War II women began working outside the home and found that they liked it. Then the economy changed, and women worked outside the home, not only because it was

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satisfying, but because it became a necessity. In many parts of the United States it is difficult for a family to live on one income.

Some psychologists believe that the price our children pay for absentee parents is high. In this society there is less parenting and supervision of young children than ever before. After having paid childcare costs for seven or eight years, parents decide their first- or second-graders are able to supervise themselves for the three or four hours before mom and dad come home from work. The number of latchkey kids is growing in spite of laws that prohibit young children from being without adult supervision.

Kids with no supervision exist in a vacuum without adult love and support. Children want and need a loving and safe environment and are unlikely to find it in an empty house after school. Without adults to guide them, lonely kids turn to the next closest source - usually friends - for love and acceptance. Parents may work out of necessity, but by their absenteeism they give away the responsibility of teaching their children about issues that were meant to be taught at home. Some parents expect the schools, or maybe even the child's peers, to teach the child about sex, morality, and ethics. That is when social climates at school and in the neighborhood become the key to what children learn and how they act.

Families have changed as society has changed. Many teenagers now belong to families that have gone through three generations of divorce. It's no wonder that teens worry about their parents' marriage. Grandma and grandpa, as well as mom and dad, are divorced. With the addition of stepparents and stepsiblings the family unit becomes more complex. Divorces and remarriages do not necessarily cause problems or depression, but they do add stress.

The mobility of American families makes home life even more unsettled. Americans now average 11 moves per lifetime,

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according to the Census Bureau. They move out of school districts, neighborhoods, cities, and states. It is not unusual for an average-size school to get one hundred transfers, either in or out, during the first three months of the school year. As a result, teens do not have the stability that can be found in a friend they have known for five years, two years, or even just one year. A teen's best friend may be someone they met a few months ago, not someone they've known since fourth grade. And the odds are that one of the two will move away within the next few years.

Then world problems come crashing in on the already fragile teenager. The threats of nuclear war, an unstable economy, AIDS, and a host of other crises make the headlines daily. Teens not only have to worry about whether they will get a date on Friday night, but, if they do get a date and are sexually active, whether they will catch a disease and die. Young people are well aware of society's many problems, and these worries add to their other pressures. For teens today, the Earth often seems an unstable place in which to live.

A Universal Experience

In a high school survey that I did, I asked the students questions about depression. Of the kids who returned the survey, one hundred percent said they had been depressed. But only 14 percent thought that other people got depressed too. Nearly all the kids believed that depression was unique to them. Kids don't realize that all their fellow high school and junior high classmates at one time have been and at some time again will be depressed. In an auditorium full of students, every one of them raise their hands when asked if they have experienced depression. As the students look around the room, they realize that without exception the cheerleaders, the athletes, the student-body president, and even the teachers have experienced

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sometimes feel down, it must be all right and even "normal" to be depressed. And it is!

For those who are convinced that being different is the worst way to be, knowing that everyone else suffers in the same way is important. Teenagers who understand that we all hurt and all become depressed no longer have to fear depression. They also don't have to feel uncomfortable seeking help when they need it.

No-Fault Clause

It is not surprising that as children become adolescents and begin to cope with social changes and the pressures of becoming an adult, they become depressed. But I want to emphasize that a depressed teenager is not a reflection on his or her parents.

Teens do not get depressed because their parents have missed something. Whether or not you have heart-to-heart talks with your kids every night, read all the right parenting manuals, are open and have great communication skills, your children will still experience depression. No matter what kind of home they come from, kids will experience emotional ups and downs. Parents cannot and should not try to protect their children from the highs and the lows. Both have to be experienced, because we learn different aspects of life from both.

Communication

The best therapy for depression is to deal with the source of the pain. What caused the hurt in the first place? This takes communication, and many teenagers don't know how to open up and talk. They especially don't know how to communicate pain.

