

Teens getting help for suicidal behavior from an online community

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It's a topic people often don't want to talk about, but suicide is a serious issue that needs serious attention.

According to a University of Alberta researcher, teens are difficult to reach and there have traditionally been few services that directly target adolescent suicidal behavior. Elaine Greidanus says many teens aren't picking up a phone, or seeing a counsellor, they're more likely logging on for emotional support.

Greidanus, a grad student in *Educational Psychology*, did a study to see how helpful cyber support really is.

Greidanus observed an online help site, where teens would create an anonymous thread, and studied about a dozen participants. Trained volunteers, who helped the adolescents, would write messages including: "It sounds like you are experiencing a lot of pain right now," "What are some things that give you strength in your life?" and "If you read some of the other threads, you may be surprised that several people have similar feelings." Greidanus also found that volunteers would frequently suggest specific resources including local telephone distress lines or talking to a counsellor.

Not only would the teens get advice from the site volunteers but from other adolescents who were online. Greidanus noticed messages of empathy including "Stop hurting yourself, I care for you!" and "You should go to the doctor." She found these messages helped the

participants develop a relationship and a sense of community with their peers.

Psychologist, university professor and expert in adolescent suicidal behaviour Dr. Robin Overall says "accessing adolescents and providing services in a way that they will actually seek help is a critical issue." Understanding how adolescents interact and communicate with each other on the internet can open new channels for connecting with distressed youth. Overall says it's encouraging to know that well designed and monitored cyber communities are being used.

Greidanus' research found the teens emphasized the importance of expressing their thoughts and feelings to a community who understood, suggesting the online community created an opportunity to seek and receive social support they would not otherwise have. She also found several of the participants who initially began asking for support, began writing to support others. She believes this proves the online community to be a meaningful peer-based support system.

Source: University of Alberta

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