

SOS via SMS: Help for suicidal teens is a text message away

October 12 2015, by Mark Pratt



In this Thursday, Oct. 8, 2015 photo, a Samaritans sign is posted near the Bourne Bridge, in Bourne, Mass. For decades the Samaritans have offered phone counseling to the desperate and distraught. But increasingly the group is turning to text messaging to engage with young people. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

With younger generations using cellphones less for actual conversation and more for text messaging, suicide prevention organizations are setting up ways that let distraught youths seek help that way.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among teenagers and college-age adults, making a text messaging initiative—started this month by Samaritans Inc. of Massachusetts to supplement the more traditional phone help line—a natural, Executive Director Steve Mongeau said.

Nearly 5,300 U.S. residents younger than 24 took their own lives in 2013, the most recent year for which data are available, according to the Washington, D.C.-based American Association of Suicidology. The latest suicide report by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health indicates that 90 state residents ages 5 to 24 killed themselves in 2012.

"We want you, as a person in need, to be able to use the communication platform you feel most comfortable with," Mongeau said, adding that Samaritans is the first suicide prevention organization in Massachusetts to offer the texting option.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has offered text help for suicidal veterans for several years.

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline also offers text messaging help at many of its more than 160 crisis centers nationwide. That organization found that nearly 40 percent of people reaching out for help using its online chat option indicated they would not feel comfortable seeking help by phone.

Young people may not be able to articulate their feelings in a phone conversation, said Dr. Jill Harkavy-Friedman, vice president of research at the America Foundation for Suicide Prevention, yet their emotions became crystal clear in a text conversation.

"What we found is that parents would look at their children's phones after a suicide and see all the distress their children were experiencing," she said.

The same Samaritans telephone number often seen posted near bridges—877-870-4673—can be used for text messages, Mongeau said.

People texting the organization are connected with a volunteer trained in the use of text messaging, and familiar with the grammatical quirks, abbreviations and emoticons used in text messaging. In fact, most of the organization's volunteers are under 30, with some as young as 16, and are already well-versed in text messaging, Mongeau said.

Text messages are also more private, he notes.

"Say you're in a public place, or on a school bus, you can text back and forth without being overheard," he said.

The Samaritans texting service is so far available daily only from 3 p.m. until 11 p.m., the period after school when young people tend to have more time on their hands, Mongeau said. But the goal is to make the program available 24/7.

And of course, anyone who wants to can text, regardless of age.

A few people have already taken advantage of the texting option, Mongeau said, even though the organization is still trying to get the word out. Eventually he expects to engage in as many 300 text conversations per day, or about the same as the number of phone calls the organization receives daily.

"People just want someone to confide in without judgment," he said.

More information: Online: samaritanshope.org/

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