Communication skills are learned. Effective communication between parent and child should be practiced from the

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beginning. When eight-year-old Jeff wants to share his fears about second grade with mom, she should give him the same respect she would give an adult friend who came to her with a problem. But instead Jeff's mom smooths over the problem: "It will work out, don't worry about it." Or she ignores it: "I'm busy, Jeff, and you complain too much anyway." This tells Jeff that his problems are not important enough to bother mom about them.

After five more years of having his problems minimized or ignored, Jeff, now 13, no longer tries to talk to his parents about his concerns. His typical reaction when he has a problem and is hurting is, "My parents don't listen anyway." Unfortunately, the pattern that began many years before confirms this for Jeff.

Kids who are hurting inside have difficulty reaching out for help, and will often quit reaching out if their early attempts are unsuccessful. They learn this technique from their parents. Adults close up when they don't want to talk about a problem: "Nothing is wrong. Leave me alone. I don't feel like talking." It is not surprising that teens also withdraw when they are depressed. The problem is that nothing gets resolved by withdrawal. Depression deepens when it is not discussed.

Communicating with children, giving them respect, and paying attention to their problems and successes must begin early. But even if negative patterns have developed, it is never too late to change. Parents must be honest about their failings: "I know in the past I haven't been a very good listener, but I would really like to try harder. I want you to know that I'm here for you whether you are happy or hurting. I will do my best to listen to you without judgment."

It may be hard to regain the trust of children who have not seen evidence of their parents' sincerity and change of heart. But all kids want their parents to be there for them. If you give them reason to believe you will support them by being available during small crises, they will begin to share larger problems with you as well.

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Remember, communication is important *before* your children become depressed. Shutting kids out, minimizing their problems, and being unavailable when they need you makes it unlikely that they will come to you when they hurt. Being open, honest, and nonjudgmental, listening for subtle clues about their emotional states, and being available to them in large and small ways keeps the lines of communication between parent and child open and uncluttered.

Sources of Support

Depressed adolescents are hurting. They want the hurt to stop but don't know how to stop it. The reasons for their pain are varied and may come from the circumstances of their lives or from the pressures visited upon them by parents, peers, school, or society. But what they all need in common is support to get through the tough times.

If the adults in their lives are absent or are not willing to support them, teenagers will turn to friends for advice. But friends are usually not trained or experienced in dealing with depression. Their advice may be to mask the problem, deny it, or ignore it.

Often, friends will give the hurting teen what they believe is an instant solution: "If you feel bad, take drugs. Get drunk. Run away from home." But if young people cover depression with drugs and alcohol, how can they know what they are feeling? It is impossible to know how you feel or how to make yourself feel better in an alcohol- or drug-induced state.

Running away from home appears to be another quick and easy solution. If kids can't talk to their parents, they reason, their parents must be the problem. So they leave. Most runaways quickly learn that life outside the home is more complex and frightening than facing mom and dad and their own difficulties.

Why do friends pass out this kind of advice? Kids are not

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taught how to deal with their own depression, so they therefore know even less about dealing with a friend's depression. But if there is no other support, it is friends to whom the depressed teenager will go for help.

Young adults must be taught where to turn for reliable, wise support. If they do not have the built-in support of families and a network of support from well-informed friends, counselors, church, and community leaders, we need to teach them to care for each other. If depressed teens can reach out to friends who know how to help, they will not feel so alone in the world.

At a high school in Seattle, Washington, a group of teens gathered around me after the *Dare to Live* program. I noticed a girl who held back as other students commented on my stories or asked for advice for a friend. Finally, two girls remained. The young woman who had held back was named Jolene; she told the other girl, Beth, that she could speak first.

Beth told me a life story of tragic proportions. Her parents were divorced, and Beth lived with her mom. Her mother's boyfriend appeared when the welfare check came and disappeared with the money. There was no food in the house, and Beth's little brother often went to school without a lunch or lunch money. Beth had been babysitting to give her little brother money for lunch, but she recently discovered that an older brother had been stealing from the younger child to buy drugs. Fifteen-year-old Beth was overwhelmed with the responsibilities of acting as a surrogate parent to her younger brother and of trying to make it through her own mixed-up life.

