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## Twelve Warning Signs

*"It is characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things."  
- Henry David Thoreau*

*Gresham Union High School*

*Depression starts out with what we call the "bad day." Ever had a bad day? You know what I'm talking about. Let's consider the young ladies first. Young ladies, have you ever been home on Friday night, no date, no one's coming over, nowhere to go, and you walk into the bathroom and in 37 seconds make your hair look exactly the way you've always wanted it to look?*

*Every hair falls into place. You put your makeup on and it flows. You stagger back from the mirror and say, "I look maaaahvelous!" But the only person who's home is your little brother, and he thinks you're a dog all the time.*

*But let's say it's something important, like picture day at school. This is the day they take your picture and put it in the yearbook for all time and eternity, and you want to look good. So you get up at three in the morning. You wash your hair, you dry your hair,*

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*you comb your hair, you brush your hair, you frizz it, you fry it, you perm it, you take it off, you put it back on-all the things that young women do to their hair to make it look as nice as it does. But the longer you work, the worse it looks.*

*You have this one curl that sticks straight up at the side. After two hours, a quart of hair spray, and a tube of Vaseline, you get that sucker to lie flat. You walk outside. The wind blows. Boiingng! Not only does it stick out, but it's as hard as a rock and it's considered a lethal weapon in most states. You show up at school and your friends want to know when you went punk. That is having a bad day.*

*Guys have bad days too. Isn't that true? When I was in eighth grade I was waiting to get my picture taken. There were two young ladies in front of me, and I was eavesdropping. Now ladies, let me tell you something. Guys eavesdrop on girls' conversations all the time. They do! They act like "we don't really care," but they are listening all the time.*

*These two young ladies were talking, and one of them looked at her friend and said, "Remember, before the photographer takes your picture, lick your lips, because moist lips will make you look sensuous."*

*Now when I was in eighth grade, I could use all the sensuousness I could get. So I went in there, I sat down on the chair to get my picture taken and went, "Oh, yeah, I gotta lick my lips," and I slopped my tongue over my upper lip, right when he took the picture. The yearbook came out and everyone said, "What happened to Miller? He ate his face!"*

*Everybody has bad days. But it is when you string bad day upon bad day upon bad day that a downward-spiral depression takes place and you can drop to the point where Paul Home was, to a point where you no longer want to live.*

### **Warning Signs of Depression**

This chapter covers warning signs-not of suicide, but of depression, which can and does lead to suicidal behavior. Taken alone, none of

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these signs is unusual or suspicious behavior for teenagers. Any number of these signs can occur for any number of reasons; certainly, everybody experiences some of them at some point in his or her life. That is why it is necessary to look at the warning signs in their entirety. It is when you begin seeing a pattern of several of them working together that alarm bells should go off.

The warning signs of depression are like the symptoms of a cold. When you have a cold the symptoms are coughing, sneezing, and a runny nose. This is the outward manifestation of what is happening inside the body. You can observe the symptoms, but you cannot see the virus in the bloodstream causing the cold. Similarly, the warning signs of depression are not what is causing the pain. These signs are the outward manifestations of an inward hurt; they are the symptoms of the pain.

Many times teenagers come to me and say, "I hurt because of this particular problem." What they don't understand is that the hurt is not caused by the surface-level problems that are occurring in their lives. These outwardly visible problems are happening because they are hurting. For example, a young man may come to me and say, "I'm really down because I'm getting bad grades." Actually, he is getting bad grades because he is depressed. Kids tend to focus on symptoms instead of dealing with the underlying causes.

All the warning signs we're going to discuss involve a change in the actions or behavior of the depressed person. In order to notice these changes you have to know the person well. Knowing your kids as they grow involves more than just tracking whom they are with and where they are. It also calls for understanding each teenager's normal behavior, being aware when these norms change, and keeping tabs on your children's emotions. Parents, ask yourselves each day, "Do I know how my kids are feeling?"

The warning signs of depression are *subtle* cries for help. Almost always, the family or friends of a suicide or an attempted suicide say they didn't know or suspect that the person

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was considering killing himself or herself. In actuality they had not recognized the signs, or they had dismissed them. Like a worsening cold, these changes were an indication that the depression was getting steadily more intense.

