OPINION

A teen who asks for help shouldn't have to wait

By Yaaqov Lamb

Picture a 15-year-old typing a message to a support service late at night, after what was probably a long time of working up the courage. What comes next is the part nobody warns them about, which is the wait.

I'm not a therapist or a parent. I'm a communications graduate from Holon, and I'm helping build a small nonprofit called First Hello that tries to connect teens with support, so I have a stake in this. I'll come back to that at the end. First, I want to share what the numbers show.

In October, Clalit, Israel's largest health fund, reported that psychiatric emergency visits by its child and teen members rose 78.3% in the war's second year and 121.3% in the third, more than twice the prewar level. That counts visits rather than patients, so some of it may be the same kids coming back, but the same report found no significant change among adults, which suggests the young are carrying a heavier share of this. For a lot of them the emergency room is where they end up, because it's what's open when everything else is closed or too far away.

It isn't a handful of kids, either. A Bar-Ilan University study of 7,424 students in grades 7 to 12 found that 22.3% report symptoms at a level that points to post-traumatic stress, which is more than one in every five students in a classroom.

Then there's the wait. When the State Comptroller looked at mental health treatment through the health funds, it found a wait of six and a half months as of spring 2024. That figure covers all patients and not only teens, but anyone who remembers being fifteen knows how long half a year feels.

Many teens and parents never get as far as the waiting list. The Comptroller's 2025 audit found that 61.4% of parents whose children had difficulties did not turn to the local educational psychology service, even though 72% of parents of children aged 3 to 18 said they had noticed symptoms. To me that says a lot of the loss happens at the first step.

More professionals is the answer people usually give, and it's the right one. Clalit's report itself calls for more psychiatrists, psychologists and therapists. The problem is that they take years to train, and a teenager who reaches out this week can't wait that long.

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So I'd like to ask for three things, all of them about that first step.

The first is a public standard from the Ministries of Health and Education: when a teen reaches out, a real person answers within three days. Right now most teens can't tell how long they'll wait, and not knowing is often reason enough to give up.

The second is a way in that doesn't require a phone call. Many teenagers won't call a stranger to say the hardest thing in their life, but an anonymous text or chat is a much lower bar, and a lower bar means more of them will try.

The third is for municipalities and schools to give counselors and youth leaders one clear place to send a teen, so that no adult has to guess.

A chat on WhatsApp is not therapy. It's a door. I know someone will say a text isn't enough for a teen in real danger, and they're right, which is why any first contact has to hand the teen to a trained professional quickly and give the number for ERAN, Israel's 24-hour emotional first-aid line, every time: 1201.

Here is my stake. First Hello is built around exactly this idea, and our goal is a first conversation within 72 hours of a teen's first message. We haven't launched and we have no results yet, so I'm not asking anyone to take my word for it. I'm asking for the standard to be set, whether by us or by anyone else, so teens know what to expect.

A teenager shouldn't have to end up in an emergency room to be taken seriously. When one of them writes that first message, someone should answer it.

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