

Ask a psychotherapist

Question: I'm still in high school and a lot of my friends are struggling with depression and feeling very stressed out. One of them cuts her arms a lot and wears long sleeves to hide the marks. When I ask her why she does that she says it makes her feel better (?!). Another girl says she wants to kill herself and I'm really worried about her. All this is stressing ME out and I don't know what I should do to help my friends. I would feel horrible if anything happened to any of them if maybe I could have done something. What can I do?

Answer: You aren't alone in facing these problems. These days, more teens struggle with depression and anxiety than in previous generations. The increased pace of life in the 21st century largely as a result of the technological revolution has put increased pressure on teenagers as they struggle to forge their identities and social networks. Teenagers are bombarded with information, much of it false, via the Internet. Social networking is frequently used as a tool of abuse, offering relative anonymity to abusers. The pressure teens feel can become overwhelming and they may seek relief through self-harm, substance abuse and planning to escape via suicide.

Self-harming behaviours such as cutting or burning parts of the body appeal to people who are under a lot of pressure that feels inescapable. Such acts can, paradoxically, be soothing as natural opiates in the body are released to manage physical pain. You're right to be concerned about your friend who 'cuts'. It's an indication that she's feeling overwhelmed and doesn't know how else to manage her emotions. She should be seen by a therapist familiar with the causes and treatment of self-harming behaviours. If she won't seek help for herself, you may need to talk about her behaviour with a parent, teacher or other trusted adult.

Although self-harming behaviours are not usually life-threatening in themselves, they are an indication of emotional overload. The expression of suicidal ideas should be taken even more seriously, especially if the person says that they have thought about how to kill themselves and they have access to the means to accomplish it. This is an emergency and you should not hesitate to tell a responsible adult who can get your friend the help she needs as soon as possible. If no adult is available, call 911.

While this kind of suicidal thinking and planning should ring alarm bells at any age, it is especially dangerous not to take action when a teen is suicidal. This is because teenagers are naturally more impulsive than adults. Add in even one night of substance abuse and the potential for a tragic outcome increases dramatically. Although your friends may be angry at you for 'telling' initially, you may save a life.

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