An overview of the most common warning signs of depression follows. They do not occur in any order, although some indicate a deeper depression than others. In some people you may see one behavior and in others something completely different. This list is meant to offer a wide-ranging perspective that can help you decide whether or not someone is depressed. Remember, it is not one warning sign, but the combination of several, that indicates if and when a parent or friend should be concerned.

### **1. Sudden change in behavior**

The stereotypical image of a depressed person is of one who has gone from being outgoing to being quiet, moody, and withdrawn. This can be true for someone who is usually "up" and sociable. The opposite, however, can also be true. A teen who is normally shy and quiet can suddenly become loud and boisterous because of a need to vent feelings.

A 13-year-old girl I knew who was in junior high had always blended into the woodwork. She was quiet, well-behaved, and unnoticeable. Suddenly she began getting into fights and became very antagonistic toward everyone. Her mother put her in an alternative school for children having problems, and I went to speak at the school. This youngster began crying during the program when I talked about sexual abuse. Afterward I asked a counselor at the school what had happened to cause her to get so upset.

As it turned out, the school had discovered only the day before that this girl had been sexually abused. Her parents were divorced, and she lived with her mother. Her mother, after her car broke down, had found a mechanic who would trade working on her car for spending a night with the 13-year-old. This mother had traded her daughter's sexual innocence for mechanical work. When this

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happened to the girl, the shock threw her into depression. Since she was normally a quiet person, her reaction was to act out.

Parents who want to be on the lookout for signs of depression must first define their children's basic personalities and behavior patterns. Are they usually shy or outgoing? Do they never get in trouble or are there often problems? Then when a change occurs it will be noticeable. But remember that changes in teenage behavior can also result from drug use or addiction, which is another indication that something is wrong.

### **2. Dramatic change in appetite**

Teenagers' eating habits are unpredictable anyway, so changes in appetite may be hard to recognize. Some people stop eating when they become depressed. They are just not hungry and they pick at their food. Even teenage boys who are normally bottomless pits may lose their appetites when they become severely depressed.

But the opposite is also true. Some individuals eat everything in sight when they feel down. This is often called nervous eating. A weight-conscious young woman may suddenly not care about her weight or figure.

Either overeating or under-eating can also indicate that something is physically wrong. The important thing to watch for is an appetite change.

### **3. Sleeping difficulty**

Sleeping difficulty is hard for parents to spot, but it is one of the most common signs of depression among teens. It is difficult to recognize because parents are in their own bed asleep and don't realize that their son or daughter is unable to sleep. The kid tosses and turns all night. If they don't get to sleep until 4:30 a.m., chances are they'll sleep in the next morning. This earns teenagers the label "lazy" rather than being recognized as a warning sign.

On the other hand, some people try to sleep through their

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depression. One young man was so severely depressed that he slept 16 to 18 hours a day. He would wake up, find that he was still emotionally hurting, turn over, and go back to sleep. He was trying to sleep through the problem. But that never works. If the problem is not dealt with, it will be there every time the person wakes up.

I met this same teen in the hospital after a suicide attempt. He had no longer been able to sleep enough to avoid his problems, and he overdosed on pills. Remember that this can go either way: depressed teenagers may either have problems sleeping, or they may be sleeping as much as possible to escape from problems.

### **4. Poor performance in school**

When teenagers are hurting emotionally, it is hard for them to take an interest in what is going on at school. They have an "I don't care" attitude about almost everything. It is difficult to care about who was president in 1864 or how to diagram a sentence when one is in deep emotional pain.

I see this attitude a lot. When teens are depressed, I tell them, "If you get bad grades you're going to flunk."

"I don't care."

"If you flunk, your parents are going to get upset." "I don't care."

"If they get upset, they'll ground you and you won't be able to go out."

"I don't care."

When kids are physically sick they don't care whether the stock market crashed or they missed an algebra test; emotional pain has the same effect. Students in pain aren't concerned about grade-point averages. Again, they earn the label "lazy" when in fact they are depressed and unable to make the effort. Effort coincides directly with ability to care. If students don't care, they are not going to try. If they don't try, their grades are going to drop.

