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# How to Help

*"Whoever preserves one life, it is as if he preserved an entire world."*

- **Talmud**

In my six years as chaplain with the fire department, I spoke to at least 500 teenagers in the hospital following suicide attempts. With one voice, all of them said they hadn't opened up before their attempts because they had no *one* to talk to. This is not true. The problem for these teens was not that there was no one to talk to, but that they did not know how to communicate their pain.

"No one understands" was the common theme I heard from these teens. Why did they think that nobody would understand? Communication fails at such a crucial time for many reasons. Some teens feel isolated and confused; they think that no one else in the world feels as bad as they do, that there is no one who can relate to their problems. Other teens have not been taught to expect any pain in life or how to communicate these feelings when they occur. Still other teens "shut down" when their attempts to talk to someone have been unsuccessful. Let's look at each of the reasons that teens may keep their problems

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inside until they are so desperate that death seems the only solution.

Teens Relate to Parents Who Aren't "Perfect" There is a thinking process in adolescence that goes like this: "I don't understand what is going on inside of me. If I don't understand it, then no one else will either."

While I do not blame parents, I have observed that many adults unconsciously encourage the teen's mistaken belief that "no one understands" by not admitting that parents make mistakes. Rare are the parents who seek forgiveness for their mistakes. Few even share with their children the feelings and frustrations of the days when they, too, were teenagers. All parents were once teenagers who became depressed, had bad times, and were eventually able to overcome their problems. Adolescents need to hear this specific information from adults.

The idea that "my parents are perfect; they can't relate to my problems" develops gradually during the long-term relationship between parent and child. When children are young, parents tell them when to get up and what to wear. They buy their clothes, tell them what to eat, and generally foster an image of the perfect parent who knows everything and never makes mistakes.

Consequently, kids grow up with the idea that their folks are never wrong and never troubled. When teens feel bad or face problems, they conclude: "Mom and dad won't understand because they haven't gone through this."

Parents have experienced virtually everything their kids are experiencing, and they must tell that to their kids. As you teach children to eat vegetables and put on warm clothes when it is cold outside, you must also teach them about the issues and problems they will face as they grow into adults. They must learn that fear, anger, and suffering are not unique to teenagers; that from childhood to adolescence to maturity to old age everyone

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experiences the whole spectrum of life's highs and lows. We can't expect our children to comprehend these lessons automatically.

Kids love to hear stories about when their parents were young. This is an ideal way to relate the scary, sad, upsetting, exciting, and wonderful experiences that parents have had - and are still having as adults - to the experiences that their kids are now having.

### ***Share All Aspects of Life***

Don't be uneven in what you teach your children. Parents and kids need to discuss physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual experiences. Each of these four aspects is of equal importance because the teenager will have experiences and problems in all four areas. Neglect in one or more areas stunts a young person's growth.

Let's look at some examples: If you teach your children spiritually, mentally, and emotionally, but neglect the physical aspect of their lives, they are likely to have poor physical hygiene and problems with their teeth, and they may become ill because of neglect. If you teach your children physically, emotionally, and spiritually, but not mentally, they'll grow up not knowing how to read, write, or do simple arithmetic. If you take care of children physically, mentally, and spiritually, but don't give them emotional insight, you will leave them vulnerable to all the different emotional upheavals in their lives. The same goes for spiritual growth. If you don't teach spirituality, your child may grow up without the basic moral fiber needed to be successful and happy in our society. (For more details, see Chapter Nine, "Balance and Self-Esteem.")

With teenagers who attempt suicide, the aspect of growth that has been most often neglected is the emotional one. Suicidal kids usually don't understand either that they are depressed or why. Parents can remedy that. Teens should be taught that they will have broken

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hearts. They will have friends who treat them without respect, and some people will let them down. They will experience the joy of winning and suffer the pain of losing something important to them. These are common emotional experiences that kids should be told to expect.

### ***Be There to Listen***

Not only must young people be taught that they will have problems, but parents must be there to listen and to understand when the problems arise. Everyone wants to be understood. There is nothing worse for a teenager than trying to confide in someone and having that person respond with a look that says, "I don't have the foggiest notion of what you're talking about." If you, as parents, want your kids to come to you when they're happy *and* come to you when they're sad, then they must trust that you understand them. Only when they know you understand will they communicate at all times. There is nothing more crucial to your role as parent of a teenager than to listen and understand.

***The ability of parents to understand the intensity of teenagers' emotions and to support them during rough times is probably the most important factor in the prevention of teen suicide.***

When a hurting teen reaches out, how can parents best offer their support? Parents need to express *empathy*, the appreciative sharing of another's emotions or feelings. Many people confuse empathy with sympathy. There are differences. *Sympathy is* entering into someone else's mental state in such a way that there is an emotional involvement. In other words, sympathy involves experiencing the other person's emotions and leads to feelings of pity or compassion. Parents who respond with sympathy, however, may become too emotionally involved to offer a child much support. Parents who respond with empathy, on the other hand, can understand the emotions of teenagers without feeling overwhelming sorrow or pity for them.

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When a 15-year-old breaks up with his or her first girlfriend or boyfriend, or when a teen really likes someone but those feelings aren't returned, he or she is in pain. Parents can let teenagers know they understand by being empathetic: "It does hurt. You will get over it, although that is hard to believe now. It happened to me and I recovered, even though it was tough. I'm glad that I got through it, because eventually I met someone else." This doesn't deny the adolescent's feelings, and it gives a positive message: Life does go on. Now the teen does not suffer alone, but instead knows that "other people have experienced what I am going through and they are happy now. I will be happy again."