Jolene listened to Beth's story and realized that she was not the only person who hurt. At that point Jolene was willing to share her similarly sad story with Beth and me. The two girls, who had never met before, agreed to become each other's support system. They promised to look for the other at school every day and to check on how each was doing. These two hurting teenagers began the framework of support they both needed to face their problems.

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Teenagers are relieved to learn that it is all right to offer support to each other. When I ask at a *Dare to Live* assembly how many students would be willing to reach out to a fellow student who needs help, every hand eagerly raises. Hurting kids realize that they are not alone in their fear and suffering. If they are told it is O.K. to talk about depression and suicide to their friends, and these friends learn how to listen and how to seek outside help if necessary, troubles are brought out into the open. A common misconception is that talking about depression and suicide *creates* problems. That just isn't true. Encouraging young people to talk about how they feel *solves* problems. Kids talking to kids builds support.

It is important to have more than one person to whom turn in times of need. A support system must be deep, made up of many people who are willing to help. It is impossible to have too much support. Everyone - both young people and adults - should constantly be building support systems.

During a *Dare to Live* assembly I call six kids up front to represent the different places that teens can go to find help when they are feeling bad: their family, friends, school, community workers, community programs, and professionals in the mental health field. I also ask the teachers to reinforce this point in the classroom, and I encourage them to have their students compile personal lists of support people. In the Appendix of this book is a sheet that readers may use for the same purpose. Tear it out or photocopy it and give it to a teen about whom you care. This will become a personal list of the teen's support system that will be available should it be needed.

Depression is a negative state, but it can be dealt with in a positive manner when we provide each other with support. We must care for one another. True, "no man is an island," but it seems that as the world gets more populated, people become more isolated. Relationships, the foundation of support, must be built in the old-fashioned way: I care about you, so you'll care about me, so we can care about each other.

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Scott

Other emotions besides depression are being experienced for the first time during adolescence. Kids need to be taught about these emotions, too.

Take 15-year-old Scott, who listened to the program and approached me afterwards. Scott was worried that he was depressed.

"I do eight of those 12 signs," he told me.

Over the years I've learned to spot kids who are feeling bad, and Scott didn't look depressed to me. "What kinds of problems are you having?" I asked. "Are you doing O.K. at home?" "Yeah," Scott said.

"Are you doing O.K. at school?" "Yeah, I'm doing fine at school." "What seems to be the problem?" I said.

"Well, I'm having trouble sleeping. I can't concentrate in class. My stomach is all knotted up and I don't feel like eating." "How long have you felt this way?" I said.

Scott thought for a minute. "About a month."

"Was there anything different that happened a month ago, Scott?"

He looked puzzled. "I met Lisa."

Scott wasn't depressed! He was in love for the first time, and he didn't know that his confused feelings might stem from an emotion that was supposed to be wonderful. Teenagers must be told about the whole range of emotions they will experience, from depression to love.

Success

Which kids succeed? The students who are truly successful are not free of depression. *Everyone experiences depression. It is a normal, healthy emotion.* But success is more likely when teens have a network of support, when they know how to

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communicate, and when they know their parents, or someone else, will listen to them.

Successful teenagers are taught that it is all right not to be perfect and that failure is not only acceptable, but to be expected. These kids work out problems more promptly. Although they go through their share of emotional upheavals, they have the knowledge and the support to deal with difficulties as they occur.

Gresham Union High School

I'm not talking to you about something I've read in books; I've actually lived through this. About five years ago I developed migraine headaches and a shaking in my hand. I went to a neurologist to find out what was wrong with me.

He ran about \$2,000 worth of tests and said, "Well, Mike, I've got good news and I've got bad news."

I said, "What's the good news?"

He said, "I can't find anything wrong with you." "What's the bad news?"

