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Teens make DVD about mental illness

Lois K. Solomon, Sun Sentinel

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Some mentally ill teens have a message for their depressed peers: It's time to come out.

They say there is no good reason to hide gloom, heartache, frustration or any other emotion keeping their peers down. A friend, a teacher or a school administrator likely is available to help them emerge from their loneliness.

The teens have produced and starred in "Breaking The Silence," a DVD sponsored by [Boca Raton's Promise](#), a nonprofit organization that assists youth in south [Palm Beach County](#). They hope schools will show the 21-minute film in the coming year and emphasize the importance not only of well-rounded academics but of a healthy emotional life.

"My hope is that one day we talk about mental illness as much as we talk about cancer, as a disease," said Haylee Becker, 17, a 2011 graduate of Atlantic High School in [Delray Beach](#) who has been diagnosed with depression and bipolar disorder. "It's too late for the school system to do things for me that would have made me healthier, but I hope they can start intercepting other kids at a younger age."

When she turned 13, Becker said, she started hating school and began skipping it. At 15 and 16, therapists ordered her into institutions because she was not taking her medications and had lengthy episodes of crying and refusing to get out of bed.

With help from counseling and medication, Becker said, her attitude has changed to accepting her disability instead of fighting it. She channels her energy to helping others and now attends Palm Beach State College, where she hopes to start a chapter of "Friends," [Boca Raton's Promise's](#) youth social club.

Mental illness among teens is more common than many people realize. One in 10 children and teens is depressed at any moment, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Almost 5 percent have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and another 5 percent Oppositional Defiant Disorder, or hostility to authority figures. Eating disorders affect about 2 percent of teens, while conduct disorders touch up to 4 percent.

Not treating mental diseases can have serious consequences: Suicide has become the third-leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Warning signs include depression, drugs, alcohol and personal losses.

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[Boca Raton](#)'s Promise's Friends club, which focuses on alleviating teen problems, has proven a valuable connection for youth seeking help. The DVD was made by students involved with the club, including Cavan Ammirati, a [Boca Raton](#) High School junior with ADHD, and Vickie Rusinova, a recent Atlantic High graduate who became deeply depressed at 10 after immigrating from Bulgaria.

"We became regulars to the group, but we realized we needed to reach a greater audience," Rusinova said. It took a year to script and produce the video.

The DVD is being reviewed by the [Palm Beach County](#) School District's chief academic officer to see if it is appropriate for schools, a district spokeswoman said.

Phil Heller, a forensic psychologist from [Boca Raton](#) who works with [Boca Raton](#)'s Promise, said school officials need an education in how to recognize symptoms of mental illness. Too often, he said, administrators blame drugs or alcohol for teen problems when there are complicated underlying causes.

"They should understand why the kids are acting out instead of blaming," Heller said. "These are real kids with real problems who are suffering."

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