### **5. Restless, irritable behavior**

Depressed teens are raw bundles of nerves. They are hurting, they are tired of feeling bad, and they get irritable. Approach a depressed teen and casually ask, "How ya doin'," and they're likely to respond, "Just shut up and leave me alone!"

What they are feeling may remind you of cabin fever. You probably remember your last bout: you've spent the whole winter inside, and you have that itchy, anxious feeling. You can't sit still, and you want to change something, but you don't know exactly what. Nothing sounds interesting. You're restless and frustrated. When people make seemingly innocent remarks, you jump all over them. Instead of dealing with the causes of your irritability, it is easier to take it out on the nearest person. Just as with cabin-fever sufferers, some depressed teenagers show all their anger and frustration right on the surface.

### **6. Unexplained fatigue and that "down" look**

This trouble indicator, characterized by a lack of energy and unexplained fatigue, is the opposite of the fifth warning sign. It is best described by the word lethargy. Some depressed kids find it hard to get up the energy or interest to do anything. Their sadness shows physically: their shoulders are slumped and their face is long. How many times have you looked at someone and said, "Is everything all right? You look down."

Kids look sad when they feel sad. I can look at the faces of students in an audience and pick out the ones who are suffering. It shows.

### **7. Loss of interest in friends**

This is a major warning sign for adolescents-and for adults as well. Teens are very social beings. They love to be around their own kind, clique, or social group. When kids start pushing friends away it is a clear sign that they are depressed.

Teenagers push friends away for two reasons. First, they can't stand being around people who are happy. When teenagers feel

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desperately unhappy while everyone else seems to be having a wonderful time, they feel isolated and they hurt even more. Second, depressed teens feel so bad that they may worry about causing pain for others. Not wanting to hurt anyone else, they avoid company, turn down invitations, and withdraw even further into themselves.

Friends call and ask, "Do you want to go to the movies? Do you want to go to the mall? Let's do something together." The depressed teen responds, "No, you guys go without me. I want to stay home tonight."

When a depressed teenager no longer seems to want to be with friends, the friends usually do not recognize this as a warning sign. They too are emotionally immature, and they reject in turn. They perceive being pushed away by their friend as a form of personal rejection: "He doesn't like me any more. Fine, I'll treat him the same way." Hence, friends begin to withdraw, which confirms the depressed person's feelings of being unliked and unlikable.

I use this example with teens: "You're at the lake or the pool in the summer, you look out into the water, and somebody is drowning. How many of you would stroll over to the edge of the water and say, 'Hi. I can swim. Need any help?'"

"'Glub, glub, glub.'"

"'Sorry to bother you. Have a good one! Hey I tried, but he didn't want my help. There was nothing I could do!'"

That's not what you'd do! If you saw someone drowning you'd kick off your shoes, jerk off your shirt, dive into the water and swim out there to help him.

"Listen," I tell them, "if you are willing to risk your life for a total stranger who is drowning, how much more should you be willing to get involved with your friends who are drowning emotionally? The definition of a true friend is not a person who will stay when times are good. A true friend is a person who will stay even when things go wrong. If someone pushes away, a true friend finds out why."

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Paul Home began pushing his friends away six months before he committed suicide, yet none of them recognized this as a sign of depression. His friends started saying, "What's wrong with Paul? I guess he doesn't like us any more. Well, fine, if he doesn't like us, we don't like him," and they turned their backs on him. I believe that if these teenagers had recognized Paul's behavior as a warning sign, they would have responded more appropriately rather than giving up on him as a friend.

The friendship situation is even more complicated because of the transitions so many families go through--moving, divorces, and job changes. The concept of a true friend is not well developed in this society. Let me say it here: a true friend sticks with you, no matter what.

I have presented *Dare to Live* at one Washington school several years in a row. The last time I spoke there, 16-year-old Pam came up to me after the program. She told me the following story:

Pam's best friend, Amy, had been a good friend since third grade. The two girls lived on opposite sides of town and attended rival high schools, but they had been able to maintain their close friendship through the years.

