Troubled teens have help available in BR

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One to two youngsters in Baton Rouge seriously think about committing suicide each day, national averages indicate.

In Baton Rouge, immediate 24-hour help is available at The Phone, a suicide hotline, and two private mental health facilities, Parkland Hospital and CPC Meadow Wood.

People whose problems can wait until regular working hours have a choice of the Baton Rouge Crisis Intervention Center, community mental health centers and private psychologists or psychiatrists. LSU students can get help at the college’s Mental Health Center, and Southern University students can find help at the school’s Comprehensive Counseling Center.

Treatment costs vary.

Community mental health centers, Greenwell Springs Hospital, the Crisis Intervention Center and LSU Mental Health Center charge fees based on the patient’s ability to pay. Southern students get free help at their school’s center.

Parkland Hospital and CPC Meadow Wood charge more than $300 per day, although insurance can cover most or all of the costs.

The types of treatment vary as well. At The Phone, for instance, the goal is to help a youngster get through an immediate crisis.

Celia Maith, director of The Phone, said that when a trained volunteer receives a call, he first tries to find out what is wrong and how the caller is feeling.

The volunteer might repeat what he has heard, just to make sure he is in tune with the caller’s feelings, but he will not offer advice or say whether he thinks the problem is serious.

The volunteer then tries to focus on the caller’s behavior. If the caller cannot sleep, eat or concentrate, it indicates he is having trouble handling stress and may be a suicide risk.

The volunteer might ask if the caller has considered a way of resolving his

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problem. Should the caller respond that he is contemplating suicide, the volunteer might point out other options. Maith said a suicidal person sometimes is so upset or consumed with his problems that he is incapable of seeking assistance.

We try to help broaden (his) perspective," Maith said. If the caller still views suicide as his best alternative, the volunteer then might try to get the caller to commit to a "To Live Contract," in which the caller verbally agrees not to kill himself for a specific period of time, say the next 72 hours.

Dr. Arthur L. Rosentrantz, associate director of the LSU Mental Health Center, said he has found such verbal contracts a useful tool in helping suicidal people get through a crisis period.

"If you can say it and you mean it, then it's a good contract," Rosenentrantz said.

The volunteer also will try to persuade the caller to get help from a professional the next morning.

The volunteer, if satisfied with the way the caller is behaving, might end the conversation by telling the caller to telephone immediately if he again feels distressed. The volunteer also will ask if he can call back soon just to make sure the person is doing well.

Maith said one or two counselors might immediately visit a caller, but only under special circumstances, for instance, if the caller is alone and a high risk to himself, but not a risk to others.

Maith said she tries to let young people know about The Phone by speaking to students and nurses at Baton Rouge schools, by passing out bookmarks and by advertising on television and radio.

Maith said volunteers at The Phone receive a minimum of 60 hours of training. They are taught crisis intervention and suicide assessment techniques and how to trace a phone call, get in touch with Emergency Medical Services and get a person committed to a mental health hospital.

Maith said "The Phone's" volunteers, some of whom are psychologists, sociologists, engineers, social workers and college students, basically "help people to move through a crisis. It gives them a chance to get their problems out."

The Baton Rouge Crisis Intervention Center takes treatment a few steps further. Myron Mohr, the center's executive director, said that if a counselor determines a person is undergoing a lot of stress and not handling it well, he might help restructure the person's daily life.

The schedule would spell out when to eat, sleep and exercise, and is designed to help bring that person's life back to normal.

"A schedule adds structure to their life," Mohr said. "If a person is feeling helpless, hopeless or worthless, the chance of doing something or planning to do something is nil."

Mohr said he encourages exercise — either jogging, aerobics, swimming or biking — because it helps relieve stress, makes people eat and sleep better and improves self-esteem.

Mohr said a counselor might even develop a diet for a suicidal person, one with a low intake of caffeine and sugar and one rich in protein.

It also is important to get the person back in school or to work because that, too, helps a person establish a routine, he said.

Unless a patient is under constant stress, like a pregnant teen-age girl who plans to have the baby, most people make only six to eight visits to the Crisis Intervention Center.

Based on a person's income, each visit can range in cost from a minimal fee to $40 per hour.

Some of the suicidal patients go for additional counseling after they finish at the Crisis Intervention Center, and a few are referred to a private or state-run hospital, Mohr said.

"This is the first step toward longer-term treatment," Mohr said. "We stabilize the emotions so they can do effective problem solving."

At Parkland, CPC Meadow Wood and Greenwell Springs, treatment for adolescents includes group and individual counseling, art, crafts and music therapy; recreation; and a school program that keeps youngsters from falling behind in their classes.

As problems are discussed in group therapy, a young person often begins to realize what he has been alone in feeling a certain way. He learns that his peers have been able to cope and he begins to understand and copy these skills, officials said.

Dr. Douglas Dicharry, a child psychiatrist at CPC Meadow Wood, said young people also tend to talk freely with people their own age.

"It's a good icebreaker when kids get in groups," Dicharry said. "When they go into groups, it reassures them that they are not crazy. It debunks the stereotype."

Depending on the youngster's problem, he may learn about controlling his anger, saying "no" to drugs or alcohol, feeling good about himself or just learning to open up and talk about his problems. If the youth's problems involve a parent, then family counseling might be tried.

Dicharry said different programs are formulated to suit each patient's needs.

"We want them to get a handle on their problem," Dicharry said. "They often come in with only a preconceived notion and think there are no other alternatives to suicide."

"We try to develop other means of coping and give them hope that they can get over it."

Dr. Donald Hoppe, director of psychological services at Parkland, said youngsters take arts and crafts, music and gym because they often are able to express themselves through these activities.

"It helps them develop a self-image," he said.

Hoppe added that recreational sports like swimming, gymnastics or tennis help a young person learn how to effectively use his leisure time.

At Greenwell Springs, some youngsters are permitted to hold jobs like delivering supplies, painting curbs or doing secretarial work.

Dr. Jay C. Pennington, clinical director at Greenwell Springs, said these jobs "teach work skills and responsibility to youngsters.

In return, the youngsters are paid a salary, usually slightly less than minimum wage. Pennington said the salary is important "because many come from economically depressed families and it is often the only spending money they have."

At Parkland, the adolescent patients conduct a kind of government, complete with an elected president and vice-president. This structured forum allows youngsters to develop leadership qualities in an orderly fashion, including the ones they have with each other.

"This helps them learn to live in groups and solve problems," Hoppe said.

Usually, after three to six weeks, a youngster gradually is reacclimated to the community. He may go home for a weekend, to school for a few days, to the mall for an evening or to a special event like the rodeo or circus.

If all is well, the community goes smoothly, he might soon be ready to go home for good or be seen on an outpatient basis. There is no outpatient treatment at Parkland.

If the youngster is not ready to return home, he may go to a treatment center, perhaps at another facility.

Before treatment, a suicidal youngster often feels he does not have a person to whom he can turn or a place where he can go for help, Dicharry said.

But after several weeks of intensive intervention, suicidal youngsters no longer will be a risk, Dicharry said.

"If they develop one trusting relationship, let that person know what's going on, it can make a difference."