Of course, before parents and teenagers can forge a common bond of understanding, they must be able to communicate. ***It is the parents' responsibility to teach communication to their children. It is also the parents' responsibility to initiate communication, because the child is the learner and the parent is the teacher.*** Don't sit and wait for your child to come to you. Go to them and talk to them.

When adolescents are depressed, they need, above all else, to talk about what is troubling them. Although there are literally hundreds of people to whom they may talk, not everyone at any given time will talk to them. Put another way, *all* their friends, family, and acquaintances will talk to them at some point in time, but not all will talk to them at *the* time and on *the* subject they need to discuss. Out of those hundreds who will talk, some will not listen. This doesn't mean the teen's problem is unimportant. It does mean that they need to find the right person - one who is willing to listen.

Again, teens interpret anyone's unwillingness to talk to them as confirmation that "no one understands what I'm going through." Then they close up. When a teen is depressed, discouraged, or just lonely, they must decide they will look, and keep looking, until they find the person willing to listen, to talk, and to help them with their problem.

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As a door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesman in college, I was told the following by a very wise man: "You will get 10 doors slammed in your face before one person speaks to you. Then, out of every 10 people who will listen to your pitch, only one will let you in their house to show the vacuum cleaner." Not only was he right, but of the people who let me into their houses, it took three tries before one would buy the product. That meant I had to knock on 300 doors and get 299 rejections before someone would listen to my spiel, let me do a demonstration, and then buy a vacuum cleaner.

The man who taught me this rule also gave me a positive way of looking at all that rejection. "Every time a door is slammed in your face," he said, "you are one person closer to making a sale." I knew, because I was told, that I could expect rejection as a door-to-door salesman. Teens need to be told that they may also face rejection when looking for someone who will listen to their problems; they need to consider this search for the right listener in light of the door-to-door salesman. Every time a depressed teen reaches out, but is unable to connect with one of the 200 or so friends, family members, or community people that they know, they are that much closer to finding someone who will listen to them.

*They must keep looking to find that person, because that person is out there waiting to be found.*

### **WHERE TO FIND HELP:**

*A resource list for parents and teens*

#### **1. Family**

Each individual is related to a huge network of people by blood or marriage. The wonderful thing about most families is that they are accepting. They have known and loved the teenager since he or she was small. I tell teens to talk to their immediate family - mother, father, sisters, and brothers – or to their extended

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family, especially aunts, uncles, cousins, or grandparents. Stepparents, stepsiblings, and godparents also make the list of family resources.

Families are often an ideal outlet for a troubled person, but it doesn't always happen that way. At one middle school a seventh-grade girl, Lisa, came to me after an assembly and told me she was being abused at home. She was lucky enough to have a fine counselor at her school who sat down with this young girl and talked to her. Then he called Lisa's mother. Her mother said, "She's a liar. Tell her not to come home."

In my experience 75 percent of the children who are being molested at home by their father or stepfather and who report the situation to their mother are not believed. (Mothers also sexually abuse children, but statistically this is a much rarer, or less reported, event.) The counselor asked Lisa who in her family loved her, and she told him that she had a grandfather in Denver. When the counselor called her grandfather he made plans to be on the next plane.

Unfortunately, when parents don't believe what their children report, the kids often give up on communicating their problem to anyone else. They could go outside the family and talk to teachers, parents of their friends, clergy, and others. But instead, deciding that nobody cares, they refuse to talk to anyone.

### **2. Friends**

I encourage teens to go to their friends to talk, but friends should be wise enough to know when the problem is more difficult than they can handle. They must be able to say, "Hey, I'm only 15. I don't know what to do about this."

Kids come to me with problems that I, an experienced counselor, can't handle. I'm not ashamed to say I don't know what to do, but I can and will find out. It is shameful to know about the problem and choose not to do anything.

Teens have friends in a multitude of places: at school, in their neighborhood, in their church or temple, on teams, in clubs or

organizations, and at work. Friends are often easier for a troubled teen to approach than are adults. It is natural for kids to share problems with each other, since they feel a peer can relate to them. But if teens share their problems with a friend and that friend is not helpful, they should never stop trying to find someone who will help.

Many schools have peer support groups. Sometimes they are called "natural helpers" or "peer counselors." These are fellow students specially chosen and trained to listen. These kids know when to go for additional help and where to find it. They are an excellent resource for a teenager who is not ready to talk to an adult.

I also encourage students to avail themselves of friends' parents. At one school I did a student program during the day and a parent program in the evening. Many of the students came back to hear me speak a second time. One girl told me afterward about a problem she was working through. Her father had died two months before, her mother was grieving, and she was unable to talk to her mother about her feelings.

The mother of another student overheard our conversation, came up to the girl and said, "Honey, I know what you're going through, and I know what your mom's going through. If you need someone to talk to, here is my phone number. Your mom can't talk to you now, so I'll be there for you."

### **3. School**

At school there are teachers, counselors, administrators, coaches, drug and alcohol counselors, and support staff who like kids and care about what happens to them. If they don't know how to help the student, they will refer them to a resource that can help.