During the summer following their sophomore year, Amy no longer seemed interested in Pam as a friend. Pam would call her to ask if she wanted to see a movie, go to the mall, or just hang out. Amy turned her down over and over. Finally, Pam got mad, deciding that Amy must have found some other friends and didn't like her any more.

Then one day, Pam was cleaning her room and came across the handout I give kids about the warning signs of depression. She realized that some of these signs, especially the seventh one--loss of interest in friends--seemed to fit the way Amy was acting.

Pam called Amy up immediately. "What are you doing tonight, Amy?"

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"Oh, nothing," her friend replied.

"Do you want to do something? We could go to the movies or something."

"No. I don't feel like doing anything," Amy answered. "Where are your folks?"

"They're out."

Pam persisted. "Where's your brother?" "He's out on a date," Amy replied.

"If you're home all alone, why don't you come over here?" suggested Pam.

"No, I don't want to. I want to stay home."

"All right, then I'll come over there," Pam persisted.

"No! I don't want you to come over. I've taken a shower, I'm in my pajamas, and I just want to be left alone!"

Pam hung up the phone. Her first reaction was, "Fine, she obviously doesn't want me bothering her," but then she thought about the conversation and decided she couldn't let the matter rest. Pam drove over to see Amy.

Amy answered the door. She reluctantly let Pam in and the two girls began to talk. Within half an hour Amy revealed that she was depressed and feeling very desperate.

About a month later, when Amy was feeling better, she told Pam that she wanted to thank her.

"For what?" asked Pam. "I was just being a friend."

"No, you don't understand," said Amy. "That night you called me and came over, I was going to kill myself. My parents and my brother were gone. I found my dad's gun, and I was going to shoot myself. It was only because you kept bothering me that I didn't do it."

I believe that if teenagers understand this warning sign and have a friend who starts pushing them away, they won't let go. They will reach out to their friend and say, "Hey, you are my friend and I'm sticking by you. You can't push long enough or hard enough to get rid of me. I am your friend."

**8. Increased drug and alcohol use**

It has been said that the dramatic rise in drug and alcohol abuse is the cause of the mounting teen suicide rate. I disagree. Drug and alcohol abuse does not cause suicide, but it is a way to escape overwhelming feelings of depression. "I will do anything to feel better for just a little while" is the attitude of the abusers.

Our society is inundated with drugs. We turn to drugs for all kinds of problems: when you're sick, when you're sleepy when you shouldn't be or not sleepy when you should be, when you're in pain, when you want to lose weight or gain weight or do better in athletics, and dozens of other reasons. If you can't find it in the drugstore, ask your doctor. If your doctor won't give it to you, then you can ask someone on the street to provide "the cure." You don't have to look far, because in the United States there is a pill or drink that will "solve" any problem.

According to slick television, radio, and magazine ads, you can't have a good time without absorbing chemicals that stimulate your body. The best commercials on television are beer commercials. They are attention-getting, they often use famous faces, and they are aimed at the young. They portray drinking as fun, as a party, as a joke, and as a marvelous time with gorgeous people and clever dogs. Whether you're having a great day, or want to have an even better day, celebrate life with alcohol.

Then there's the opposite message. If you're having a bad day, a drink can make you feel better. According to many television shows, drinking solves all problems: "Had a hard day at the office? Here, let me fix you a martini."

Kids are very television-oriented. They believe the slick messages the media pumps out. This is what teenagers hear and believe: you need to be chemically stimulated in order to feel good and chemically stimulated when you feel bad.

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After years of hearing the media message that drinking is good for whatever's ailing you, and observing parents and peers using alcohol and drugs, it is no surprise that hurting kids turn to drugs to deal with pain. The problem is that alcohol and many other drugs are depressants. They mask the pain temporarily, but when the high wears off, the users are plunged deeper into the depression from which they were seeking escape. This roller coaster helps push our young people closer to the edge, closer to suicide.

A young man I met at one school had started smoking dope in seventh grade because his family didn't care about him and smoking made him forget the rejection. Instead of dealing with his problem he chemically induced a short-lived euphoria. But as his hurt increased—because his family never did and never would show that they cared about him—he had to smoke more and more.

