

A PEER  
COUNSELING  
GUIDE FOR  
TEENS

# I'm Here

James J. Crist, Ph.D.

Art by  
Jomike Tejido

free spirit  
PUBLISHING®



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# CONTENTS

---

## INTRODUCTION 1

---

About This Book - - - - - 3

How to Use This Book - - - - - 3

---

## CHAPTER 1: TEENS HELPING TEENS 5

---

The Increase in Mental Health Problems - - - - - 6

Causes of Stress Among Kids and Teens - - - - - 8

How Young People Can Help One Another - - - - - 10

Formal Helping Roles - - - - - 11

The Advantages of Helping - - - - - 14

Where You Can Help - - - - - 17

Anti-Bullying Efforts - - - - - 17

Which Helping Role Will You Take? - - - - - 18

---

## CHAPTER 2: PEER COUNSELING 19

---

Peer Counseling Defined - - - - - 20

How Peer Counselors Help - - - - - 21

The Importance of Giving Hope - - - - - 22

Keeping Someone's Confidences - - - - - 23

Organizing Support Groups and Clubs - - - - - 24

Advertising Your Program - - - - - 26

What Peer Counseling Is Not - - - - - 26

---

## CHAPTER 3: CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE HELPING

---

29

What Qualities Do You Have? - - - - -	30
Can You Deal with Risky Situations? - - - - -	33
Do You Like to Talk About Yourself? - - - - -	35
Are You Good at Keeping Secrets? - - - - -	36
Taking Care of Yourself - - - - -	38
Are You Ready? - - - - -	39

---

## CHAPTER 4: BASIC HELPING SKILLS

---

41

Three Tasks for Helping - - - - -	42
Attending Skills—Showing You’re Listening - - - - -	46
Asking Questions—Getting More Info - - - - -	49
Reflecting—Talking About Feelings - - - - -	51
Restating—Summarizing What’s Been Said - - - - -	54
Self-Disclosure—Sharing Your Experiences - - - - -	55
Unhelpful Reactions - - - - -	56

---

## CHAPTER 5: HELPING PEOPLE FIND SOLUTIONS

---

59

Building Motivation to Make a Change - - - - -	61
Helping People Find Solutions - - - - -	62
Giving Information - - - - -	65
Teaching Skills - - - - -	66

---

## CHAPTER 6: TEACHING PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

---

77

What Are Problem-Solving Skills? - - - - -	78
The Five Steps of Problem-Solving - - - - -	80
Goal Setting - - - - -	86

---

## CHAPTER 7: TEACHING CONFLICT-RESOLUTION SKILLS

---

89

Causes of Conflict - - - - -	90
Helping People Resolve Conflict - - - - -	92
Stages of Conflict Resolution - - - - -	97
Helping with Conflict Resolution When Only One Person Is Present	102

---

## CHAPTER 8: WHEN TO SEEK ADULT HELP

---

105

Suicidal Thoughts and Plans - - - - -	106
Nonsuicidal Self-Injury or Self-Harm - - - - -	108
Homicidal Thoughts and Plans - - - - -	109
Alcohol and Drug Use - - - - -	111
Physical, Sexual, or Emotional Abuse - - - - -	113
Other Risky Behaviors - - - - -	118
Talking to Trusted Adults - - - - -	118

---

## A FINAL WORD

---

121



Resources - - - - -	122
References - - - - -	126
Index - - - - -	129
About the Author - - - - -	136





# Introduction

As a professional therapist, I've spent my career working with young people. I've listened as teens talk about feelings and problems in their lives. I've helped them come up with solutions. And I've taught them strategies they can use to deal with their problems and improve their relationships. But the skills I've used in this work didn't grow overnight. I had to learn them first, and then I practiced them, over and over again, on my own and with my clients. A few things have stood out to me during this time. Mainly, that respect for another person's ideas and thoughts, along with an understanding of their feelings, is key to being able to help them. Being a good listener comes in handy too!

It's not only counselors and therapists like me who listen to people's feelings and problems and help them find solutions. People show up

for one another in this way every day. Families and neighbors support each other through challenges big and small. Friends help each other navigate the ups and downs of life, school, and growing up. Peers can make school a nightmare or a safe haven. Many of the kids and teens I've worked with have told me that they shared the suggestions I gave them with friends, near and far, who are going through similar problems.