People forget that when a suicide or suicide attempt occurs at a school, it is not just the students who are devastated. Everyone who knew the teen feels some responsibility. Teachers and staff are no exception. Stacie, whose suicide was discussed in

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Chapter One, had a teacher who talked to her mother because he was worried that something he had done had driven Stacie over the edge. Schools are very involved with the young people they teach, and when kids attempt and commit suicide, the teachers and administrators feel part of the blame.

At every school there is a teacher to whom students relate especially well. A perfect example is Ellen Boggs, a health and physical education teacher at Fort Vancouver High School in Vancouver, Washington. Ellen was the teacher who received Paul Home's "Who Am IT" essay the day he ran away. Since Paul's death, she has asked me to visit her class each semester to talk about depression and suicide.

Teachers such as Ellen have dedicated their lives to education; the vast majority of them let kids know that they like what they are doing and truly care about the students they have chosen to teach. I have the utmost respect for teachers. They have one of the hardest jobs in our society today. If an individual cares enough to be a teacher and to be dedicated to working with young people, they are usually a good person for a depressed teen to approach.

### **4. Community Resources**

There are many people in every community who are devoted to helping those in trouble. Police officers, firefighters, and religious leaders have chosen to work in these fields because they want to help. Students also should not overlook the availability of many community workers and volunteers who are concerned about what happens to young people.

When I first became a youth minister at age 21, there wasn't anyone working with the teenagers at our church. Starting with a couple of kids from the neighborhood, I let it be known that I cared about teenagers and would be there for them. We commenced with a Monday-night Bible study with two or three teens. By the end of the school year more than 80 kids jammed into our house on Monday evenings. I spent seven years as a youth minister, and during that time I talked to

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literally thousands of kids. In virtually all communities there are religious organizations that focus on youth and are willing to help young people with problems.

If you, as a parent, are reading this book and want to know how you can help, this is where you can fit in. You don't have to be a psychologist, counselor, or youth minister to help kids. If your home is open, warm, and loving, they will come to you, and you can provide the service of being there and listening. Start by being available and letting kids know you care.

### **5. Emergency Programs**

Every community has programs aimed at emergency situations. There are teenage talk lines, suicide-prevention hot lines, counseling services, chaplains with police and fire departments, YMCA, YWCA, and drug- and alcohol-abuse programs.

You can call the emergency room at a hospital and explain the situation, and they can direct you to an agency that will help. If it is two a.m. and there seems to be no one available, call 911 or the local police or fire dispatch number. Emergency response teams would much rather have a chance to help *before* a suicide attempt than deal with the end result.

### **6. Professional counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists**

Referrals to professional help for a depressed student are often made through the school or at the parents' request. There is a wide variety of mental-health-care professionals who work with people of all ages to resolve depression. It doesn't matter who you call as long as you do call.

In indirect ways, Paul Home tried to communicate to his friends and family that he was depressed. Friends heard him saying, "I wish I were dead," and his "Who Am IT" essay was a cry for help. Too often

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the cry from young people like Paul is indirect. They want someone to come to them; they want someone to rescue them from themselves. These teens have reached the point where they believe, "If someone really cared for me or understood me, they would pick up my signals and know that I am hurting."

As depression deepens, there is a point when a person will no longer reach out or becomes unable to reach out for help. That's when others have to see what is happening. Read the signs and seek help for that individual. Reach out to them.

A number of kids who attempted suicide told me something like this: "I did it so people would know how much I hurt. They'd know I needed help." My response was, "If you'd died, it wouldn't matter what people thought because you wouldn't have been here." In these kids' minds their suicide attempt was another cry for help. It's as if it never dawns on depressed teenagers that once they've died, they're dead - permanently.

Don't wait for a crisis. Find out what support is available for your teens before they need it. Talk to them about the options. Tell them, "If you are hurting and you don't feel like you *can* come to me or I'm part of the problem, here are people you *can* reach out to." Just as you give them a number to call if their car breaks down, help your kids come up with six to eight names and phone numbers of groups and individuals who will be there when they need them. Refer to the "support" sheet in the back of this book for ideas.

According to various of studies, between 35 and 90 percent of young people seriously consider suicide at some time during their adolescent years. All teens should have this information on hand now. It is best to arm kids with contact information in advance, so they will know where to turn for themselves or a friend if they get into a situation that feels desperate. To help teens compile a resource list also tells them that you understand that depression happens, that you will support them, and that you care about what happens to them.

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*Gresham Union High School*

*I was working at the fire department at the time I was taking that prescription for Corgard, and the chief asked me to run an errand for him. I loved running errands for the chief, because I loved driving his car.*

*I got on the freeway fully expecting to have a good time in the chiefs car, but driving down 78th Street, I saw a dead cat on the side of the road.*

*Now let me say something here, seriously. If I say anything to offend anyone today I apologize, because I'm not here to offend you. I'm here because I care. But in all honesty, I don't like cats. When I see a dead cat I think the world is a little better place to live. I know there are some cat lovers out there who will disagree with me.*

*But this particular day I see this dead cat, and I'm so depressed and hurting so bad, honestly, I start to cry. "Poor little kitty, kitty." Sniff, sniff.*

*In my mind's eye I see this little eight-year-old girl standing at the door of her house, calling, "Here puddy tat. Here kitty."*

*This old flat cat ain't never coming home. You're going to have to get a shovel to get him off the side of the road. It was the saddest thing I ever saw. I cried all the way to Portland. I cried all the way back to Vancouver. I cried two hours over this dead cat!*

*I get back to the fire station and I'm scrubbing at my face. "O.K., Mike, get a hold of yourself," and I walk in.*

*Donna, the secretary, says, "Mike, what is wrong with you?" "What do you mean?"*

*"Your eyes, they are all red and swollen and puffy . . . hay fever!" She'd think I'd lost my mind if I told her I'd cried over a flat cat. She gave me some Allerest.*

*I was taking a class at the time and had to write a term paper - footnotes, the whole nine yards. I wrote this term paper and it had to be typed, and I don't know how to type. So I called Jodie, a friend of mine, and said, "Jodie, would you type this report for me?"*

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Jodie asked, "How long is it?" "Thirty pages.,  
"Ohhh nooo."

