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What about me? : the final question of a suicidal teen

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What about me? : the final question of a suicidal teen

Abstract

Adolescents need access to vital information on how to help a friend who is contemplating suicide. They need to be able to identify the signs and seek assistance from an understanding adult.

This research project, *What About Me? The final question of a suicidal teen*, was designed to determine whether reading an adolescent novel can educate teens about depression and suicide awareness. I wrote the adolescent novel so young adolescents would be able to relate to the main character and learn from her mistakes.

What About Me? The final question of a suicidal teen.

A Graduate Project

Submitted to the

Division of Middle School/Junior High School Education

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

By

Peggy Ann Kleve

July 2000

This Research Project by: Peg Kleve

Titled: What About Me? The final question of a suicidal teen.

Has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

7-28-00

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Date Approved

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And Instruction

Abstract

Adolescents need access to vital information on how to help a friend who is contemplating suicide. They need to be able to identify the signs and seek assistance from an understanding adult. By speaking to teens through a fictional book, they can be provided with information on the scope of the problem, how they can help a suicidal friend, and where they should turn. It may also help teens who are suicidal recognize the fact that they need help, and encourage them to turn to a trusted friend or adult.

This research project: *What About Me?* The final question of a suicidal teen was designed to determine whether reading an adolescent novel can educate teens about suicide awareness. I wrote the adolescent novel so young adolescents would be able to relate to the main character and learn from her mistakes.

The purpose of this project was to find a way to educate adolescents about depression and suicide awareness outside of a public education system. The participants in the project completed pre and post surveys to determine their understanding of suicide awareness. All of the students were given a pamphlet informing them of the signs and symptoms of someone who has suicidal thoughts. The data collected on the surveys was analyzed to determine the percentage of change from the pre to post surveys in both the control and experimental groups.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Charline Barnes, University of Northern Iowa, for all of her words of encouragement, patience, and dedication. Early on, you proved to be a valuable asset to my graduate project. I wholeheartedly appreciate the time you have invested in the novel and my project.

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Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Chad Kleve, for being so patient, understanding, and supportive of the rigorous schedule I have kept the family on this past year. The kids, Brandon, Taylor, Clint, and Nathan needed you when I was buried in homework or research and you never let them down. I would not have been able to survive this past year without you cheering me on or holding me and wiping away the tears when the stress got the best of me. Thank you for being so incredible.

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What About Me? The final question of a suicidal teen.

Introduction

Chapter 1

Suicide has been an issue that I have had to deal with personally for a long time. As a teenager, I was suicidal. I had no idea what was happening or why I felt the way I did. I can remember crying and wondering why no one could see that I was hurting inside and that I really didn't want to live anymore. The only person I told was my younger sister. She was too young to realize the severity of my depression and when I made her promise not to tell anyone, she didn't. At this time, there were no educational programs available in the middle schools or high schools to help adolescents understand what depression and suicide was or what signs to watch for. Somehow I was able to make it through the difficult feelings on my own.

As a young adult, I had to deal with my mom's severe depression. She tried to take her life six times. This time, I had to face depression and suicide from the other side. We had to get mom the help she needed and find ways to get her to fight for reasons to survive. The medical field did everything they could with antidepressants and counseling. The rest was up to the family. We had to supervise, care, watch, and even yell at her at times.

When I became a driver education teacher, I found that some of my students were depressed and turned to me for help. With the closeness the driver education car provided, I became an adult the students could relate to and confide in. Some of the students had no idea that they were feeling was called "depression", but after talking with the school counselor and seeing their doctor, they were able to get the help they needed.

The more I had to face suicide, the more I realized that depression is not made public and those who are suffering must do so alone. That is the worst thing that could happen. Tipper Gore, took a stand to bring about an awareness of depression and mental illness in the United States and spoke at the White House Conference on Mental Health at Howard University in June of 2000. Hillary Clinton, the First Lady, and Al Gore, the Vice President also spoke at the conference. This has helped, but the educational system in the United States is still shying away from depression and suicide awareness.

Researching depression and suicide and trying to gain entry into the school systems has made me realize that the public still has many misconceptions that need to be overcome. The only way this can be accomplished is by talking about the issue. Keeping quiet is not going to prevent suicides. It will just shock everyone when it happens. Talking about suicide is not going to cause a person to take his/her life. The warning signs are there, people just need to know how to recognize them and get help for the person who is suffering with suicidal thoughts.

Review of Related Literature

Chapter 2

Teenage suicide is the second leading cause of death for adolescents age 15-19 (King, 1999). A suicidal adolescent is any child, ages 10-19, who has ever considered ending their life. A completed suicide is a child who has successfully ended his/her life. From 1980-1992, there was a 28% increase of suicide for this age group, and a 120% increase for adolescents age 10-14 (King, 1999).