"There's something wrong with you." "For \$2,000 you're telling me that?"

"What you've got, Mike, is an acentral tremor. Now, we don't know what causes it, but it can be treated."

I said, "Well, how do you treat it?"

"We treat it with medication. I'm going to give you medication and I want you to take it for a month. Come back so I can see how you're doing."

I took the medication. I came back in a month and he said, "How are you doing?"

I said, "Fine," but not with much enthusiasm. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." "Headaches?"

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"No, I haven't had a headache all month."

"Shaking?" "No shaking." "What's wrong?" "It's kind of embarrassing."

"Come on. I'm your doctor, tell me."

"Doc, ever since I started taking that stuff, I've lost my sex drive."

"That's not good."

"You're telling me! My wife's got me sleeping on the couch!"

"It's a side effect of the medication. Various medications have different side effects for different people. I'll change your prescription and put you on Corgard. Come back in a month and let me know how you're doing."

So I started taking Corgard. I went back in a month, and he asked again, "How are you doing?"

I said, "Great! No headaches, no shaking, my sex drive is back to normal. Good stuff!"

He said, "Fine. Take it for six months and come back and let me see how you're doing."

He forgot to mention one small detail - that some people who take Corgard develop deep, deep depression as a side effect. Now, you realize that depression builds. I didn't take one Corgard and say, "Oh no, I'm depressed." But after five months I was fullblown depressed. I was hurting so much I didn't know what was going on. It was awful.

I hurt so bad I decided I was going to do something I had never done before in my entire life: I was going to get drunk. I'd been to junior high, high school, college, Navy. I'd been around a lot of people who drank. I never drank. I never wanted to drink.

When I was a high school sophomore I went to a football game and the party afterward. A football player walked up to me and said, "Here Miller, have a beer." I took it because I was afraid he wouldn't like me if I didn't.

I stood there holding the beer thinking, "I'm baaad." Then I

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smelled it. Uhggggg. You know what it looks like, don't you? Yeah, it foams like it too. I'm standing there with this beer in my hands and I don't want to drink it, because if it smells like that, and it looks like that, it's probably going to taste like that. I didn't want to find out.

But pretty soon I realized that if I didn't drink this, people were going to laugh at me and were going to see that I was not drinking. So inspiration struck. I took the can of beer and brought it up to my mouth. I stuck my tongue in the hole, tipped the can back and went "gulp, gulp, gulp," brought it down, threw the still full can in the bushes and said, "Give me another brewski!" Not a drop went in my mouth.

Mike Miller, sophomore, 15 years of age - I developed a reputation that night. I was the first human being in history who could drink 24 cans of beer and never go to the bathroom. Everyone thought I had a bladder as big as a basketball. I didn't know that the stuff went right through you.

But until I was depressed I had never gotten drunk, never wanted to. Kids used to come up to me and say, "Miller, let's go get drunk."

I'd say, "Why?" "well, it's Friday." "So?"

"We're teenagers; we're supposed to."

"What do you mean we're supposed to? You guys go out, you get drunk, and you throw up on each other in the car. That doesn't sound like much fun. If you want to get sick, my mom made a tuna noodle casserole that went bad. We could go eat that and get just as sick."

But this particular day I was hurting so bad I was willing to try anything to feel better. I drove to a liquor store and walked in. I'd never been in a liquor store. It's wall-to-wall bottles. I didn't know there were so many ways to get drunk.

The clerk came up to me and asked, "May I help you?" "Yeah, give me some of that clear stuff."

"What size?"

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"I don't know," I said, "give me a quart."

"I think a pint will be enough." "That's all right. Give me a pint."

So he sold me a pint. I went out to my car. I didn't even know what I'd purchased. I pulled it out of the bag and looked at it. IT was 120-proof Smirnoff vodka.