"Please, Jodie, I'll pay you. I need this typed."

She said, "You don't have to pay me. You're my friend. I'll type it for free."

That day she called me at the fire station and said, "Mike, your report's done. Come by the house and pick it up after work."

So after work I drove over. Jodie is very conscientious about things being done correctly, so as she handed me the report she asked, "How is it?"

I read the first page and was halfway through the second page when I saw that she'd changed something. I asked, "Jodie, why did you change this?"

And honestly, this is all she said: "Mike, your sentence structure was not correct, and I changed it so the paragraph would flow better."

Have you ever had somebody say one thing to you and you heard something else? What I heard Jodie say was this: "Mike, you're a moron. You write like a chimpanzee. If I had typed what you had written, people would think I was as ignorant as you are!"

Oooh, it made me mad that she changed my report! I glared at her, and I said, "Jodie, if you can't do what I ask you to do, don't bother doing it at all!" and I ripped the report in half.

Honestly, I know you won't believe this, but she got mad. (Jodie is my friend and full-time associate at Dare to Live. This is a true story. You can ask her. I had to crawl on my hands and knees to get forgiveness for what I did.)

Guys, I want to tell you something. This has nothing to do with the assembly. This is a freebie. If you're ever out with a young lady and she starts to yell at you, don't worry about it, because girls just naturally like to yell.

Any of you girls disagree with that? I can prove it. How many of you girls have a younger brother, and how many of you guys have an older sister, and all the guy ever hears is this: "Get out of my room! I'm going to tell mom!"

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*True? If a girl is yelling at you, don't worry about it, O.K.? It is when they start to whisper that you'd better take notice.*

*Jodie looked daggers at me and whispered, "Don't you ever, ever ask me to do anything for you again as long as you live." I couldn't believe it! She was mad at me!*

*I scowled at her and said, "Don't worry, I won't," and I threw the report at her. Up it went, down it came.*

*Jodie clamped her jaw tight, and a muscle in her jaw started to bulge. When that muscle starts to bulge, Jodie is going to do one of two things. One, she's going to slap the snot out of you. Two, she's going to throw something very heavy and hard at your head. Either way I knew it wasn't a very safe place to be. So I left.*

*I'm driving home and thinking, "Mike, what a terrible thing to do. What an awful way to treat your friend. Come on, snap out of this!" Besides, I didn't have a report to turn in. I wasn't going to go back and say, "Uh, do you think I could have the rough draft back, please?"*

*Well, things went on like that for a long time, and I didn't snap out of it. My poor wife thought I was losing my mind. First thing I'd do when I got home was take the phone off the hook. I'd say, "Don't*

*put the phone back on the hook. I don't want to talk to anybody. I don't want to see anybody." If someone came over to the house while I was there, I'd go hide in the back room until they left. I just wanted to be left alone.*

*It was while I was sitting in the back room one day that I decided I no longer wanted to live. I decided my wife would be better off without me, my children would be better off without me, and, for that matter, the entire world would be better off without me.*

*I thought, "How am I going to kill myself?" I decided I would shoot myself, but I didn't have a gun.*

*So that night I drove over to my brother's house - he's a gun collector - and said, "Larry, I need to borrow a pistol."*

*He asked, "What for?"*

*"There's a burglar in our neighborhood," I said. "He's broken*

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*into a few houses on our street, and I need a gun to protect my home."*

*Larry said, "I've got just the gun for you, Mike." He went to his gun cabinet and came back with a .45-caliber Colt automatic. He loaded the clip with hollow-point bullets. He slammed the clip into the butt of the gun and said, "Mike, anybody comes to your house, you point this at them, and you pull the trigger. You hit them, you kill them. If you miss them, they'll die of a heart attack."*

*I said, "That's what I need, Larry. That's it." I took the gun. I hid it under the front seat of the car; I didn't want my wife or kids to find it. Then I proceeded to go home. That was Thursday night. I decided that Friday I would go to work as usual since it was payday and I knew my wife would need the money. Then on Saturday I would tell my wife I had to work overtime, and I would drive up into the hills and shoot myself.*

*Friday, I went to work. They gave me my paycheck, and at 5 o'clock I stopped at the bank. Everybody and their dog was at the bank on Friday at 5 o'clock. I'd been going to the same bank for years, and when I walked up to the teller, she said, "Hi, Mike! How ya doin'?"*

*Now, everybody says that. It's a common greeting. I said reluctantly, "I'm all right. I'm fine." And then I started to cry, just because she asked me how I was doing! I started repeating, "I'm all right," tearing up, sniffing all over the place.*

*Grace, the teller, looked at me and said, "Mike, what is wrong with you? You act like you have PMS."*

