

# A Second Life for Teen Depression

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By the time she was 16, Sarah had dropped out of high school, was living on the streets of London, Ont., and abusing drugs.

During a hospital stay after an overdose, she learned about a new Web-based program that blends social networking with expert advice on teens' mental-health issues. The program, says Sarah, who asked that her real name not be used, led her to discover that she had been self-medicating her depression with street drugs.

Almost three years later, she is clean and sober, off the street and working full-time. She is taking Prozac to deal with depression and anxiety.

"A lot of parents will just say, 'Oh, it's a teenage thing,' " she says. "They don't take it seriously."

As recognition of the prevalence of mental-health problems in children and teens grows, health and social service providers are seeking new ways to reach those at risk. Many programs are following teens to their favourite hangout: the Internet.

The London-based site that helped Sarah, [mindyourmind.ca](http://mindyourmind.ca), now has profiles on MySpace and Facebook, and testimonials by teens on YouTube. In the United States, at least one university professor is offering a mental-health class inside the popular virtual world Second Life.

Even mental-health researchers are turning to the Internet to look for teen subjects. At Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, doctors posted on [craigslist.org](http://craigslist.org) to recruit teenagers for a five-year study on first episodes of major, or clinical, depression called the Blue Sky Project.

The idea of navigating the grown-up world of psychologists and psychiatrists is terrifying to many teenagers, says Maria Luisa Contursi, [mindyourmind.ca](http://mindyourmind.ca) project manager. "Kids are afraid of bricks and mortar," she says. "They're not sure what's behind that door."

In Ontario, of the estimated 530,000 children and adolescents who have treatable mental illnesses, only 150,000 are getting care, according to Michael Bagby, lead psychologist on the Blue Sky Project at CAMH.

The Canadian Paediatric Society projects the number of mental-illness cases will increase by 50 per cent by the year 2020.

The growing numbers are due in part to better recognition and a decreasing stigma attached to mental-health issues. But problems such as depression, eating disorders and substance abuse are showing up at younger ages, says Marshall Korenblum, a child psychiatrist at Toronto's Hincks-Dellcrest Centre. "It's a phenomenon," he says.

Young adulthood is the period of greatest risk for the onset of serious mental illness, including major depression, Dr. Bagby says.

That's also the best time to start treatment, experts say.

Among young people who go untreated, more than half will go on to suffer recurrent episodes throughout their adult lives, Dr. Bagby says.

Untreated, those who suffer two depressive episodes face a five-fold risk of recurrence.

In the Blue Sky Project, the subjects recruited on craigslist.org will be offered treatment, giving CAMH a template for how more young people might be reached.

Hoping to attract students while they are searching for used bikes or second-hand furnishings for university dorm rooms, Dr. Bagby's posting seeks people who are having trouble concentrating and getting out of bed in the morning.

Dr. Bagby and others say it can be hard to get to teens. School outreach programs are beset by red tape and parental-consent issues.

"The previous studies I've done, we didn't use the Internet at all," Dr. Bagby says. "Now, we're almost exclusively Internet."

Once they can get young people through the door, they can help them with their mental-health issues.

"We say, 'Look, this happens to people. It's a treatable condition. You can get better. It's not just you,' " Dr. Bagby says.

These kinds of initiatives are the future of youth mental-health outreach, says Ron Comer, who directs the behavioural health counselling program at the College of Nursing and Health Professions at Drexel University in Philadelphia. He has taken his program, which teaches future therapists and counsellors to identify illnesses such as schizophrenia, into Second Life.

The 60-year-old's avatar holds court in a room full of posters and resources, including a virtual poster he requested from [mindyourmind.ca](http://mindyourmind.ca). He says the website has no peer in the United States.

Prof. Comer says the sites that teens visit play a crucial role. Even teachers who deal with kids daily can have a tough time sifting through symptoms and behaviours.

"When you tell teachers what to look for, they will say, 'That describes about 90 per cent of my class. How am I to tell which one might be suicidal?'"

But for a teenager, he says, a website can be "an environment where they feel better about coming forward."

Early users such as Sarah are offering input on how services work for a savvy, yet hard-to-reach demographic.

Sarah, whose feedback was rolled back into the site, is now visiting schools as a peer outreach counsellor for [mindyourmind.ca](http://mindyourmind.ca), a program under the umbrella of the Family Service Thames Valley.

"People come up to us after we talk," she says. "I'm pretty sure we help a lot of people."