



REACH OUT

Tips for Helping
Someone in Crisis

by Jill C. Wheeler

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Content Warning: This book describes suicide and suicidal thoughts, which may be triggering to some readers.

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CHAPTER ONE

Hidden Struggles

In December 2021, the US surgeon general—the nation’s leading public health official—released a report that called attention to mental health issues among adolescents. The report noted that mental health issues among teens had been rising for years. “The challenges today’s generation of young people face are unprecedented and uniquely hard to navigate,” Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy wrote in the report’s introduction. “The effect these challenges have had on their mental health is devastating.”⁵

The report pointed to national surveys of youth collected to monitor and evaluate the overall state of adolescent mental health in the country. The surveys showed that the number of high school students who said they often felt sad or hopeless had increased 40 percent between 2009 and 2019. In addition, the report cited statistics from emergency room departments, which noted a 28 percent increase in the number of young people seeking help for anxiety, depression, and problems with behavior between 2011 and 2015.

The surgeon general’s report also raised concerns about increases in adolescent suicidal thoughts. National

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**—US surgeon general
Dr. Vivek Murthy**



Dr. Vivek Murthy became the US surgeon general in 2021. One thing he focused on was addressing mental health crises among youth.

surveys from 2009 to 2019 found a 36 percent increase in teens who said they had thought about taking their own lives. Of that group, 44 percent reported they had gone so far as to make a plan on how they would do that. Actual suicide rates also had increased among young people between the ages of ten and twenty-four, rising 57 percent between 2007 and 2018.

Statistics also showed girls were more commonly diagnosed with anxiety, eating disorders, and depression. Boys were more likely than girls to be diagnosed with behavior disorders, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They were also more likely to take their own lives.

In addition, LGBTQ+ youth face significant mental health challenges. When compared to their heterosexual peers,

lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are two times more likely to feel persistently hopeless or sad. Transgender youth are two times more likely to have depression and thoughts of suicide. They're also more likely to attempt suicide.

The report also looked at how race and poverty impact mental health. Black children and adolescents had nearly double the suicide rate of their white peers. Young people growing up in low-income households were two to three times more likely than their peers in more affluent households to develop mental health conditions. The surgeon general's report identified financial instability, food shortages, and housing instability as risk factors that contributed to mental health issues in young people. In addition, young people exposed to community violence and

Out of the Darkness

Mental health disorders and the people who suffer from them have long been feared, dismissed, and stigmatized. That has started to change as more people, including celebrities, talk about it openly in the press. Movies and songs also have begun to offer more compassionate portrayals of mental health challenges.

In 2019, singer and actor Selena Gomez collaborated with singer and songwriter Julia Michaels on the song "Anxiety." A few years later, Gomez shared the story of her bipolar disorder diagnosis and treatment in a documentary film, *My Mind & Me*. Other singers have shone the spotlight on mental illness as well. Pop star Taylor Swift released a previously unheard song, "Forever Winter," with her *Red (Taylor's Version)* album in 2021. The song is written from the point of view of someone watching a close friend struggle with mental illness. Singer Demi Lovato went public with her/their own struggles with bulimia, self-harm, and substance abuse with the 2011 song "Skyscraper." Lovato also established a scholarship program to help those who need but cannot afford mental health care. On the fictional side, actors Bradley Cooper and Jennifer Lawrence starred as two people with mental health challenges navigating a new relationship in the 2013 movie *Silver Linings Playbook*.

discrimination had a higher risk of developing mental health problems than peers not dealing with those issues.

Roots of a Crisis

The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified five major influences that impact mental health. These include individual factors such as genetics and age, and also societal factors such as discrimination. Families, communities, and a person's environment play a role too.

Mental health challenges can surface at any stage of life. However, the period from age ten to age nineteen, which is referred to as adolescence, is a particularly sensitive time for mental health issues. Adolescents undergo significant physical changes. They also experience changes in their brains and how they relate to other people and society. The prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that plays the biggest role in making decisions, is not fully developed until a person reaches his or her midtwenties. A developing brain means adolescents are at a higher risk than adults for making decisions that may be unsafe and, in turn, create stress and anxiety.

Mental health issues in teens are relatively common. Statistics indicate that about one in five adolescents has experienced a significant mental health challenge. Oftentimes the stress, insecurity, and hopelessness young people say they experience can be linked back to expectations they may feel from family and peers. Other risk factors for stress and anxiety include the drive many young people have to gain more control over their lives or to be more like their friends. The use of technology, specifically social media, can also impact a person's mental health.

More Than Mood Swings

Experts have identified three categories of mental health challenges that teens frequently experience: anxiety, social phobia, and depression. In the first category, anxiety, people may become anxious when experiencing major life events or even everyday situations. For instance, upcoming tests, first dates, jobs, and college decisions may trigger anxiety.

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