*Honestly, that's what she said. I said, "I really don't think so."*

*"I know that!" Grace said, but she took me by the hand, led me around the teller's cage, and took me back to the employees' lunchroom. "Mike, I know you don't have PMS, but listen. Seriously, I used to cry one week out of every month, and I went to the doctor and he gave me something for it. You need to go to the doctor. This isn't normal."*

*It was as if a light went on. I was already going to the doctor. I*

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*was taking something. I said, "Can I use the phone?" She said, "Sure," and I called my doctor. He was just leaving for the hospital.*

*"Listen, you've got to help me," I said. "I need to know, is there any chance, any possibility at all, that Corgard can cause depression?"*

*I'll never forget what he said. "Sure Mike, big time." "OOOOhhhhhh. I cried two hours over a flat cat, my friends hate me, my wife thinks I'm losing my mind, and I'm crying in a bank because a teller asked me how I was doing."*

*He said, "Maybe you ought to stop taking it, Mike." Oh, good deduction, Sherlock. "Mike, listen, I'm leaving for the hospital now but I want to see you tomorrow morning. I'm closed, but I'll come down here at 7 o'clock. I'll open the clinic. I want to see you."*

*The next morning I drove to the clinic, instead of up in the hills where I'd planned to kill myself at 7 o'clock that morning. I had come within 14 hours of taking my life! I saw the doctor and said, "Tell me, how long will it be until I feel good again?" I'd been depressed for five months.*

*He said, "Mike, I'm not going to help you. You've been on the stuff for a long time. It will probably take four to six weeks to come out of this depression."*

*Here I'd been depressed for five months, and he's telling me I have to hang on at least another month. But as soon as he told me I was going to get over it, I felt better. There was hope. There was light at the end of the tunnel.*

## ***HOW TO HELP SOMEONE WHO IS DEPRESSED OR SUICIDAL***

We can tell our kids where to go for help, but what do we do when they come to us? The next section will teach anyone - parents, friends, counselors, others - how to help someone who is suicidal. If we tell teens they have to reach out when they're down, then we have

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to be there when they reach out to us. I will refer to the depressed person as a teenager, but this information applies to any person who is depressed.

Depression is a normal, natural state that everyone goes through now and then. It begins slowly, and if not dealt with, it gradually deepens. I divide depression into two stages, although it actually progresses as a continuum. The stages correspond to how difficult it is to get the depressed person to open up. Depression's First Stage: Teens Open Up Easily In the first stage of depression teens are usually willing to talk. If you recognize that a kid is depressed (see the warning signs in Chapter 3), go to them and ask, "What's the problem?" The key to helping in early depression is listening and being direct. Communicate your concern and support. Let them know you care, and that they are important to you. But let them do the talking.

### **You must listen.**

If their problem is something totally out of your control - if they are depressed because they have acne or are overweight, if they got grounded after a fight with their parents over grades - there may be little that you as a listener can readily do. However, you can lend an empathetic ear. The teen may tell that he or she is being abused. If you aren't a counselor, that is another type of problem you cannot directly help them with. You can assist by locating professional help.

Just remember that regardless of whether you view a depressed teens' problem as trivial or serious, it is of grave concern to *them*. That's why at this stage of another's depression the most important thing you can do is to become a listening post so that they can talk about what is bothering them and get it out in the open.

How does listening help? When depressed teens keep their problems inside, the problems loom larger and larger until they

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consume the teens' thoughts and lives. It's like worrying about a problem late at night. You lie in bed and stew over it until it seems insurmountable. But when the sun comes up and you are busy with day-to-day existence, the problem seems smaller, even solvable, because you are able to put it back into perspective. Bringing a problem from the dark recesses of your thoughts and discussing it with another person gives it that same daylight perspective. Once teenagers state the problem clearly, they often feel better because it seems less overwhelming.

Listeners don't have to do anything about the problem. They don't have to come up with the solutions. They don't have to fix what is bothering the depressed person. They only have to listen and care.

### **Listening Skills**

Now, that's not quite as simple as it sounds. Some ways of listening are more helpful than others. Think about the people to whom you like to talk. Chances are that they are not just good talkers but also good listeners. There are techniques to being a good listener. Everyone can benefit by learning a few of these listening skills.

First, find a place where you will be undisturbed, take the phone off the hook, and remove distractions. If a depressed teen needs to talk, don't do something else such as cooking dinner or paying bills. Even if you can do two things at once, the person who is talking will feel that your attention is divided. Also, don't interject your own problems. The hurting person feels better when you pay attention to them.

Physically you must give the speaker your complete regard. Make sure your body language says you are concentrating. Fidgeting and twitching indicate impatience. Sit quietly, maintain eye contact, and stay focused. This lets them know they are special and important.

If you want to show someone that you care, be a good listener. Be willing to put down what you are doing and listen when they need to

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talk. Treat whatever they are discussing as if it is of the utmost importance. To them it is. Give them your undivided attention.

### **Depression's Second Stage: Convince Teens You Care**

In the second stage of depression teenagers often don't want to talk. Their depression may have deepened to the point that they no longer care. Once they've crossed that line, it becomes doubly hard to get them to open up and tell you what is wrong. They can even become belligerent and hostile. (Remember the fifth warning sign number- agitation.) These teens have been locked into their problems for so long that they don't want to talk about them, because bringing them to the surface hurts. Their attitude is that nobody cares or understands anyway.

The way to reach someone in the second stage of depression depends on the individual. There are many ways of getting through. For me, being loving and gentle sometimes works. Other times I have to argue or browbeat them. The approach depends on the person and their personality. When the depressed person is resisting, do whatever it takes to get them talking.