The depression he felt because of his poor family life was intensified by his depression from using drugs. He then used more drugs to try to feel better. This kid hurt, and his escape from the pain was drugs. But the crutch he picked created a hell in itself. He eventually took a drug that did the ultimate job of relieving his pain. His death certificate read "accidental death by overdose," but I know that this teen had reached a point at which he began to wonder if life was worth living. He could see no reason to live, so he bailed out.

The message we must give young people is this: *There is no way to get drunk enough or stoned enough to drive a problem away. Every time you come back to reality the problem is still there. The only way to deal with problems is to face them sober and head-on.*

Alcohol and drug abuse not only deepen depression, but they lead to situations that most kids would not have to face if they were to stay away from chemical influences in the first place. No town in the United States has been spared the tragedy of young people dying in car accidents as a result of drinking or

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drug use. In every city we read headlines about thefts, robberies, and muggings that are sparked by addicts' need for money for drugs.

Even those who are not involved in the drug-and-alcohol scene can get caught up in the excitement of a party and the fun of feeling slightly woozy. Often, however, they too find themselves in situations they can't handle. One young woman told me a story about a Halloween party that changed her life.

Fifteen-year-old Michelle had been invited by her boyfriend to attend a costume party. Her mom gave her permission after being assured that the party would be chaperoned. But when Michelle arrived, she found that there was no adult supervision and all the teens were drinking.

Michelle had never before been drunk. She didn't want to be different, so she accepted a beer. Her boyfriend thought it would be amusing to get Michelle sloshed, so he began adding whiskey to her beer until she was so drunk that she could only sit on the couch and feel sick. Her boyfriend wanted to make out, but Michelle didn't want to. He left her, still drunk, to fend for herself.

While she was in this alcohol-induced fog, another young man found her and took her to a bedroom. With no control over herself because of the alcohol, she found herself having sex with three boys consecutively. Michelle had never had sex before this happened. She later told me that she had felt like two different persons. She knew what was happening was wrong, but she was unable to do anything to stop it. It was only when she began vomiting that the boys stopped assaulting her.

The young men then dressed her, took her home and deposited her on her front step. Michelle was so drunk that the next morning she did not remember telling her mother about the night's events. When she returned to school, she found that the boys who had used her were spreading rumors around school about how easy she was.

After I told this story to another group of high schoolers, one young

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woman wrote to me and said that she had been planning to kill herself until she heard Michelle's story. The same thing had happened to her under similar circumstances, and she was contemplating suicide because the aftermath of this terrible incident did not end with her hangover. She learned that boys only asked her out because they'd heard that she would sleep with anyone. This young woman no longer felt that her life was of any value. When she heard about Michelle, however, she decided not to kill herself. "If she can make it through that, so can I," she wrote.

Drugs and alcohol cause depression or worsen a depression that has already begun. Drug and alcohol use, even in a onetime or first-time situation, leads to hurts that teenagers would not have to suffer if they avoided drugs entirely. Teenagers should leave these lethal chemicals absolutely alone.

### **9. Constant feelings of worthlessness and self-hatred**

When you feel good, there's a spring in your step and you see what is right with the world. When in a good mood, I like what I see when I look in the bathroom mirror. But when I'm feeling bad about myself, I can go to the same bathroom, look in the same mirror at the same face, and say "Blecch."

The first thing I see is my nose. It's been broken four times. I've got one ugly shnoz. Then I see the reason why my nose has been broken four times, namely, I'm blind in my right eye. When I was a kid it was crossed. I used to look at my nose all the time.

Kids would tease me, "You know you got a funny-looking eye?"

I'd snap back, "You know you got a funny-looking face?" Then they'd punch me in the nose and break it again.

Then I look at my hair. I used to comb my hair back, but then my forehead started to grow. I wasn't getting any smarter, so I started combing my hair down and my scalp began peeking through behind. So now I'm combing it back again. My grandfather's bald, my dad's

bald and both my older brothers are bald. I don't have a whole lot to look forward to.