These kind and supportive people fill an important role. The reality is that there are not enough licensed counselors and therapists to serve everyone who needs them. And this lack is keenly felt in schools—more so since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the worst of the pandemic, when most schools were shut down and doing virtual learning, many kids and teens suffered from lack of or reduced contact with friends. Learning became more difficult and more frustrating. Other stressors, such as families not having enough money to pay bills, caregivers losing their jobs, social and political issues, worries about the climate crisis and other environmental issues, and concerns about being able to find a good job after finishing school, weighed even more heavily. When schools needed more counselors, there weren't enough. And those who were available became harder to reach. Even with the pandemic closures officially over, the stresses kids and teens are facing have not let up. And there still aren't enough counselors to go around.

Schools around the world have used peer counseling to try to fill this gap. They train students to become peer counselors who help other students at their schools struggling with a variety of problems. But you don't have to be a designated peer counselor to do this. Anyone can learn strategies and skills for talking with friends and peers. In fact, many kids and teens talk to each other about their frustrations, often before they reach out to adults or trained helpers, if they reach out at all.



## About This Book

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It can be stressful if a friend talks to you about their problems. You might feel good that they trust you enough to share with you, and you want to help . . . but you're not sure what you can say or do. And you definitely don't want to make things worse! That's where this book comes in.

Many of the skills that professional counselors learn and that young people are taught in peer counseling programs can be used by anyone. My goal is to share some of these skills, as well as some of the knowledge I've gained over the years, so you can support the people in your life. Because when a person has someone to talk with, someone who will listen and offer a sympathetic ear and who can help them figure out how to cope and come up with solutions to problems, this makes all the difference in the world. So, if you want to learn how you can help your friends, family members, and classmates when they come to you with problems and how you can be part of making your school and community a kinder, safer, and more welcoming place, this book is for you!

## How to Use This Book


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By reading this book, you can learn many valuable skills that will help you know what to do when people come to you with problems. In the chapters that follow, I share basic helping skills, including listening and asking questions. I also share strategies for helping people come up with solutions to problems, set goals, and work through conflict, as well as advice for what to do if someone needs more help than you can give.

Some of the information in this book applies mostly to trained peer counselors or other formal peer helpers. (Chapters 2 and 3, as well as

the Peer Counselor Tips throughout, are specifically geared toward this audience, but are valuable for everyone to learn.) But most of the strategies can be used by anyone who wants to learn how to help in an informal way. By learning these skills and putting them into practice, you might even decide that you want to help start a peer counseling program at your school!

Try reading the book all the way through first to get a feel for the various strategies that you might use when someone comes to you for help. You can go back to specific chapters or sections as situations arise. As you read, think about how the skills might help you in your own life too. And if, after reading the book and practicing the skills, you think you might want to choose to help others as a career, that would be awesome!





# Teens Helping Teens

**Maria:** “You look a bit down today. What’s up?”

**Jordan:** “I haven’t been getting along with my parents lately.”

**Maria:** “Sorry to hear that. How so?”

**Jordan:** “Well, they’re always on me about my grades. It’s really stressing me out!”

**Maria:** “I can relate to that. What have you tried so far to deal with it?”

This conversation is one that might take place on the bus, in a school hallway, between members of a team or club, at an after-school program, at home, in a peer counseling office—or anywhere young people meet and spend time together. And it’s a good example of how people your age can support one another.

In this chapter, you’ll learn about mental health problems and stressors young people face, how you can help friends and peers formally and informally, the various helping roles you can take, the advantages of helping, where you can offer help, and how you can be a part of anti-bullying efforts at your school.

## The Increase in Mental Health Problems

Mental health and addiction problems have increased significantly in recent years, including among young people. The problem is so serious

that in 2021 a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health was declared in the United States by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children’s Hospital Association.

The most recent data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that ADHD, anxiety, behavior problems, and depression are the most common mental disorders in children and

### RATES OF COMMON MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS IN KIDS AND TEENS

- 9.8% (about 6 million) have ADHD
- 9.4% (about 5.8 million) have an anxiety disorder
- 8.9% (about 5.5 million) have behavior problems
- 4.4% (about 2.7 million) have depression

(CDC 2023)



teens. Nearly 22 percent of kids and teens have one or more diagnosable mental health disorders. That is about one in every five kids.

Depression, suicide, and substance abuse are also important concerns among teens. The US Department of Health and Human Services reported that in 2021, one out of every five teens had severe depression during the previous year. Of those, almost 75 percent had symptoms that interfered with their ability to do well at school or work, complete their chores at home, get along with family members, or have a social life. Over half of these kids did not receive any kind of treatment. Chances are that you or someone you know has had at least some trouble handling the stresses of daily life.

