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Teens living with anxiety or depression: an information community

I have been teaching for over 16 years now, the last four in middle school. In my own classroom and in discussions with other teachers, I find myself lamenting more and more the rise in the number of students I see who struggle with anxiety and depression at such early ages. According to Scott Poland, Ed.D. (2017), nearly 20% of all teens suffer from mental health issues such as anxiety or depression. When I translate this statistic into real numbers I can digest, it equates to 12 out of the 60 students I work with each year.



Secret from PostSecret.com

Teens who struggle with these issues don't run around announcing, "I'm so depressed," or "I'm feeling so anxious right now," even though, as Poland reports, most teens who have attempted suicide have given off warning signals. Unfortunately, many times the adults and peers on the receiving end of these signals did not recognize them leading up to the suicide attempt, or reported not knowing how to help. While some teens may be sending these flares up in what must feel like an isolated desert on a dark night, a robust information community of teens who

seek information about how to cope with anxiety and depression and how to find help does exist on the Internet. In their search for and use of social media websites, teens encounter others sharing similar experiences and those offering personal support, guidance, and information that connects them to professional organizations with robust services. This description adheres to the definition of information communities put forth by Fisher and Durrance (2003) in that these teens, and the organizations that seek to support them, have a common interest in the well-being of adolescents and in providing a place for teens to discuss what has often been viewed as the taboo or stigmatized topic of mental health.

The community of teens who struggle with anxiety and depression demonstrates the five characteristics of an information community as described by Durrance and Fisher (2003). The characteristics are summarized as follows:

- There is an emphasis on collaboration among diverse providers
- It has formed around information needs
- It exploits the information-sharing qualities of technology

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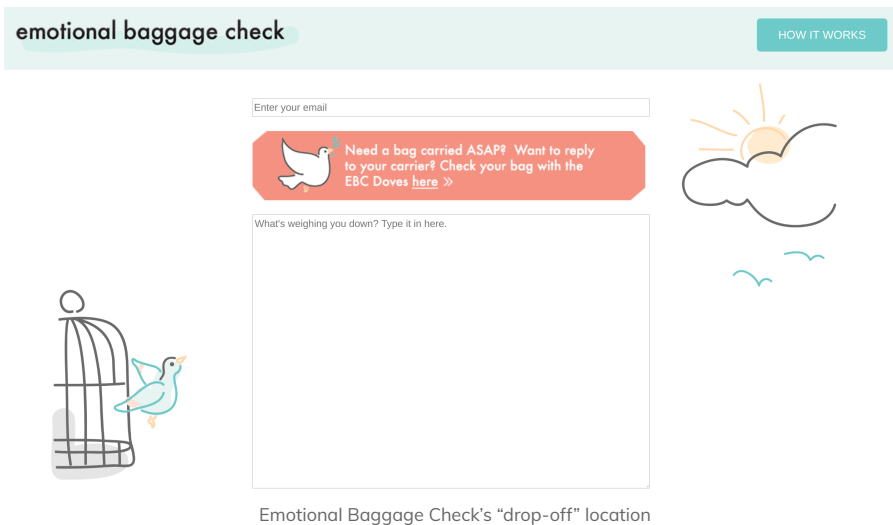
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- o It transcends barriers to information sharing
- o It fosters social connectedness

As I begin my research, I am struck by the huge sense of collaboration within this community. Teens (like adults) frequently turn to YouTube to get information and learn new things. A quick YouTube search for “anxiety coping” returns nearly 200,000 results. These vary, but many are produced by teens for teens. One, in particular, produced by [Meghan Rienks](#), has over 4.5 million views. In her summary of her video, she provides teens with a link to the website [Teen Health & Wellness](#) which provides teens with professionally vetted information about their health. This website has been critically acclaimed by several library organizations as well. Tumblr is another social media website that not only fosters connectedness among teens but also anticipates the information needs of teens. If a user searches with a hashtag such as #cutting or #suicide, the user is immediately directed to professional organizations that offer support in the form of hotlines, online chats, and educational information.

While teens may actively seek advice on how to cope with anxiety or depression, another information need for many teens is confirmation that they are not alone. Many of the social media websites utilized by teens provide this (more nebulous) kind of information. [PostSecret](#) allows its users to post their difficult-to-discuss stories or secret traumas so that others may read them. In this process of sharing, teens encounter others who have similar experiences from which they can learn. Users can also chat publicly or privately with other members. All of this can help to decrease the sense of isolation that teens struggling with anxiety and depression often feel.

Furthermore, [Emotional Baggage Check](#), a website designed to encourage problem-solving and kindness, is formatted so that users can “let go” of their emotional baggage by posting their stories along with their email address. Other users can read these stories and offer to “carry” the baggage. Doing so initiates a conversation between a person struggling with a problem—which can be seen as an information need as defined by T. D. Wilson—and a person who feels they can offer encouragement or support.



All of the above-mentioned sites (and these are just the tip of the iceberg) allow information seekers to transcend the normal barriers to information sharing. All of these sites allow for the use of screen names or anonymity to overcome the issue of privacy which can be of paramount importance to teens struggling with anxiety or depression. And all, of course, make creative use of technology for the purpose of information-sharing.

What I find incredibly interesting about this information community is how it can be viewed

through the various lenses of library and information science (LIS) scholars. If we take T. D. Wilson's summary of his own model of information behavior, we see he "perceives information seeking, searching and use as associated with the different stages of a goal-directed problem-solving process" (Wilson, 2000, p. 53). This information community has certainly formed around the seeking, searching, and use of information to solve a significant problem many teens and those that care about them face. Aspects of Elfreda Chatman's Theory of Life in the Round can also be observed in relation to this community. Though allowances need to be made for her definition of "small worlds," these teens do share common interests and often prefer "first level information . . . or hearsay from someone who is accepted as having knowledge of the matters to be discussed" (Savolainen, 2010, p. 1783) (i.e. another teen with a similar experience in dealing with depression). This desire and willingness to accept information more readily from human sources have been documented by others in LIS as well, such as Savolainen and Williamson (Savolainen, 2010, pp. 1782, 1784).

I look forward to delving into the information-seeking behavior and information needs of this community in future posts.

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