



## Supporting Distressed Young People

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Many young people experience high levels of stress. In recent years, research and clinical experience have recognized this. One manifestation of teen stress is depression, now considered a widespread and incapacitating problem among American adolescents.

This fact sheet reviews some ideas and suggestions on communicating with and supporting distressed young people. As used here, stress refers to the body's physiological reaction to any demand. Distress refers to the reactions when the demand is perceived as a problem or threat. Depression is an emotional state characterized by intense sadness, hopelessness, or despair that results from inability to cope with one's problems or demands.

#### Take Them Seriously

A study of some 2,000 Minnesota teen-agers found that when they experience stress or problems, most try to handle it alone or talk with other young people about it. Relatively few, at least as a first reaction, turn to adults for help. One reason is that adults tend to discount or underestimate the significance of young people's pressure and problems.

All too often, children's and teens' efforts to communicate intense feelings are minimized, denied, rationalized, or ignored by parents, physicians, school personnel, and other adults. A teen-age girl described the situation this way: "I think the reason so many young people commit suicide is because many of us have problems which are even worse than our parents have. The reason our problems are worse is because we are facing these things for the first time and we don't know how to handle these situations. When parents or teachers see us in states of depression, they figure we're just goofing off." So, in your concern for a young person's well-being, remember that teens' problems are as big and important and ominous and thus as stressful to them as yours are to you.

#### Offer Help Early

Help is essential for young people in the early stages of distress, to prevent them from sinking into deep despair or depression. But, as the previously cited study suggested, teens may not initiate a contact with an adult until a very late stage of distress, if at all. So, if you are aware of a youngster in distress, reach out yourself or arrange for someone else to do so.

Try to find a comfortable, relaxed time and a private place to talk with the youngster. Ask what is wrong in a friendly,

low-key manner, something like, "You haven't seemed like yourself lately. You seem kind of down. Is something bothering you?"

#### Attention and Encouragement

Young people's self-esteem is on the line most of the time and its loss is a major source of depression. So providing opportunities for them to regain or boost their self-esteem is important. Ways to do this include: encouragement, showing interest and attention, letting them know you are aware of their strengths and positive behavior, permitting expression of opinion and emotions (including unpleasant ones), avoiding blame and criticism, and being courteous. Such support sometimes can lift a depressed youngster's spirits.

#### Don't Offer False Assurance

Don't brush off indications of problems or distress by telling the youngster "don't worry" or "cheer up, everything will be all right" or that he/she "will get over it." The fact is they probably will. That is good for you to know; it enables you to encourage the youngster. But the "there, there, everything will be all right" approach is not a real help. It may actually be a disservice; everything probably is not all right. The kind of reassurance that teens in distress need is not the suggestion that the crisis will dissolve, but rather your statement of faith that they will be able to work it out. Let them know you are available and would like to work with them in finding a solution.

#### Encourage Them To Talk It Out

An important way to deal with stress or to work through feelings of loss or sadness is to talk about it with someone—a family member, a close friend, a pastor, or a professional counselor. Denying or ignoring normal feelings of anger, guilt, fear, and sorrow which accompany stress or loss can lead to emotional or physical difficulties. At the very least, it is likely to lead to a breakdown in communication with others, blocking a natural means of recovering from the stress, grief, or change.

Just knowing that someone is aware of the stress, hurt feelings, worries, or difficult decisions and cares can mean a great deal. As someone once said: "A joy shared is doubled; a sorrow shared is halved." Talking things out helps relieve the tension, helps to see the situation in a clearer light, and often, helps to see what can be done about it.

A study of bereaved people found that nearly half of the sympathy gestures consisted of advice — and this was rarely considered helpful. In contrast, short, neutral questions that expressed concern and willingness to listen were felt to be helpful — for example, “Would you like to talk about it?” or “You sound upset,” or “I can see that would bother you.”

Don't underestimate the value of “just listening.” Listening is perhaps the most important communication skill. Yet many of us don't listen to young people as well as we might —because we are busy; because we allow ourselves to be distracted; because we don't take them seriously; because we allow our prejudgments to distort our receiving; or because we want to help so much that listening doesn't seem enough.