Then, when I'm really feeling bad, I look at the thing that bothers me the most. That's my overbite. I was in a car wreck a couple years ago, and I damaged the joint of my jaw. I went to an oral surgeon, and as he was looking at it, I said something about my overbite.

He said, "Well, technically, Mike, you don't have an overbite."

"Yeah, sure; what do you call this?" I asked. "That's an underchin."

"Oh gee, I feel a lot better now. What do you mean, an underchin?"

"Well, look at it like this. When you were developing, you got a size 10 skull and only a size eight jaw. What we're dealing with here is a Major Skeletal Deformity." Now if that doesn't make you feel uglier than homemade sin, nothing will. Just like my seeing the worst in the mirror when I'm feeling bad, people who are hurting often have "I hate" attitudes. They are very critical of themselves. They look for, and accent, the negative. You hear them say things like "I hate my hair" or "I hate my clothes" or "I hate myself." When people are hurting, nothing satisfies them.

Paul Home thought he was ugly. In his "Who Am IT" essay, turned in just before he ran away, he wrote, "I sometimes feel that I'm the ugliest person in the world, that I'm a nobody." But no one who sees the picture of Paul Home taken shortly before his death would say that he was ugly. Self-hatred was yet another sign that Paul was depressed.

When you hear someone say "I hate ... I hate . . . ," what they are saying is "I hurt ... I hurt." Depressed people hate themselves because of the emotional pain they are suffering. 10. Excessive risk-taking

Teens are risk-takers. They feel young and invincible. Death

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seems a long, long way away, as if it only happens to old people. But reckless young people can push life to and beyond its limits, especially when they are feeling bad, angry, or frustrated.

Many times people take out their frustrations and anger behind the wheel of their car. Young men are especially prone to this; when they're going through emotional stress, they respond by driving fast and recklessly.

A lot of suicidal deaths are falsely attributed to accidents. When people are hurting, they don't care what happens to them. Besides, if they are in pain, is being careless really a risk? In addition, they experience an adrenalin surge from anger and fear that temporarily makes them feel better. The resulting "accidents" are directly caused by the pain.

In Washington a young man's girlfriend broke up with him. He piled four friends into his car and took off. He drove like a madman, that is, a hurt and angry young man, until he rolled off an embankment into a river. None of the teenagers died from injuries caused by the accident. All five drowned.

There is a popular saying: "Friends don't let friends drive drunk." We need to teach our children an additional saying: "Friends don't let friends drive mad."

Young women might take other kinds of risks. They might put themselves in situations in which they could be harmed. I know one young woman who would go into a large city and walk through a bad section of it alone, late at night, because she didn't care what happened to her. Another risk might be taking drugs or drinking a little more than usual. Still another might be dating someone who is "dangerous" or who has a bad reputation. Girls do take risks, although predominantly it is young men who take risks with how they drive.

Any kind of risky behavior can temporarily mask depression. The scary part is that the end result of these risks can be permanent and deadly.

### **11. Preoccupation with death and dying**

The Bible says, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." This means that what is felt inside is mirrored outside. When people are preoccupied with talking about death, dying, or suicide, they are speaking what they feel in their hearts.

In our society we do not talk about death. It would certainly put a damper on a dinner party if, in a conversational lull, someone said, "Well, so which of us is going to die first?" The topic would make everyone uncomfortable and probably kill a few appetites. Instead, we mask death with euphemisms. People speak of "passing away," "departing," or "going to meet their Maker." We don't like to talk about it.

Therefore, when someone is talking about death and dying, it is because they are thinking about it seriously. Paul Home began talking about suicide six months before he took his life.

Talking is not the only way depressed people express a preoccupation with dying. A young person who is creative may express these feelings by writing a poem about death or by drawing pictures of a graveyard or other symbols of death.

### **12. Giving away personal or prized possessions**

The first teenager I knew who had attempted suicide was a young girl in the bed next to a friend I was visiting in the hospital. This teen had serious problems at home. Her stepfather was sexually abusing her and her mother chose not believe it. This was in 1980, five years before *Dare to Live* was launched, but I was successful in getting help for this girl to protect her in her home. She gradually recovered from her suicide attempt.