I unscrewed the lid and smelled it, and I went, "Ooooooh!" I thought beer smelled bad! This was worse! Then I put my tongue down into the neck of the bottle and splashed a little up onto my tongue, and I went, "Ack, uggg, gross."

So I went to the grocery store and bought a quart of orange juice. I drove down to the park and poured half the orange juice out, poured the vodka into the quart container and mixed it up.

I sat there in the front seat of my car, about 10:30 in the morning, thinking, "How much of this will I have to drink to be drunk?" You see, there was no expert there. No one to say, "You're stewed. You're ploughed. You're blotto." So I thought about it and remembered that people who were drunk could no longer talk straight. I decided that when I could no longer say "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers," I'd know I was drunk.

So I took a gulp. I forgot to tell you that I hadn't eaten in two days. I took a gulp and what I did next was totally involuntary. I did this: "Gagg, ug, ack."

On this particular day there was no one to impress, so every time I'd take a drink I'd gag and go, "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers."

Gulp. "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers."

Gulp. "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. This stuff isn't working." I was drinking that fast.

Gulp. "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers."

Gulp. "Mbxibodkwwk." My tongue grew hair. I had fur growing from the roof of my mouth. I drank that entire quart of orange juice and vodka in 50 minutes. It was now a little after 11 in the morning, I'm sitting in the front seat of my car trying desperately to get my eyeballs to focus, and I'm watching the trees walk by.

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The trees are doing this (waves hand through the air) . The clouds are doing this (waves hand the other direction), and my stomach is doing this (boogies). About that time my stomach called up to my brain. You know what I'm talking about, when the stomach goes, "Um, brain. This is the stomach talking."

And the brain says, "Uh, right, stomach, what do you want?"

"Uh, we're getang ready to barf down here, big time."

So you know I'm thinking, "Hey, Mike, if you're going to throw up, you're going to get up and go to the bathroom. You're going to throw up in a toilet like any decent civilized human being would do ."

So my brain calls down to my legs, "Legs, let's get up and walk over to the bathroom."

My legs call back, "Ain't no way."

And my stomach starts, "Ten, nine, eight, seven"

Here I was getting ready to ralph on my dashboard. What I did was open the car door, stumble out and try to crawl to the bathroom. I got grass stains on my nose. I got dirt in my teeth. I left a foamy orange trail behind me.

And I'm glad none of you were there, because I can see how much sympathy I would have gotten.

The next four hours of my life were totally miserable. It was open the car door, throw up, close the car door. Open the car door, throw up, until finally my body got what is called the dry heaves. Enough said about that.

But you take a 30-year-old man who is already depressed and put that much alcohol into his system, and three things take place. One, he gets drunk. Two, he gets sick. And number three, he gets more depressed than he was when he started, because alcohol is a drug. It is a depressant. What it did was push me deeper into the depression that I was already feeling.

Questions and Answers

At the end of each chapter I will answer typical questions I field from parents and teenagers. These questions address specific issues about each chapter's topic.

1. Is depression a mental illness?

Depression is not a mental illness, but it can be an emotional or physical illness. I look at emotional needs as a continuum of feelings, with depression on one end and love at the other end of the scale. Sometimes the scale tips toward depression, other times toward happiness or love. There are also physical reasons people become depressed, including problems with a chemical imbalance, diseases like diabetes, or drug and alcohol use.

2. What's the difference between clinical and emotional depression?

Clinical depression is brought on by a physical problem, such as a reaction to a drug or a hormonal imbalance. Clinical depression involves a biological reason for depression. Emotional depression develops because of circumstances in someone's life - bad days, for example - that bring one to the point of depression.

3. Is depression more likely at certain ages?

No. Everyone can become depressed, young or old. Parents need to realize that even very little children can and will get depressed. More kids get depressed during adolescence because it is a time of intense change and turbulence. But anyone, at any age, can get depressed.

