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Girls describe loneliness, desperation

By **KATIE JORDAN**
The Tattoo

Your best friend is depressed and contemplating suicide.

This statement might not be true, but maybe it is. And maybe you have no idea.

Though it's a problem that effects teens everywhere, depression often goes unnoticed, even by family and close friends.

That's what it was like for Mary, a sophomore of Bristol Eastern High School, and Katy, a freshman at Windsor School. Both girls spoke of the condition that their identities be protected.

For a long time, Mary said, no one had any idea that she had a problem.

"I'm good at make-believe," said Mary. She hid her depression, bottling up her sadness so no one would know.

Katy related a similar experience. Her depression remained unnoticed and untreated, she said, until she made a suicide attempt.

"I'm not really sure if it's that I want to die," Katy said. "I think it's just that I don't want to live the life I'm living."

So Katy overdosed on medication at lunch hour one school day.

"I wasn't planning on telling anyone, but I got scared and told my teacher," said Katy.

Both girls said it was difficult to explain the exact reasons for their depression.

Katy's father used to hit her, before he moved out several years ago. But though that was a huge part of her problem, she said she's unsure if it was the only cause.

Mary said she has a good life, but has always been more mature than other children, and sometimes over-sensitive.

Being different, as it often does, lead to being picked on.

"When people teased me, my self-esteem shot down," said Mary. "Then I started to beat them up."

"It's easier to get angry and deal with it than it is to deal with depression," Mary added.

But her anger didn't always lead her to hurting others.

There were times when her over-

whelming emotions drove her to hurt herself: Mary had a problem with cutting, though she also hid this from those around her.

"It's not something you're really proud of," said Mary. "I'm going to have scars on my body forever because of what I did."

focus on other than the pain inside," she explained. "I would bleed out my pain because I didn't know how to talk about it."

Though she said she found it difficult to explain to other people, Mary's reason for cutting herself was similar. "It was like a release," said Mary.

when the school system removed her from school, after a second suicide attempt and hospital stay.

"Every day I sit at home I'm getting more depressed," said Katy.

Without friends to turn to, unfortunately neither of the depressed teens found family a complete source of

the fighting, Mary also began to neglect her schoolwork.

"It's hard to do anything when you don't see a point," she said.

People finally started noticing Mary's problem when her grades dropped. Her mother eventually decided that she should see someone about her depression.

Mary said that talking to a professional helped to organize her thinking, even though she didn't feel an emotional attachment to the person.

"They're just somebody to talk to," she said.

Katy has tried many ways of treating her depression since her suicide attempts brought attention from the school and her family.

A succession of antidepressant medications — Paxil, Zoloft, and Effexor — hasn't helped her much, Katy said.

Katy found, like Mary, that communicating with others is helpful.

Before she was removed from school, she said, the social worker and the teachers were very supportive, though other students isolated or mistreated her.

"When I was in the hospital, the other patients were really nice and understanding, and so were the doctors and nurses," she said.

Katy also took part in a course called Dialectical Behavior Therapy, which involved talking with a psychiatrist and learning to deal with emotions.

"I would really suggest the program DBT," Katy said.

Besides this program, Katy had other suggestions for teens dealing with depression.