According to King, when an adolescent talks of his/her death, he/she needs to be taken seriously. Most who contemplate suicide want to end their psychological pain, but do want to continue living (King, 1999). Each year in the United States, for every completed suicide, there are 100-200 attempts (King, 1999). In 1994, there were 2,270 adolescents under the age of 20 who completed suicide in the United States (King, 1999). Since 1 in 8 teens are clinically depressed, most schools need to be aware of the signs of suicide (Dubuque, 1998). Schools need to protect the health and safety of their students (Gust & Cross, 1999). More lives could be saved if the teachers and fellow students could recognize the signs and know how to report an adolescent who is contemplating suicide.

Teenage children are committing suicide in increasing numbers. It is the second leading cause of death for adolescents aged 15-19. According to K. A. King (1999), nine out of every 10 teens who are suicidal give warning signs. Most want to end their psychological pain (King, 1999) but still go on living. An adolescent who has attempted suicide in the past is 84% more likely to try it

again. One third to one half of all adolescents who complete suicide have tried before (King, 1999). There is no specific socio-economic group or gender of adolescents that are completing suicide. There has been a 28% increase in 15-19 yr. olds and a 120% increase in 10-14 yr. olds who have completed suicide from 1980-1992 (King, 1999).

There are so many myths about suicide that people fail to understand the underlying problems. Most adolescents who complete suicide are relatively rational and coherent at the time of death (King, 1999). Depression increases the risk of suicidal tendencies in adolescents (Huff, 1999). According to Dubuque (1998), 1 in every 8 teens is clinically depressed. "Clinical depression is when five or more depressive symptoms are present which impairs a teen's current functioning and lasts for at least two weeks" (Culp, Clyman, & Culp, 1995). Due to extensive pressures and perfectionism, talented and gifted teenagers may have difficulty coping with loss or perceive that they are failing in school when in all actuality they are doing very well (Huff, 1999). Although most educators and counselors would agree that these students seem to be well adapted, 10% of their talented and gifted teenagers are clinically depressed (Huff, 1999).

Researchers agree that schools need to be more responsible and train teens in recognizing the warning signs of suicide. Schools must protect the health and safety of their students (Gust-Brey & Cross, 1999). Investigations have indicated that some schools have even been held legally liable for a student's suicide if they knew the risk was there but failed to assist in the

students' emotional well-being. Since 75% of students would turn to a friend if they were contemplating suicide, it seems obvious that the teenagers themselves need to be taught how to handle this life-threatening situation (King, 1999).

However, most schools do not provide students with information on how to deal with a suicidal friend. Since adolescents are the ones who have to deal with a suicidal friend, it is important that they are informed on where to seek help.

Therefore, adolescents need access to vital information on how to help a friend who is contemplating suicide. They need to be able to identify the signs and seek assistance from an understanding adult. By speaking to teens through a young adult novel, the information can be provided directly to the reader at his/her level of understanding and pace. The teenager can relate the problems to his/her own life and past experiences. A novel can provide the teenager with information on the scope of the problem, how he/she can help a suicidal friend, and where he/she should turn. Information presented in a literary format may also help teens that are suicidal recognize the fact that they need help, and encourage them to turn to a trusted friend or adult.

Research Methods

Chapter 3

The purpose of this project was to find a way to educate adolescents about depression and suicide awareness outside of a public education system. If the schools are not providing the information because it is a controversial issue, the adolescents need to have access to the information through alternative means. I wrote a young adolescent book about a 12-year old girl who tries to commit suicide. After the novel was completed, I evaluated how well it informed teens about suicide awareness by having students complete a survey, read the novel, and then take the survey again.

Participants

Participants for this study were fifth-grade students in an Iowa community. The community consists primarily of small farms. There is very little cultural or racial diversity. There are approximately 60 students in the fifth grade at this rural community school in Iowa. They were divided into two classes. The groups were selected through a convenience sample, the predetermined class assignments. One class was designated the experimental group and the other was the control group. The students who returned the parent consent forms were admitted into the project (see Appendix A).

In the control group, there were 14 students: 11 females and three males. In the experimental group, there were 17 students that took the pre-survey: 12 were females and five males. On the post-survey there were twelve students: ten females and two males.

