

A bright spot for teens

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EVEN IF you're one of the lucky, healthy kids, high school is hard: it's a fishbowl, filled with academic pressures and social pressures and hormones.

If you're a kid who struggles with mental illness, high school can be intolerable.

This is one of the lessons from the case of Phoebe Prince, the South Hadley High student whose tormentors took plea deals last week. As the bullies' case trudged through the courts and the media, one galling defense kept coming up: that Phoebe had a history of mental health problems, long before she hanged herself in the winter of 2010.

How Phoebe's illness could somehow have exonerated mean kids, or let adults off the hook for tolerating meanness, is a mystery. Phoebe was precisely the kind of person her school should have tagged as vulnerable, monitored closely, and taken extra pains to protect.

And what if that had happened — if South Hadley High had been a place where Phoebe went when she *wanted* to feel safe? There's a model for this sort of safety zone, and it has existed since 2003 at Brookline High School.

The program is called BRYT (pronounced "Bright"), and it stands for "Brookline Resilient Youth Team." It's a joint venture between the high school and the Brookline Community Mental Health Center, a room off the school lobby, staffed full-time by social workers. Pre-approved kids can go to that room whenever they need, no questions asked — to escape from daily pressures, confide in adults, manage schoolwork without having to go to class.

And while the program is clearly useful for bullying victims, it serves a larger population, too. Over the course of their high school careers, a whopping 10 percent of kids face emotional problems that are serious enough to keep them from functioning, says Dr. Henry White, the BRYT director.

Some of those kids are skilled at hiding their pain — until, for some reason, they can't. Last week, I spoke to Alice, a charming, chatty senior who has suffered from depression and anxiety since third grade. She was always a conscientious student, nonetheless. Most of her friends have no idea what she's been through. "I do an excellent job of looking extremely happy," she told me.

So when depression hit her like an anvil at the start of senior year — compounded by the stress of college applications, shifting friendships, and an illness in the family — she couldn't muster the energy to mask her sadness. Some mornings, she couldn't get out of bed.

That's when her mother signed her up for BRYT. Sometimes, Alice would spend entire days there, doing schoolwork at her own pace. Some days, she'd make it to a single class. The social workers listened, offered advice, worked with her teachers to modify assignments. If she'd had a rough morning, her mother could call and ask the adults to check in with her. One morning, when Alice felt too weak to travel into school, social worker Annie Eagle went to her house to pick her up.

As many kids do when they get the right support, Alice made it through the roughest patch. She emerged a confident 17-year-old who is headed to college next year, armed with uncommon self-knowledge. When she chose a college, she made sure to pick a place where mental health services are readily available, just in case.

BRYT isn't just for students with mental health issues; it also serves students with physical injuries or illnesses that keep them out of class for awhile. But for kids with depression or bipolar disorder, BRYT represents a special gift: proof that their school hasn't abandoned them at precisely the time when they need support the most.

Of course, there's a cost: BRYT costs \$150,000 a year to run, a bargain when you consider that the students might otherwise be in special ed classes or private, off-site programs on the school system's dime. Red Sox manager Terry Francona is helping with a fundraiser.

And word about BRYT has steadily been spreading. There are now similar programs in Lexington, Natick, Needham, Sharon, Wellesley, and Wayland. Oklahoma City has inquired. So has a suburb of Cleveland.

Note to South Hadley High: They're ready to take your call.

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