You can be straightforward: "Don't tell me that you don't have a problem. Everything about you tells me that you do." You can go through the back door: "I need your help. Your sister is having some problems and I don't know how to deal with them." You are enlisting the depressed teen's help for another purpose, but it tells them that you are willing to listen and you can be trusted. Then you can gently, gradually, turn the conversation around to them.

You can use anger: "I know there's something wrong. You know there's something wrong. But you leave me on the outside hurting. It makes me mad." This is manipulation, but it is also a way to get a

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response. Everything is fair when a life may be on the line.

You can tease or joke. If you laugh along with depressed teens, you project a different outlook on life. These kids bottle up their emotions. Release, including laughter, makes emotions rise to the surface and become reachable. Do whatever it takes to get the door open.

What's important is not how the message is conveyed, whether angrily or lovingly, but that young people get the message that you do care and are not going to give up or turn your back on them, that you will continue to reach out to them no matter what. Let them know that you aren't doing this because you are stubborn, but because you are concerned. These kids will only open up when they are convinced that you really care.

At many high schools where I speak, I return three or four days in a row until all the hurting kids have had a chance to talk to me. They are not coming to me because of what I say. What I say at schools and in this book is basic common sense. The reason hundreds of teens pour their hearts out to me, a stranger, is simply that they know I care.

Above all else, you must be persistent. By showing your love you are disproving their feelings that no one cares. They have to believe that no matter how hard they push away, you will not give up on them.

What depressed teenagers experience as they look for help can be likened to consulting a doctor because you have an unusual pain. You don't know what the problem is, but you see a doctor because you're looking for someone who will understand. Few things are more frustrating than not knowing what is wrong and realizing that the doctor doesn't know either. Then the second doctor you visit can't figure it out, and after the third doctor you may give up on the medical profession because "nobody understands." Perhaps you don't know how to express your problem, or the doctor doesn't know what is going on. The end result is the same. You give up.

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Depressed adolescents have had the same experience. In the early stages of depression the teen may have tried to explain to someone how they felt. No one understood or listened, so they became more depressed and finally become unwilling to talk. To talk to these kids you have to convince them that you care, understand, and will listen.

### **THREE STAGES TO SUICIDE PREPARATION**

Once you've convinced the adolescent that they have to talk, find out whether they are feeling suicidal, and if so, how far along they are in their desire to commit suicide. There are three stages to suicide preparation. Here are some questions and verbal clues you can use to determine what stage the teen is in, and, subsequently, what steps need to be taken to get help. You must be direct in finding out the details.

#### ***Stage One: Thinking about the act***

"I don't want to live anymore."

"What do you mean, you don't want to live? Why?" "Everything is going wrong. I'm ugly. I'm flunking math. I just hate myself."

"What are you going to do about it?" "I'm going to kill myself."

The next question is, "But how?"

If they are nonspecific - "I don't know. I just want to die. Maybe I'll shoot myself, I don't care" - they have not reached stage two. They are still considering the options.

#### ***Stage Two: Planning the act***

When asked "How?" the teen may reply, "I'm going to shoot myself." If they make a definite, specific statement and are not considering other options, they are in stage two.

The listener then needs to determine if they've gone into stage three by asking, "Why would you choose that method?"

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Again, the specificity of the answer indicates how seriously they are considering following through. "Because it seems quick" tells you that they are in a suicidal mind set, but are still in the planning stages.

### ***Stage Three: Gathering the implements for the deed***

"Why would you shoot yourself?"

"Because my dad has a gun and I know where it is."

This answer indicates that suicide is imminent. The teen not only has considered the act and planned it, but has the tools available to complete the suicide. Remember, the more details provided about a planned suicide, the greater the risk of follow through.

If the depressed teenager is still in stage one, you have time to work out the problems by talking. If they are in stages two or three, you must act quickly.

A few weeks after I spoke at a high school in Washington, I received a letter from the school administrator. One of the students had listened. After I encouraged the students to look for help, this boy had talked to his mother. She brought him to school for help. They discovered that he had not only decided to commit suicide, but had stolen his grandfather's pistol, written a note of explanation to his brother, and composed a will. The only thing stopping him from completing the act was that he wanted to wait until after the Christmas holidays; he didn't want to ruin them for his family. This young man was obviously in stage three. We had to help him immediately, or it would have been too late.

If you believe, sense, or are told by a teen that he or she is feeling self-destructive, trust your suspicions and act on them. Your influence may make the difference between life and death. *Treat all threats of suicide as serious and imminent.*

***What To Do if the Person Has Reached Stage Three***

**1. Take the means away from them.**

Remove the gun, pills, or whatever they are planning to use to kill themselves.

**2. Make them promise that they won't hurt themselves until they have talked to you first.**

Make the teen come to you before they make a suicide attempt. If they tell me, "I can't promise that," I get mad. "You've come to me and told me about your problems, and I have this huge responsibility for you, but you won't give me the courtesy of allowing me a chance to help? I'll carry the guilt of knowing I didn't do everything I could for you. You at least owe me a chance to try to help." Make them promise that they'll come to you before they act because you care and you will hurt if they die.

This is another instance in which you must do and say whatever you can to get the teen through this critical time. Depressed teenagers do not think about dying because they want to hurt anyone else, but because they are hurting and dying seems to be the only way to stop the pain.