4. Do girls get depressed more often than boys?

No. What I see is that girls tend to be more outwardly emotional, but the fact that most boys hide their turmoil doesn't mean that they aren't depressed. Girls may be more vocal,

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more apt to cry, and more likely to let the sad feelings out. Boys say, "Guys don't cry," and they try to hide what they are going through. Girls and boys both get depressed, but girls are more likely to let the symptoms show.

5. Is depression contagious, genetic, or more likely in certain families?

Yes, in a sense it is contagious. It can seem contagious because if one kid hurts and the people around him care, when they see that hurt they start hurting too. This happens especially among young people. Let's say a teen is being, or has been, sexually molested and is very hurt. When the victim tells his or her best friend, that friend cannot change what has happened, and they've been sworn to secrecy so they can't share the problem either. The friend now hurts badly, too. They may even react as Stacie did. Stacie's suicide was a result of her caring for a friend who was hurting and then suffering rejection on top of that pain. You might also call depression contagious or genetic if you're talking about a physical reason for depression.

Another possibility is that depression within a family is a learned behavior. We can certainly learn from our parents to be pessimistic or optimistic. In some families young people learn how not to handle pressure. If children see their parents not dealing well with pressure and subsequent depression, they won't learn how to handle depression themselves either.

6. If my child is depressed, should I leave him alone?

Look at it this way. If your children are sick, do you leave them alone to get better all by themselves? If kids are depressed, don't ignore it or say, "They'll work it out," and leave them alone. Let them know that you care, that you're concerned, and that you understand what they're going through. Take whatever steps the teen will allow at the time, depending on how they feel. Whether they are a little depressed or a lot depressed, minister to them according to their needs.

7. Have things really changed that much since I was a teen?

What are these kids experiencing that we didn't? There is a twofold reason for increased teenage depression and suicide. First, the pressures of life have increased: world economic fluctuations, AIDS, nuclear weaponry, Third World starvation, war, pollution, and other crises are in the news constantly. Kids see and hear a lot about these issues, so there is a lot more stress than there was 50 or even 20 years ago.

Second, there has been a breakdown of the "traditional" family, which means less support for kids during these more troubled times. Families also move more frequently, so kids lose close friends, too. Long-term support has eroded in our society. Kids hurt and don't know where to turn for help.

8. Can you give too much support to kids?

I don't think so, and if I'm going to make the mistake of giving too much or too little help, I'd rather err on the side of too much. If you give too much help the teen will finally say, "Mom, dad, leave me alone!" But if you don't give enough, they will not say, "Hey, I need more help." If you're going to choose one way or the other, I'd say go with too much help.

9. How do I start talking to my children about depression?

First, I'd recommend talking before they become depressed. Parents must say to their kids, "Look, there are times when you're going to have bad days. You're going to get depressed. You're going to have your heart broken and your best friend is probably going to move away." If you tell kids that these hard emotional experiences are to be expected and are part of life, they'll be better able to handle them.

You're not trying to break them down or bum them out; you are saying that if it happens to them you will understand, it will be O.K. to cry, and you will be there to talk about it. Then when kids go through the tough times, they won't be confused by

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how they feel. They'll remember and say, "Gosh, if mom and dad understood this might happen, maybe I can go to them."

10. Am I qualified to deal with this? Won't I make it worse if I talk to my kids about their problems?

As far as being qualified, you're the parent. You should be the first person to whom they turn for help. Who is better qualified than someone who loves the child as much as you do?

And if you love your teenager, let them know it's all right to hurt. Give them hugs and spend time just listening to them. Don't try to have the answers, just listen and let them vent their feelings, because you care. You're not going to find anyone who cares for your child more than you do, and that makes you the most qualified for the job.

But know your limits. Again, let's look at it like a physical illness. If your child says they have a tummy ache, you don't rush them to the doctor. You do what you can do to help first. But if the child gets sicker, or if you feel that the problem is beyond your expertise, you take them to a professional. Use common sense. If you do everything you can to help your teenager overcome a bout of depression, but it is more than you feel qualified to handle, by all means take him or her to a professional.