

About Health TV with Jeanne Blake
Teen Depression
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health TV*, I'm Jeanne Blake. Depression is more than having the blues. The National Institute of Mental Health says that when that blue feeling lasts for more than a couple of weeks along with other symptoms it may be depression. Depression affects the way you feel physically and emotionally. It can affect the way you behave and decisions that you make and how well you can handle day to day pressures. The organization Samaritans is trying to educate people about suicide and depression. And one way they reach out to the community is through a program called Samariteens. On this edition of *About Health TV* we're joined by the Executive Director of Samaritans Roberta Hurtig and also one of the volunteers to the Samariteens program, Anna Lerner. Thank you both for coming in today to talk about this important topic. Roberta, the organization has been around for a long time, what was the genesis of the Samariteens program?

ROBERTA HURTIG: Well actually it was back in the 1980's we realized that young people so often turn to one another when they are struggling or looking for support and so that's when we launched our Samariteen program and our teen volunteers. They are an amazing group of young people. They go through the same training as our adult volunteers and they do a variety of things. They answer calls that come in on our helpline, they also become ambassadors back to their community and they really help be a catalyst in their own communities for increased education and awareness on this topic.

JEANNE BLAKE: It's a big job Anna when someone calls in and really needs someone to talk to, I mean it feels like there's a lot of responsibility there and I know that you're well trained you go through many hours of training. Why did you decide to do it I guess is my first question?

ANNA LERNER: Well I go to a high school where there have been a few suicides and I have friends who struggle with depression and have attempted suicide and I felt that I was faced with it enough in my day-to-day life and it was something that I wanted to make a difference and I wanted to help the people struggling.

JEANNE BLAKE: Many adults, Anna, think that they don't understand that teens can experience depression and you must hear that sometimes when you're talking with people about the work that you do so how do you explain that? You've just said that a number of young people that you know have taken their lives that young people that you know are living with depression and so you know very well that young people can experience depression.

ANNA LERNER: I think that it's a myth because teens what do they have to worry about? They are living at home with their parents and in a well-to-do community it seems like there are no outside problems and I think that when you are struggling with depression and nobody thinks that you should be, you feel like you're doing something wrong by experiencing those feelings and the result is or can be suicides.

JEANNE BLAKE: So what kind of calls have you gotten on the phone? Are there some that come to mind that stick out more than others? What are the kinds of things that young people call the teen line? What do they talk with you about?

ANNA LERNER: A few of the calls that I've gotten that were teenagers they talked about how they can't talk to their parents. There have been calls where they feel they are overworked at school with extracurricular activities and they're not allowed to take a break and they feel that they are not able to talk to anybody about it.

JEANNE BLAKE: What kinds of, what's the dynamic, how does it help? Help us understand? Take us onto the hotline with you for a minute and help us understand what the dynamic is between you and the caller?

ANNA LERNER: I can come to a level with the caller where a level of understanding and a level that I can help them understand that it's okay to have those feelings and to say that they can, there are people to turn to and that they are not doing anything wrong by feeling the way that they feel.

JEANNE BLAKE: Roberta, Anna talks about something that I hear so often that, that young people today are under an increasing amount of pressure to both internal and external and from their parents so they may often feel that they can't go to their parents. You've been in

your position with the Samaritans for six years, how have you seen that that dynamic change? Do you feel that young people are under more pressure now than they have been?

ROBERTA HURTIG: Yes, well I certainly hear them. Our teen volunteers talk about it from their experience and we do hear about it from our callers and again, I just think it's the need to increase awareness and understanding that depression is a disease of the mind. There are certainly things that can trigger it or that it can at times make someone feel unable to see their own way through it. Feeling a need to excel, feeling that no one wants to listen to them if they feel that they are feeling overwhelmed or struggling or certainly things that we try to be there for.

JEANNE BLAKE: It's hard to separate out what the contributing factors are. I think it's important though just to emphasize continually that there is hope and that talking about it is probably the first big step. Recognizing it and then being able to talk about it is huge and it's the path to getting the help that can transform and save someone's life.

ROBERTA HURTIG: Right. What Anna was saying about what brought her to Samaritans is not an unusual story. There's another teen who's now moved on to college but when she was working with us, she first heard about us because her own friends were struggling with depression and suicidal thoughts and she wasn't sure how to help them so she actually called our Samaritans line and spoke to a volunteer probably much like Anna and got some tools and support on how to do have those conversations to help her friends seek help and then ended up a year or so later calling to become a volunteer herself. So we try to equip these young people with amazing life skills that they can take with them wherever they go. But in the process try to make sure that we let people know that you can have a conversation here which is so critical as a first step often to then speaking with their parents or mental health professional, school nurses. If you can somehow engage with someone when they are feeling suicidal it's often enough of an interruption to help them realize that rather than being hopeless, there really is hope. Rather than feeling there are no options there truly are options and there need to be a variety of supports in place in order to help young people get on a path to treatment and being safe.