Explain to them how you feel: "If you do anything, it is going to hurt me. Because we've talked, it is only fair to give me a chance to talk you out of it." Kids believe in doing what is fair.

Make a contract, get a verbal agreement, a promise - whatever - that forces them into stopping and talking to you first. To insist on this lets them know that someone is concerned about them.

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### **3. Encourage them to postpone the decision for as long as possible.**

Postponing a decision to commit suicide buys time. Ask for the longest period you can get. Three months is a good place to start, but take three days if that is all they can give you. Depression has an end point. The more time you can get, the more support can be built and the better the chances that they will recover from their depression.

"All I'm asking is to give it three months (three weeks, three days) and let's see if during that period we can work it out. If the problems can't be resolved, at least we've tried. If you kill yourself now, you're going to be dead for a long, long time."

You know that depression will end. Psychologically, buying time also gives them an out. Either way, they are looking at an end point. They will get better, or they won't have to deal with the pain anymore because they will kill themselves. Waiting a predetermined amount of time can also help them come out of depression because the problems no longer seem insurmountable. One way or the other, the problems will be solved. Time heals all wounds. Get the depressed kid to allow the time for healing to begin.

Don't believe they've changed their mind about committing suicide if there seems to be a sudden change of heart. I've worked with students who threatened suicide and then backed away from the threats. But I did not necessarily believe they'd changed their minds. Sometimes depressed teens give themselves a finish time - after the state track meet, after the prom, or after the weekend. They have a sense of calm, knowing that they only have to make it through a limited amount of time.

Even if they are no longer threatening suicide, help has to be found for the problems that caused the depression in the first place. A threat of suicide should be taken, and treated, as seriously as a suicide attempt.

**4. Don't minimize their problems.**

When young people come to you with problems, do not say "Is that all?" and give them a list of others whose problems are bigger. With good reason they'll get mad at you. They are legitimately hurting. You can't tell them they have no right to hurt; everyone has that right. If you go to the doctor because you have a sprained back, you don't need the doctor to say, "You only have a sprained back? I deal with people with heart problems and cancer all the time. This is nothing."

A lot of parents minimize: "You think that's bad, wait until you're an adult." The pressures that adults face are greater than those of most teens, but to kids, the pressures they face are major, and they are happening now. Kids' emotions are as real and legitimate as adults' - even if the reasons for the emotions seem minor from an adult perspective. Not making the cheerleading squad may not seem like a big deal to a parent, but you must relate it to the experience of adults who work long and hard for a promotion, and yet someone else gets the job. They know that they were better qualified, and losing the promotion hurts. Teenagers who have failed feel the same way - emotionally devastated. Don't look down on them and say, "You don't have reason to hurt," or "I have more reasons to hurt, and I'm handling it." Whether you are an adult or an adolescent, problems can hurt.

Keep in mind that everyone has a different level of tilt. Everyone is capable of committing suicide, and everyone can hurt so much that they no longer want to live. It is a fact that most people don't like to face, but there can come a time in any life, no matter how successful and content, when suicide becomes an option. To say "Your problem isn't big enough" means that you don't understand. Each person's problems and ability to deal with them are unique. Treat teens and their difficulties with respect.

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### **5. Stay with them.**

Don't leave a hurting teen alone, especially not after they've reached stage two or three. Emotionally, this person is as injured as if they had suffered a physical trauma. If they had been in a horrible car accident, they would be constantly attended to. First the ambulance and the fire department would arrive, and the patient would be stabilized. Then they would be rushed to the hospital, where they'd receive advanced life support. After stabilization the injured person would be put in intensive care for around-the-clock monitoring. Once out of intensive care they'd be transferred to a regular unit, but would remain within reach of a push-button call for help, with nurses and doctors making regular rounds. This person would be ministered to constantly. Suicidal kids are hurting so much emotionally that they need the same around-the-clock monitoring.

Get others involved so you don't have the sole responsibility of supporting the depressed teen. It is one thing to make them promise not to hurt themselves, but it is equally necessary to make sure that they are not left alone. It is not your responsibility, or within your ability, to stay with them all the time. You need to recruit others to help.

If you are the parent, talk to their friends and call their school. Speak with counselors, church members, siblings, and anyone else you feel can help and provide support. You may have promised not to tell anyone about what is happening; you don't have to relate the exact nature of the problem. You do need to build support.

It is not necessary to tell the depressed person that you've asked other people to reach out to them. They may choose to interpret that as being the only reason people care. Give them time to heal first.

### **6. Don't challenge the individual to act on the threat.**

This may seem like common sense, but I know people who have said to someone who was feeling suicidal, "I'm sick and tired of hearing you talk about it. Why don't you just go ahead

Some depressed kids will be pushed over the brink just to prove that they are serious about their intentions. All suicide threats or attempts, no matter how "minor," should be treated seriously.

**7. Keep the depressed person active.**

Keep them active and keep their mind off their problems. This may appear contradictory, as we've encouraged them to talk about what caused the depression. After all, not talking is what prevented them from working the depression out when it began. But there is nothing worse for suicidal teens than being alone and staying alone. It is too easy to focus on their problems when they are by themselves.

During recovery there is a time for talking and counseling, and there is a time for getting on with daily life. Depressed kids need to get back into the real world, even if they are reluctant at first. Take them to the movies, go shopping with them, take a walk together, do anything to get them out in the world again. Consider this to be the emotional equivalent of physical therapy after an accident. It is a way of rehabilitating them into society, drawing them in again, a little bit at a time.