### **RATES OF DEPRESSION, SUICIDE, AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN TEENS**

- **36.7% have had persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness**
- **15.1% have had a major depressive episode**
- **4.1% have a substance use disorder**
- **1.6% have an alcohol use disorder**
- **3.2% have an illicit drug use disorder**
- **18.8% have seriously considered attempting suicide**
- **15.7% have made a suicide plan**
- **8.9% have attempted suicide**
- **2.5% have made a suicide attempt requiring medical treatment**

(CDC 2023)

Alcohol and drug use are also common among teens, and among some middle schoolers. According to the CDC's 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, almost 60 percent of high school seniors had tried alcohol at

least once. About 30 percent had used in the last 30 days. Over one-third (36.8 percent) had used marijuana at least once, and 21.7 percent had used in the last 30 days. Often, people turn to drugs or alcohol to handle situations or emotions that feel overwhelming. But some drugs, such as heroin, fentanyl, or prescription drugs, can be deadly if the user overdoses. People can also die from drinking too much alcohol. While not all teens who use alcohol and drugs have problems as a result, using these substances can make mental and physical health problems and social problems worse.

## Causes of Stress Among Kids and Teens

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Growing up can be pretty stressful. Trying to juggle keeping up with friends, getting good grades, meeting family obligations, working part-time, participating in sports or clubs, and thinking about your future can get overwhelming. Such stresses are perfectly normal and usually get better with time as you mature and are better able to handle them.

Situations or problems such as divorce or other family issues, bullying, being unhoused, dealing with food insecurity, and having trouble with learning are longer term types of stress. They can often make life harder and are much more difficult to cope with than everyday stressors.

Traumatic events such as assault, domestic violence, and physical or sexual abuse can take a long time to overcome. When these problems persist over long periods of time, they can affect your mental and physical health.

Young people everywhere have experienced a great deal of stress and trauma in recent years. And high levels of stress can make people more vulnerable to developing mental health or addiction problems. Issues



around the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular, have contributed to an increase in mental health problems and addictions in teens and adults.

Racism, intolerance, and hate crimes are challenging and stressful issues that many kids and teens face. Violence based on race and religious beliefs has risen, making young people from targeted communities feel unsafe. Experiences of racial discrimination and the trauma resulting from them can contribute to physical symptoms and mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, substance use, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They can even cause damage to the brain.

Discrimination and violence on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation have also worsened in recent years. LGBTQ+ teens continue to face extremely high levels of violence and mental health challenges. The CDC's 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that half of LGBTQ+ high school students reported having poor mental health and more than one in five (22 percent) had attempted suicide in the past year. Laws are being passed in many places to make it harder for people, and especially young trans people, to receive gender-affirming care.

Traditional gender role expectations are another source of stress for many. Though times are changing, many boys are still afraid to talk about and express their feelings out of fear that doing so is a sign of weakness. This can make it difficult for them to ask for help when they need it and may explain why suicide rates are higher for boys and men than other gender groups. Girls also face pressure based on gender. Sexual harassment, being treated as less capable or less competent, and being called degrading names can harm their self-esteem. It can be hard for girls to tell others if they have been a victim of harassment or assault, because many fear that no one will believe them.

All these issues have led to increased stress in young people and an increased need for professional mental health help. Even so, there are still not enough mental health and addiction professionals available.

## How Young People Can Help One Another

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While, as a young person, you are not expected to fill the role of a professional, there are many informal ways you can help friends, family members, and peers.

Talking with people about their feelings or problems and offering support is one way to help. Not all kids and teens feel comfortable talking with adults about their problems. Some may worry about being lectured or judged. Talking about risky behaviors can also lead to consequences. Admitting you smoke marijuana to a teacher or school counselor might result in disciplinary action. Talking with a friend or peer can feel easier and safer. For many young people, just talking about a problem can help them feel better and less alone, even if there isn't a clear solution.

You can also help when you see someone being bullied. You might step in and try to defuse the situation or find an adult if you think someone is in danger of being hurt.

You can ask, "Hey, what's going on?" as you walk toward the person being bullied. You can also help by telling people to "knock it off," inviting the person being bullied to walk away with you, checking in on them, or offering to help them report the bullying.