JEANNE BLAKE: Right. We talked about the DVD *Depression: True Stories* and Mike is profiled in that and there's a wonderful description that he offers of what it feels like to be depressed. Let's listen to 18-year-old Mike.

MIKE: I felt like I was just sinking in the ocean with like a weight strapped to my feet. The pressure was just unbearable. I couldn't breathe. I was just panicky and I would lay in my bed in the fetal position for days trying to make myself as small as I could so that the pressure might be lessened a little bit.

JEANNE BLAKE: I think that Mike describes so clearly what many people with depression feel that there and it's a surprise to some people that there are physical symptoms that come with feelings of depression. You must hear this on your phone calls?

ANNA LERNER: I do, and it's definitely a part of depression. Callers will say that they, their parents are worried because they've lost weight or they just don't feel like going out anymore with their friends. They'll complain of headaches or backaches and it's all, it's not necessarily depression but the callers who are depressed do have the symptoms where they just can't get out of bed not because they don't want to but because they're literally so tired that they can't get out of bed.

JEANNE BLAKE: Anna we want to thank you for coming in, we're going to bring in one of your colleagues on the Samaritans line now, Lindsay, and Roberta I'll ask you to stand by and while we're waiting for Lindsay to come in we'll put the help line phone numbers on, these are two phone numbers, phone lines they're the 800 teen line for Samaritans and also the hope line.

JEANNE BLAKE: We continue our discussion now on teen depression and suicidal and we're joined by Roberta Hurtig who is the Executive Director of the organization Samaritans whose mission it is to educate about these topics and now we're joined by Lindsay Tsopolas with the Samaritans program. Lindsay tell us how you came to volunteer for this position?

LINDSAY TSOPOLAS: I heard about the Samaritans through a friend who was also suffering from depression and had attempted to die by suicide. A lot of kids within a few months actually last year, who I had grown up with had attempted the same and it struck me

because I had never come face-to-face with anything like suicide before so I reached out to the Samaritans to try to lend a hand.

JEANNE BLAKE: So it's hard enough for adults to understand how a young person could want to die and take action to die, how did affect you and your friends when someone in your peer group attempted to take their life?

LINDSAY TSOPOLAS: I think that we were all a little bit stunned because I think that for us we had never really been exposed to anything like that before so it was hard for us. We didn't see warning signs. I mean, we saw bits and pieces of what we thought was depression but we never saw any warning signs. I think probably because we were never taught to see what the warning signs are.

JEANNE BLAKE: I think you've given us a perfect transition to talking about what those warning signs are. The National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center which is sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers these warning signs and we'll put them up on the screen. Sad or irritable mood, loss of interest in activities once enjoyed large changes in appetite or weight, difficulty sleeping or oversleeping, slow or agitated movement, loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, difficulty concentrating and frequent thoughts of death or suicide. As we've said, it's hard to understand or be able to tell if a child is just going through a typical adolescence. I mean, these are symptoms that we might see in any young person at any time but I think it's when it's a combination of enough of them that endure over two weeks or longer, that's when someone needs to take help or call for help right, Roberta?

ROBERTA HURTIG: Yes, and you know, suicide's a complex issue and each instance of suicidal ideation or attempts or even completions are often unique. You're so right Jeanne that often it's a series of things that happen together. It could often be undiagnosed mental illness, or untreated mental illness. Then you put on that some, like a significant loss of some kind or some type of health issue or some other major traumatic event and combined together it can pretty easily put someone who you thought one day was fine create a vulnerability that puts them at risk.

JEANNE BLAKE: I remember one doctor who was our advisor on our *Depression: True Stories* DVD taking about how each of us has a different breaking point and so that speaks to what you said Roberta. Lindsay, often young people may talk with a peer or a friend about thoughts of suicide or feeling depressed and many young people feel that speaking about that to another adult that they trust would be a betrayal of that friendship. What would you say to that?

LINDSAY TSOPOLAS: I would say that there are certain limitations if the person, I think it's all about, it's all about a trust issue. If the person is thinking about hurting themselves then I think it's definitely important to reach out, but again, the adult or teacher/parent whatever this person also needs, you need to have trust in them and I think that it's very important to keep the information within a circle of trust.

JEANNE BLAKE: Right. But it is key to be able to tell somebody that and to not keep it to yourself thinking well, my friend will be mad at me.

LINDSAY TSOPOLAS: Yes.