One of the last things the young woman had done before she tried to kill herself was to give away everything she owned. She gave away her clothes and her stuffed animals. She gave

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away her jewelry and her posters. She gave away everything, because she wanted to be remembered.

I tell my teen audiences that if friends call them up in the middle of the night and say, "Hey, I want to give you my stereo," the proper response is not "Gee, thanks! Can I have your records too?" The proper response is to ask questions like, "Why are you giving me this?" If the friend gives a lame excuse such as "I don't need them anymore" or "I want you to have it" or "You'll get more use out of it," it is a clear sign that this person is planning his or her death.

### ***No Warning Signs***

A small percentage of teens do not show any warning signs in spite of deep depression. Jennifer, the young woman who committed suicide on the first day of school, gave no outward indications to her friends or family that she was depressed. Friends saw Jennifer the day before she died. They talked to her, and they felt she acted normally. She told one friend how excited she was about beginning her senior year. Jennifer didn't share her pain with anyone. But on the inside she was hurting. Achievers like Jennifer have learned to mask their feelings; these kids do not want to let anyone down.

At another school a cheerleader, Kim, came up after the assembly and very cheerily asked if she could talk to me. I fully expected her to say, "I've got a friend who needs help . . .," but when we met in the counseling office with the door shut, Kim burst into tears. The mask came off and Kim revealed that she was contemplating suicide. She was overwhelmed and didn't want to live any longer. Kim, too, kept all her pain inside.

### ***Three Stages Toward Suicide***

I have found that people go through three stages when considering suicide. First, they think about the act: "I'm going to kill myself. I don't

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want to live any longer." It was obvious from what Kim said that she was thinking seriously about suicide.

Second, they plan the act: "How am I going to do it? I can shoot myself, overdose, or slit my wrists." I asked Kim if she knew how she would commit suicide. She quickly replied that she was going to take an overdose of pills.

Third, when suicide is imminent, they bring together the implements to do the deed. Kim revealed that she not only had thought through how she would die, but she also had a bottle of pills in her purse that she would use.

This 17-year-old woman had planned her suicide for the next Saturday. She had responsibilities to take care of first. Friday night was the last basketball game of the season, and she had to finish her cheerleading duties so she wouldn't let down the squad. The morning after the game, she planned to die with her responsibilities fulfilled.

It is important to remember that everyone displays these signs at some point, and all of us are depressed at times in our lives. Certainly, all depressed people do not commit or even attempt suicide. But when teenagers are depressed they need attention and support from their friends and family. The problems don't go away if teens ignore them, and the problems don't go away if their parents ignore them either.

The most important thing to look for is a pattern of several of these signs. The more warnings there are, the more concerned a parent or a friend should be.

If young people show warning signs, don't be afraid to talk to them. Ask "What's going on? I noticed this . . ." or "I see a change in you." Just as in the example of the drowning person, you are not going to cause more problems by reaching out. If you don't feel comfortable reaching out, find someone else who can. Don't walk away without trying to help.

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### ***Questions and Answers***

#### **1. How does one teach kids to deal with bad days?**

First, kids have to realize that they will have bad days, because bad days happen to everybody. Next, give them an endpoint. Ask them to hang on for 72 hours, and then see how they feel after that. Chances are, circumstances will have turned around. This experience gives kids the knowledge that there is an end to even the worst day. There is always hope that tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that, will be better.

#### **2. How many warning signs should someone show before I get worried?**

I get worried at three or four, but each teenager is different. If a teen is experiencing two or three, then they're probably depressed and you should start looking into the reasons for their depression (see question 9.) If the teen is demonstrating three or four signs, they are pretty well into depression and you should deal with it immediately. Remember, these are warning signs of depression, not of suicide.

#### **3. Are there other reasons teens may show the warning signs?**

Again, each individual warning sign may point to many changes taking place during the teen years other than a drop into depression.

Drug and alcohol abuse is one reason kids might exhibit some of these behaviors, as well as being a warning sign itself. But even if a teen isn't depressed to begin with, if he or she is using drugs as something to do or because it's cool, the drug abuse will cause depression and trigger other warning signs.