**8. Tell them, and help them, to stay away from drugs and alcohol.**

Drugs and alcohol mask problems temporarily. As Chapter 6, Drug and Alcohol Abuse, will make clear, these crutches make the user more depressed in the long run. Suicidal teens must not "self-medicate" to help themselves feel better.

If there is a recurring theme in this book, it is to love and care for one another so that depression can be overcome quickly. Be a good listener at all times, not just when someone is dangerously depressed. Be aware of the signs of depression, and above all else, be willing to reach out and help.

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

#### **1. What kind of family pressures affect kids?**

Whatever pressures affect mom and dad affect the kids: job transfers, layoffs, problems at work, money problems, social problems, anger between the parents, or parents' frustration with the other children. Anything that involves the parent will filter down and affect the child.

#### **2. I feel unqualified to help. Maybe as a parent I'm too close to the situation.**

You might be. Consider Rob's story in Chapter 1: the circumstances in his life were not something he was willing to share with his parents. The point to remember is that everybody gets depressed and hurts. What matters is that you find people your child can talk to, whether or not they can communicate with you. There is a sheet in the back of this book that can be used to help your child list the people they can talk to. That is their support system.

#### **3. What if my child won't listen to me?**

Join the club. The point of adolescence is to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. Somewhere along the line teens begin to think that they know more than you do, simply because that's the nature of being a teenager. When I was 17 I didn't know how my dad could function. After I was married and had kids, my dad became a very intelligent man. Your kids will go through that, too.

The way to get young people to listen to you is not by lecturing, but through discussion. You have to earn the right to be listened to. If the subject is depression, tell them that you've been hurt and that you understand what it feels like. Tell them that when they come to a point where they're emotionally hurting, you'll listen to them.

Describe to them what a sick feeling you get in the pit of your stomach when you look in the rear view mirror and see a police car with flashing lights. Let them know what it feels like to go through a romantic breakup. Share with them how you felt when someone wanted you to do something you really didn't want to do, but at the same time you didn't want to be laughed at and called a chicken. Then teenagers understand that these kinds of feelings and experiences are universal, and when they go through them they'll know you can listen.

**4. I'm a good listener, but my kids won't talk.**

A lot of teens won't talk because they feel that their parents won't understand or because their parents are in the habit of yelling at them. You must earn the right to be a listener.

Often kids won't talk simply because you're not really listening. Practice these good listening techniques: Don't be ready with pat answers. Acknowledge how they feel even if you don't understand it personally. Let them talk without butting in about how you'd feel or what you'd do in the same situation. Let them live their own lives, but be an interested and willing participant when they want you to be. Listen with equal respect to their difficulties at 10 years old or 12 years old, because if you tell them or indicate to them then that their problems are no big deal, they won't come to you later when their problems are a big deal. You must make six-year-old problems big enough, 10-year-old problems big enough, and 17-year-old problems big enough to merit your attention and care.

**5. Do parents have to have the answers?**

Thank goodness we don't need to have the answers to every problem. In fact, that's one thing a lot of kids complain about. When they try to talk to their parents, the parents want to provide a solution. Kids usually don't want that; they just want a sounding board.

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Besides, the answers might not be available. I talk to kids all the time who are depressed, and there is no way to make the problem go away. If their parents are getting a divorce or if they are being neglected emotionally, I can't go back in time and change that. There is not an "answer" to be had. But I can help them live through those experiences. I can let them know I care and then love them through it. Parents can do the same thing.

### **6. How do I know when to talk and when to give my children the privacy they need?**

This is a question that doesn't have a single answer. You need to trust your instincts. Adults need privacy, times alone, and times to talk. Young people do too. If kids spend too much time alone, that's not good, but don't barge into their room every time they shut the door. Each child and each family is different. You have to trust your feelings; build a relationship and communication with your child.

If you are concerned, tell them that you are available when they need to talk, or set a time to talk. I often do that with my children. If something is bothering them, I give them an hour to think it out, and then we sit down and talk. That way I've given them a time to be alone and a time to talk.

### **7. If someone else's child comes to me with a problem, should I tell their parents?**

That depends. If the child comes to you just because they're depressed over average teenage problems - breakups, poor self-confidence, loneliness - talk to them and help them through it. Later you may want to tell their parents that you talked to their son or daughter and were able to help them out.

But if a young person tells you something that involves physical abuse, sexual abuse, drug or alcohol abuse, or pregnancy, their parents probably need to be told. (An exception is when the parent is the direct cause of the problem. Then you should go over the

parent's head first.) There isn't a rule of thumb for every situation; there are just too many variables. You have to use your best judgment. Generally I try to get the parents involved when I'm working with their child. My goal is to let them know what is going on without destroying the confidentiality or trust that the child has in me.

**8. We've just moved, so we're new in the area. We don't have any friends or family close by. I know it's tough on my kids; it's tough on me. How do we find support?**

Do things that will help your kids build support. Get your teens involved in a church youth group, where kids come together in a smaller group than at school and where they can participate with others who share their beliefs. If your child is artistic, athletic, or musical, help them find activities with other teenagers who share those interests. Also, after they've been in school a few weeks, you might invite some of their new friends over. Make it as easy as possible.

What you don't want to do is to move and then tell your children they are on their own and wish them good luck. Being in an unfamiliar area is a difficult situation, and the key is to make it as easy as possible for your children to make friends, to rebuild their support system.