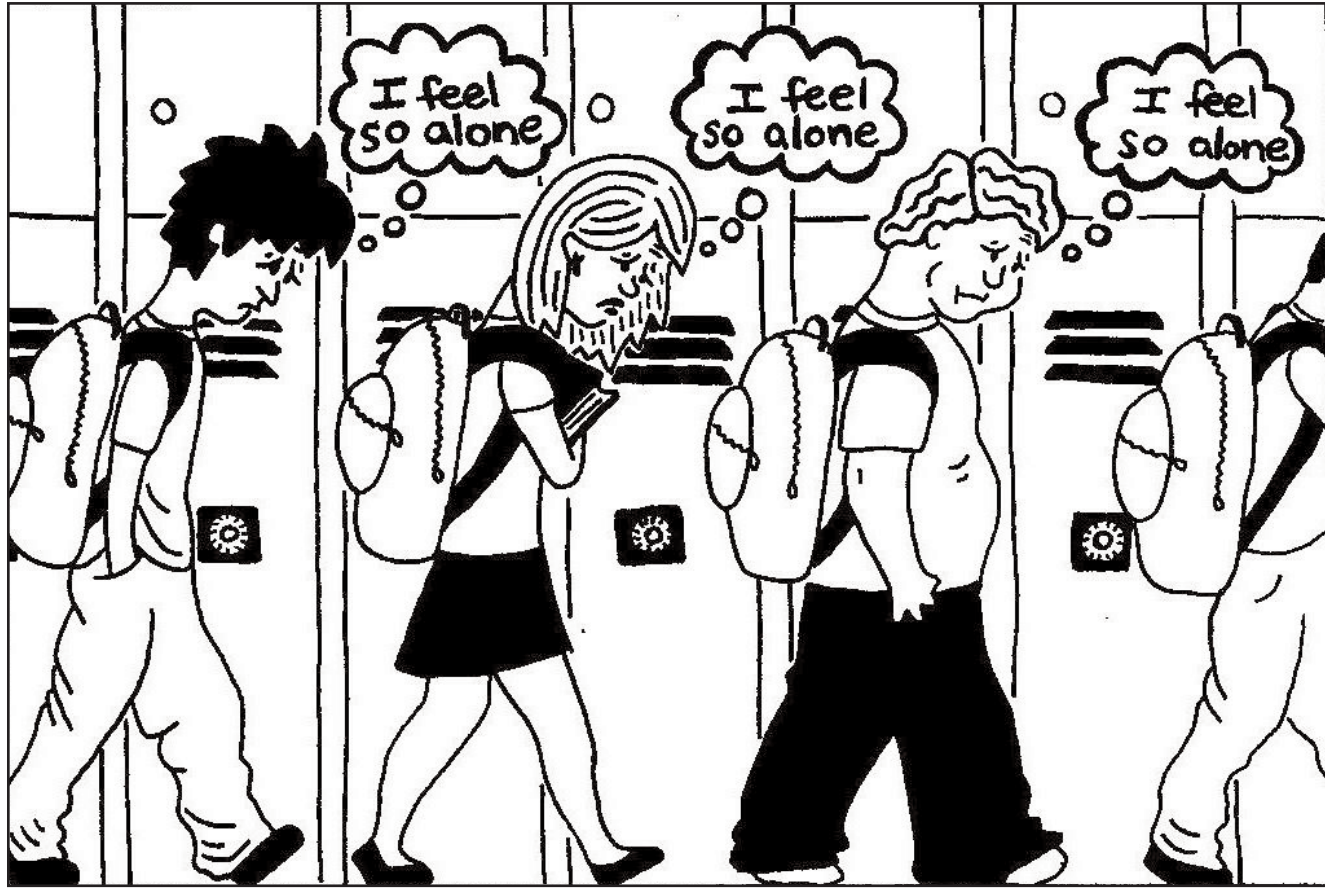
She said they should not give up, because "there are always people out there who are going through similar situations."

Mary said she now has friends who try to be there for her, even if she can't make them understand what she's going through.

Mary's advice for anyone suffering from depression: "Find somebody to talk to."

It's almost impossible to find the words to explain how depression feels, Mary said.

"It eats you alive from the inside."



Katie Jordan / The Tattoo

Once a friend noticed the cuts, Mary said, and Mary told her they were from her cat.

"She knew it wasn't my cat," Mary said.

Katy has also struggled with cutting, or self-harming, and tried to conceal it from others. "I tried to hide it by wearing long sleeves," she said.

But everyone found out what she'd been doing when she was brought to the hospital after her suicide attempt.

Katy said she found comfort in self-mutilation.

"It gave me another type of pain to

Mary also said she found release in fits of uncontrollable crying — but only when she was alone.

Being alone was part of Mary's problem. During her worst periods of depression, she had no friends, she said.

