Texting to Save Lives

By Donald M. Fitch, MS
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At a family dinner, my granddaughter Sarah, a high school sophomore in Fairfield, CT, and I were talking about the tragedy in Sandy Hook. She asked me, "Why?"

I talked about the need for school programs for early detection and prevention, but I had no real answers or solutions.

Later, I searched several terms online in hopes of finding some answers. I was surprised to learn that "1 in every 20 teens either made plans to kill themselves or actually attempted suicide, and that fear, anger, distress, disruptive behavior, and substance abuse were predictors of suicidal behavior." (M. Nock, JAMA Psychiatry, January 2013)

I also learned that according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents, taking more than 4,100 lives each year. (Healthfinder.gov)

Some of the answers I found appeared on 24/7 hotlines that encouraged callers to speak to their parents, teacher, counselor or doctor. (American Association of Suicidology)

A disturbing article in the NY Times (D. Murphy, Child Trends 2013, NY Times 6/19/2013) cited a national survey that found among the high school class of 2013:

• 71% experienced physical assault

• 39% had been bullied

• 29% felt "sad and hopeless"

• 28% were sexually assaulted

The more I learned the more helpless and frustrated I felt. What would make a difference in the lives of thousands of teens?

We had a thought; what if we created a sticker of a hotline that you could stick on the back of a cell phone? Old cells have 1"x2" space; smart phones a 2"x4" space.

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I contacted Lifeline, the leading National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, administered by the Mental Health Association in New York City.

Sunitha Menon, MSW, Program Manager of the Crisis Text Line at Link2Health Solutions, MHA said they would be moving into texting following their launch of their chat programs and we were welcome to produce a Lifeline sticker for research purposes.

We produced a hundred 1"x2" stickers at about 10 cents each (see photo).

Sarah Fitch

Sarah conducted several interviews with her classmates to explore their reactions to a cell phone sticker that would have a text number on it, and I conducted several focus groups of young people at the Center for Career Freedom:

• "I would definitely call if I saw someone who needed help, like a friend who drank too much alcohol or an abusive guy"

• "I text about 3,000 times a month; I rarely email or phone my friends; texting is quicker, cheaper, and anonymous"

• "I think most teens know if a classmate is having problems before their parents do. The Lifeline sticker could make us like, first responders"

• "I'm embarrassed to snitch on my classmates, but if they were in deep trouble and I could alert someone anonymously, I would do it"

• "I know a few teens that need help with drinking & drugging. I think one is a cyber-bully; another steals stuff"

• "Teens are more comfortable texting their thoughts—no one around you knows what you're texting"

• "I know several girls in my school who struggle with depression, and one boy who's always getting into fights and acting out Mortal Combat fantasies"

I also interviewed several teachers, a school psychologist and several mental health professionals. They thought the cell phone sticker would prove to be an effective tool to help more teens get the professional help they need sooner, before their situation becomes critical.

Jeremy Willinger, Director of Communications and Marketing at MHA of NYC said it best, "The Lifeline sticker accomplishes a necessary goal of making people more aware of this life-saving service, available anytime, anywhere, anyplace. For over a million Americans this year alone, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline will be their beacon of hope during their darkest hour. Having a reminder on your phone is a great way to keep the service top of mind when you or a friend is in crisis."
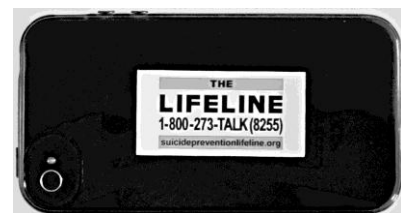
**The Lifeline Sticker
on the back of a cell phone**