### Help To Understand The Cause of Distress

Understanding the source of distress is one of the best means of freeing ourselves of its effects. With such awareness, there are a number of active options which can be exercised rather than just surrendering to the depression and passively waiting until it leaves. One of the following questions may lead a distressed young person to a greater awareness of the situation.

- What have you lost or what do you fear losing?
- What are you afraid of; what are the threats for you in your situation?
- How much change is going on in your life? What can you control or avoid while trying to deal with the most difficult?
- Do you feel you are falling short of some ideal — whose?
- Have you given up on a person or a situation and why?
- How much responsibility do you have for what has happened to you?
- What role do you have in shaping your feelings and reactions?

To an important degree, we create our feelings —including distress and despair — by how we perceive or interpret our experiences and circumstances. Usually there is some degree of negative thinking that needs to be made more realistic for recovery from depression. Can you help the person review and sum up this self talk to consider what contribution it is making to feelings?

### Show By Words and Actions That You Care

None of these questions would be helpful to a distressed young person unless asked in a warm, caring, supporting way. Indeed, the indication of caring probably is the greatest contribution. The expression of sincere feelings of affection, admiration, or concern, a friendly arm around troubled shoulders, a few words of support and encouragement, or an opportunity for a long talk can help a lot. It is important that a troubled person experience warmth, concern, and availability.

### Try to Arrange Continued Contact

An unfortunate paradox is that distressed people tend to withdraw from contact with others at a time when they need it most. Can you arrange or urge the distressed teen to attend activities where there are other people, even if she or he does not feel like talking or participating? Since teens' company

probably is more interesting and more important to a teen-ager than adults' company, you may need to enlist the support of other teens to achieve this. “Shunning” of depressed (or otherwise troubled) persons is **not** unusual, either because we feel awkward and don't know “what to say” to the distressed person OR because the depressed person is not very good company — joyless, uncooperative, uninterested, irritable, a party-pooper. Continuing to be included in their friends' activities — even if they are not enthusiastic about going and are “wet-blankets” while there — can be good therapy for distressed youngsters.

### Focus on Positive Behaviors

Two frequent and essentially useless pieces of advice for troubled people are “don't worry” and “cheer up.” Both outcomes would be highly desirable, but the admonitions won't achieve them. Do not expect nor urge the person to feel cheerful. Instead try to involve the distressed young person in things she/he has enjoyed in the past. Increased cheer may result.

In his work with depressed clients, therapist Aaron Beck has them work out short lists of daily “assignments” —simple but meaningful tasks they will be able to complete. Instead of lying around feeling they can do nothing, they are encouraged to move from one small accomplishment to another. This helps them overcome the illogical assumption that there is no effective way they can act. Try to have them keep busy at such activities and to review the pleasure from each.

Another aspect of behavior management may need to be gentle prods to keep up appearance and to continue health and hygiene practices. Deeply distressed persons who have lost interest in life may simply quit doing these essential tasks.

### Expect Rebuffs

Deeply distressed or depressed teen-agers (or adults) are in many ways like a difficult child. They are not trying to be difficult and may really want help, but their sense of despair and self-depreciation get in the way. Anyone trying to communicate with or support a distressed youth should not be surprised at, and should try not to take personally, irritable responses and rebuffs. Patience is an important attribute. Can you manage it?

Remember that young people have many pressures and stressors in their lives. They will experience stress and, if unable to cope adequately for one reason or another, may become depressed. Mild to moderate depression is a healthy reaction to many life situations — such as losses —in the short-term. Help them to appreciate that the way they feel is **not** so strange or terrible and that you do not consider their depression something to be afraid of or ashamed of.

A wise, warm friend can do much to ease the emotional distress that comes with the worries, disappointments, and conflicts of life. However, if the reaction seems all out of proportion to its cause, if the depression lasts beyond a couple of weeks, or is very intense, if the person seems to have given up hope, or (especially) has threatened self-harm, it is urgent that professional help be arranged. You probably should scout around for possible referrals early in your involvement with the persons or even before such an encounter occurs.

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