ROBERTA HURTIG: When we do educational outreach out in the community we often talk about the kinds of secrets that you can't keep and certainly thoughts of self-harm particularly with the intent to die is one of those secrets that can't be kept. I want to underscore what Lindsay said and that's part of the reason why we do so much work in the community is that when a young person knows that someone's at risk and they want to involve adults in solving this issue and providing help, it really is easier to do it if you're going to someone who you know is equipped to handle this information and who will really be an effect, do an effective job in providing support.

JEANNE BLAKE: Lindsay in the ideal situation, young people would be able to talk with their parents, don't you agree?

LINDSAY TSOPOLAS: I do agree but there are a lot of reasons why kids today can't, don't feel that they can speak with their parents.

JEANNE BLAKE: Give us a couple examples?

LINDSAY TSOPOLAS: I was on the phone with somebody the other day who didn't think that his mother would approve of his feeling that he might be a homosexual. We have been brought up with certain ideals and certain ideas that our parents have. What's right and wrong and that comes down in how, what we're taught to feel and if our parents teach us that homosexuality isn't acceptable then how are we going to talk to them? We don't want our parents to hate us, but I mean some things we just can't speak about with them.

JEANNE BLAKE: So you've been on the other end of the phone line with some pretty desperate young people who felt that they had no one to talk to. They're calling an anonymous hotline so what would your words of wisdom be to adults with respect to being able to listen to the young people in their lives?

LINDSAY TSOPOLAS: I'd say that there's nothing better in this world than being open and being able. Instilling a comfortable feeling within your family, giving your child the opportunity to speak with you. Asking questions and not just waiting for him or her to come and speak with you.

JEANNE BLAKE: Because?

LINDSAY TSOPOLAS: Because sometimes, sometimes we chicken out. Sometimes we're scared, sometimes we need to be prompted and I think that if parents give their children the opportunities to speak with them, I think that can't do anything but good.

JEANNE BLAKE: And just biting the lip right? I think what you said earlier not judging them is so important. Roberta, you know we've talked earlier about the fact that it takes a community-wide effort. We can have a lot of Lindsay's and Anna's out in the community doing their good work and spreading the word but it does take support at every level to reduce the stigma that does surround mental illness and to bring people to the place where they can talk about it and hear about it and that lives will be saved because of that.

ROBERTA HURTIG: Right. Here in Massachusetts we are pretty fortunate. We have wonderful leadership from our legislature and from the Office of the Governor in setting policies that help support suicide prevention. Both the Commissioners of Public Health and Mental

Health work well together and we have a strong coalition. The Massachusetts Coalition for Suicide Prevention. We take mental health professionals, we take people who are gatekeepers, who are working the schools or with older adults or other at-risk populations and community groups as well as the passion of people who have been personally touched by this issue who want so much to channel their energy to make a difference and together you know we're working hard to be there for people who are struggling and in the process save more lives.

JEANNE BLAKE: So if people want to volunteer for the Samaritans, I know that this program does air in cities other than in Massachusetts, but if someone wants to volunteer in Massachusetts where you are based, what can they do? Where do they call?

ROBERTA HURTIG: Well, hopefully they can go to our website, www.samaritanshope.org and learn more about our organization and opportunities for volunteering or call our business line which is 617-536-2460 and learn how they can join with us.

JEANNE BLAKE: Okay, we'll put that up on the screen as well and I want to underscore the fact though that the 800 numbers that we put up are available to people nationally and call from anywhere in the U.S. will come in to the help line. I always like to end, Lindsay, on a hopeful note because I think it's so important that we remind young people and adults who are living with depression that one of the symptoms of depression is that it distorts your thinking and that you have a hard time thinking that you'll ever feel good again. What would your message be just from the calls that you've been on and from the friends that you've known that have experienced depression? What hopeful message would you leave them with?

LINDSAY TSOPOLAS: I would say that there's always somebody willing to listen. We at the Samaritans are always there to hear anything you have to say whether you just want to say hello during the day or you really need to get something out. We are always willing to listen and we are always there to lend a helping hand.

JEANNE BLAKE: Good for you for the work that you are doing. What a wonderful choice for a teenager to make to dedicate herself or himself to a cause such as this. Roberta, from you, on a broader issue around the issue of depression and suicide, there's really good treatment. It's not always easy to access, but treatment really can save lives.

ROBERTA HURTIG: It really can. And treatment coupled with a caring community. One that's knowledgeable, one that notices, one that is there with compassion and caring and love will make a difference.

JEANNE BLAKE: That is our hopeful note that I wanted to end on. Thank you both Roberta, Lindsay and Anna wherever you are in this studio. Thank you so much for coming in. We hope that your work will continue and that more people will get the help that they need and deserve. We'd like to thank you for joining us on *About Health TV*, I'm Jeanne Blake. I'll see you next time.