Katy also said she was isolated, because friends either ignored her or said unkind things to her after she tried to kill herself and went to the hospital.

"I don't think they wanted to be friends with me anymore," Katy said.

The loneliness became even worse

comfort, either.

Katy said her family didn't really understand her depression and was "really critical about things."

Mary suffered a traumatic loss when her grandfather died a few years ago.

Her parents knew that he was ill, but left Mary at home when they went to see him — she never got to say goodbye.

The loss of a loved one is painful for anybody, but Mary said her grandfather's death was especially hard.

Besides the cutting, the crying, and

Warning signs of depression

- Change in eating habits
- Withdrawal
- Boredom or apathy
- Decline in schoolwork
- Violence
- Running away
- Drug or alcohol use
- Any radical personality change

Source: John Mingel, counselor and program manager at the Wheeler Clinic

To call for help
National suicide hotline:
1-800-784-2433

If a friend is depressed

- Talk to him or her.
- Listen for the reason he or she gives for being depressed.
- Evaluate the severity of the situation.
- Keep communication going.
- Be supportive.
- Do NOT swear to keep secrets.
- Get the person the help they need from a parent, counselor, teacher or other trusted adult.

Source: John Mingel, counselor and program manager at the Wheeler Clinic

Depressed teens can get help

By **KATIE JORDAN**
The Tattoo

Nobody is happy all the time. But if your feelings of sadness seem to be permanent, you may be clinically depressed.

John Mingel, program manager and counselor for the Wheeler Clinic's help line, said the 24-hour telephone outreach handles about 30,000 calls a year, many of them from young people from the Bristol area.

"A good percentage would be teenagers," Mingel said. Teenagers everywhere suffer from depression.

Psychiatric nurse Kevin Toomey, who also teaches a health class at Bristol Eastern High School, said he absolutely sees depression in the school. Depression, said Toomey, is "an extremely important teenage issue."

Toomey said that many students feel confused about who they are and where they're going. But confusion isn't out of the ordinary for teens, he said. And neither is being depressed.

"Depression is normal, but to stay depressed isn't," said Toomey.

There are several important causes of depression in high school students. Both Mingel and Toomey cited loss, rejection, and abuse as the main reasons that teens become depressed.

"These are difficult problems for anyone, especially an adolescent," Mingel said.

Whatever the cause, depression can have some very serious effects on teenagers.

Some teens turn to mood-altering drugs and alcohol in an attempt to get over difficult emotions, said Mingel, but others may take even more drastic measures.

"There is a direct connection between depression and suicide," Mingel said.

Mingel said that about 10 to 20 percent of calls to the clinic's suicide line are teens, although they also hear from all other age groups.

Toomey also said he hears from suicidal teens. Fortunately, those discussions are rare, he said. As a nurse, he's also seen cases where teens have tried to kill themselves. But there are ways to help pre-

vent these problems.

Although it's obvious that more must be done, Mingel said, the school system has made an effort to help depressed students.

There are guidance counselors, social workers, and teachers who can talk to students about their problems, said Mingel.

'There is a direct connection between depression and suicide.'
— John Mingel, counselor at The Wheeler Clinic

According to Toomey, the opportunity to talk can be a big help to teens dealing with depression. He said that teachers must try to create an atmosphere where

students feel safe to say what's on their minds.

But teachers, social workers and counselors aren't the only ones who can help teens deal with depression.

Mingel recommended that teens reach out to each other, as well.

Teens who have a friend who

severe the problem is, he said. It's important to keep communication going.

"Be supportive," said Mingel.

But Mingel also stressed that teens should not swear to keep secrets for a friend. If the person has a serious problem, Mingel said, you should tell his or her parents or the school system and get them the help they need.

There are also help lines, like those at Wheeler Clinic. They're confidential and callers speak to trained mental health workers.

The number of Wheeler Clinic's help line is 747-3434 for central Connecticut, and 524-1182 for Hartford.

For the clinic's suicide line, the number is 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433).

Teens who are depressed sometimes feel like they're alone. But the truth is, they aren't.

"They can get help," Mingel said.



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