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## **Teens find support in cyberspace**

By Christine Morente, STAFF WRITER

SAN MATEO — In an 11-by-17 room painted violet, two girls sit at their computers and chat online.

With their textbooks pushed off to the side and an adult watching behind them, they comfortably talk to other teens about pertinent issues.

Breakups. Depression. Self-harm. Homosexuality. Suicide.

"Tinkerbell" and "Hyacinth" say they are there for you.

Outside of school, they're two of 12 teens who spend much of their time at onyourmind.net, a 2-month-old Web site that features an online chat, where teens can talk to other teens. Because of confidentiality, they asked to use their screen names.

"A lot of people have no one to talk to," said Hyacinth, 16, of Foster City. "I can't tell them what they can do, I just listen and be there (for them)."

An offshoot of the crisis hot line, the San Mateo-based site seems to be the only medium where teens can talk about their problems and get accurate information about suicide and other mental health issues online.

Started by the Youth and Family Enrichment Services, Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention Center, the Web site was created by the youth volunteers.

It attracts teens who are between 14 and 16 years old, said Lisa Carlton, program manager for the Crisis Center.

"We knew teens prefer talking to other teens," she said. "While we know that attempted suicide is a big problem — and at a higher rate (in San Mateo County) — we tried to think what was attractive to youth. We have the youth phone line, but so many other sites that are run by other youths don't have accurate information. This is a unique delivery of the program."

So after a year of research by the Youth Outreach Team, the Crisis Center got funding from the Foundation Incubator and from the Sand Hill Foundation. Cost to run the site is \$70,000 a year. They're halfway to their funding goal, Carlton said.

Fourteen teens — two of whom have left for college — from local high schools were chosen and completed 40 hours of training. They volunteer 15 hours a month.

Carlton said youth suicide attempts stem from the pressure for families to make ends meet, and the loss of a relative, job, boyfriend or girlfriend.

"With adolescents, they are impulsive," Carlton said. "With the combination of depression and impulsiveness, that can be complicated. They have no experience of going through a certain experience to develop coping mechanisms."

Calls to the hot line and chat room visits are going up. Since November, the Web site has received 167,500 hits

and had 137 chatters, many of them out-of-state. In October, 93 teens talked online.

With an adult supervisor, the teen volunteers have access to resources, different agencies, and organizations nationwide.

"My role is to listen and to help them if I can," said "Becky," 16, of San Carlos. "I just have to like really be careful not to offend them or bring them down or that their problems seem unimportant. If teens want to call in or talk to teen, we're available to talk."

The chat room is open Monday through Thursdays, 4 to 10 p.m. To become a volunteer, visit [www.onyourmind.net](http://www.onyourmind.net).

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