Another reason kids might demonstrate some of the warning signs has to do with growing up. They might need more "space" and want to spend time in their room alone. That doesn't necessarily mean that they are cutting themselves off from friends

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and family. Other factors can also cause the warning signs, such as illness or prescription drugs. What you must look for are changes in behavior-changes that persist.

### **4. How do I know whether my child is eating too much or too little?**

Know your child. Look for weight loss; anorexia and bulimia are two fairly common psychological problems that teenage girls and boys face, and these eating disorders have been linked to suicide. If teens continually focus on their weight, even when they are very thin, or if they do a lot of ritualized eating and exercising, you should be concerned. Conversely, if there is a rapid weight gain, if they no longer care how they look or what they eat, you should take note.

You have to know your children and know what is normal for them. Everybody goes on diets. Everybody eats too much at Christmas and Thanksgiving. In the spring it is a rare teenage girl who doesn't go on a diet to get into her bathing suit. Likewise I don't know many guys who don't work out to give themselves a little better physique. Know your children so you can be aware of when they aren't on a normal track.

### **5. How do I know if my children are sleeping well?**

Ask them. I think that every morning parents should ask their kids how they slept. When they were babies you were attuned to that, but when kids get older you probably just expect them to go to bed and sleep. Instead, make this a routine question. Keep track of your kids sleeping habits.

### **6. What does it mean if my kid suddenly has a bunch of new friends?**

If your child starts pushing off old friends, this could point to the seventh warning sign, loss of interest in friends. If he or she has picked up new friends, you need to determine who those new friends are. If the new friends use drugs, they may be the people

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the people from whom your child is getting drugs. I'd be very concerned if something like this happened to my child.

### **7. How can I tell if my child uses drugs and alcohol at all, or if they already do, whether or not they have increased their drug and alcohol use?**

It is extremely important that you know the answers to these questions. Sit down and talk to your kids about alcohol and drugs, and about depression. Don't preach or lecture, but explain that drugs and alcohol will worsen a depression. Tell your kids that the worst thing they can do if they are feeling down is to take drugs. Explain that if they take drugs when they're depressed, the drugs will make them hurt more. Kids need to know that.

Also watch for the other warning signs, especially for drops in grades or attitude problems. Look also at the physical signs listed in the chapter on drug and alcohol abuse. You must pay very close attention: drug and alcohol abuse is not an easy thing to determine.

### **8. Can kids get depressed and not give out any warning signs?**

About 10 percent don't reveal any warning signs at all; they keep everything inside. These are often kids who follow the straight and narrow, have everything together, and give no reason for their parents to worry. They get good grades and seem socially happy. But these teenagers may hurt, too.

Even if your child causes no problem at all, you still need to say to them, "I know you hurt sometimes. No one goes through life with everything perfect and nothing wrong." Let them know that you understand that they hurt. That understanding breaks down the wall so they can open up and talk to you.

**9. If my child is showing these warning signs, where do I go for help?**

First, talk to the child. Next, talk to the school, your minister, or a counselor. Try to find out the reason for the teenager's depression. What is causing them to feel this way? What is going on in their life? Your kid might look at you and say, "I don't know what's wrong," or they'll deny that they feel bad. In that case other sources, including your child's friends, can help you figure out what is happening.

Everybody gets depressed, so everybody will give out warning signs at one time or another. What you must try to combat is the depression, not the warning signs. If your child can't eat, can't sleep, and is getting poor grades in school, don't decide merely to get a tutor, to play relaxing music at night, and to make their favorite meals. Those "solutions" deal with the symptoms; they do not address the underlying problem.

If your teenager is not willing to share with you the reason for their depression, remember Rob's story in Chapter One. He didn't want to tell his parents how he felt because what he had done was against everything his parents had taught him and believed in. If your child will not open up to you, for whatever reason, you must find someone whom the teen will trust.

Finally, realize that the reasons behind depression are often situations for which you won't have an answer. Often there is nothing that can be done except to help your child walk through the hurt they are experiencing.