Surveys/Pamphlet

The effectiveness of a fictional book involving a character that attempted suicide was determined by comparing the pre-survey and the post-survey results between the control and the experimental groups. The pre and post surveys included the same questions but in a different order. The fifteen questions were designed using the Student Awareness/Voices in Education-SAVE educational material that was provided by the agency (see Appendix B). The questions were written in an agree/disagree format in order to determine whether the student has any misconceptions about suicide awareness. Each question was written as fact or fiction responses to more easily determine whether the student gained any knowledge about suicide awareness by reading the novel.

Both classes answered pre-survey questions (see Appendix C) about depression and suicide. Each class was given a pamphlet about depression and suicide published by SAVE (see Appendix B), but there was no discussion or class time spent on reviewing the information. When the week was complete and the experimental group had finished the novel, both classes were given the post-survey (see Appendix D).

Lori, the guidance counselor at the school supervised the project and issued all of the materials to the participants.

The Novel

The experimental group then read the novel "What about Me? The final question of a suicidal teen" (see Appendix E) written by Peg Kleve, the project coordinator. The experimental group was given one week to finish reading the

novel during their guidance period and free reading time at school. There were no comprehension questions or discussion about the novel. The experimental group also completed a feedback questionnaire (see Appendix F) about the novel.

The novel written for young adolescents is about a 12-year-old girl who tries to commit suicide. She explains how she feels about herself, life, and why she wants to die through a personal diary. At her middle school, her advisory program will be talking about self-esteem, depression, and suicide. This is where statistics and educational information on suicide awareness and prevention was introduced. It is also where the readers learned how to help a suicidal person. The novel took the readers through the feelings and emotions of everyone involved with a suicide attempt. In the end, the suicidal teen returned to school and faced the classmate who saved her life.

Chapters in the Novel

Chapter 1	<i>Dear Diary</i>
Chapter 2	Snowball Pride
Chapter 3	Do I Like Myself?
Chapter 4	Billy the "Pain"
Chapter 5	What's to Like?
Chapter 6	Mom Runs My Life
Chapter 7	Hide and Go Seek
Chapter 8	Hopes of a Friend
Chapter 9	Am I Depressed?

Chapter 10	Homework HELP
Chapter 11	The Plan
Chapter 12	Just Leave Me Alone!
Chapter 13	What About Me?
Chapter 14	A Cry Too Late?
Chapter 15	Fight for Life
Chapter 16	A School in Pain
Chapter 17	Second Chances
Chapter 18	The 5 th Floor
Chapter 19	Never Alone
Chapter 20	Breaking Free
Chapter 21	New Start
Chapter 22	A Friend for Life

Time Schedule

Due to the difficulty finding a school district that was willing to participate in the study, the students were placed under a stiff time constraint. They completed the whole project in a week because their last day of school was May 29.

Select Participants:	May 5
Pre-survey:	May 22
Handout pamphlets to be read:	May 22
Give the experimental group the novel to read:	May 22
Post-survey:	May 29

Results

Chapter 4

Surveys/Pamphlet

After the results of the pre and post surveys were compiled, it showed that there was no significant increase in suicidal awareness in either the control group or the experimental group. However, the females did show a slightly greater level of understanding than did the males. This could be due to the fact that the males in the experimental group had a higher mortality rate in the study or because the main character in the book was a female. One female student was absent on the day the post-survey was administered. Three of the male students from the experimental group decided not to read the book. When looking at the average score from the different groups, there did appear to be a small increase in understanding in the experimental group.

Novel Feedback Sheet

Not all of the students completed the novel feedback sheets because they were given to the students on their last day of school. However, there were three female students that did complete it. The following questions are followed by the actual student responses:

1. Did you like the novel? Why?
 - Yes, it is very descriptive and interesting.
 - Yes, it was fun to read about. It was also scary.
 - Yes, because it teaches some people a lesson.
2. What was your favorite part?

- When the boy who teased her confessed that he thought she was cute.
- When Laura came over to talk to Ashley when she was babysitting.
- When she found friends and had an admirer.

3. What didn't you like about the novel?

- Nothing.
- The part where she had to stay in that hospital.
- It was sad.

4. Did the novel teach you anything about suicide prevention or depression?

- Yes.
- Yes.
- (The student did not answer.)

5. What would you change about the story if you could?

- Someone stopped her before she took the pills.
- Nothing, I like it the way it is.
- Yes, it is dangerous.

6. Do you have any suggestions for the author about the novel?

- No.
- No. I did enjoy reading the book.

- No.

I was informed by Lori, the guidance counselor that only half of the books were returned to her at the end of the project. The students wanted to keep them. When the project was finished and all of the students had completed the post-survey, the control group did ask to read the novel and were allowed to do so. Lori also informed me that some of the parents asked to read the novel and they thought it was very informative and gave them an avenue to discuss the topic with their children.

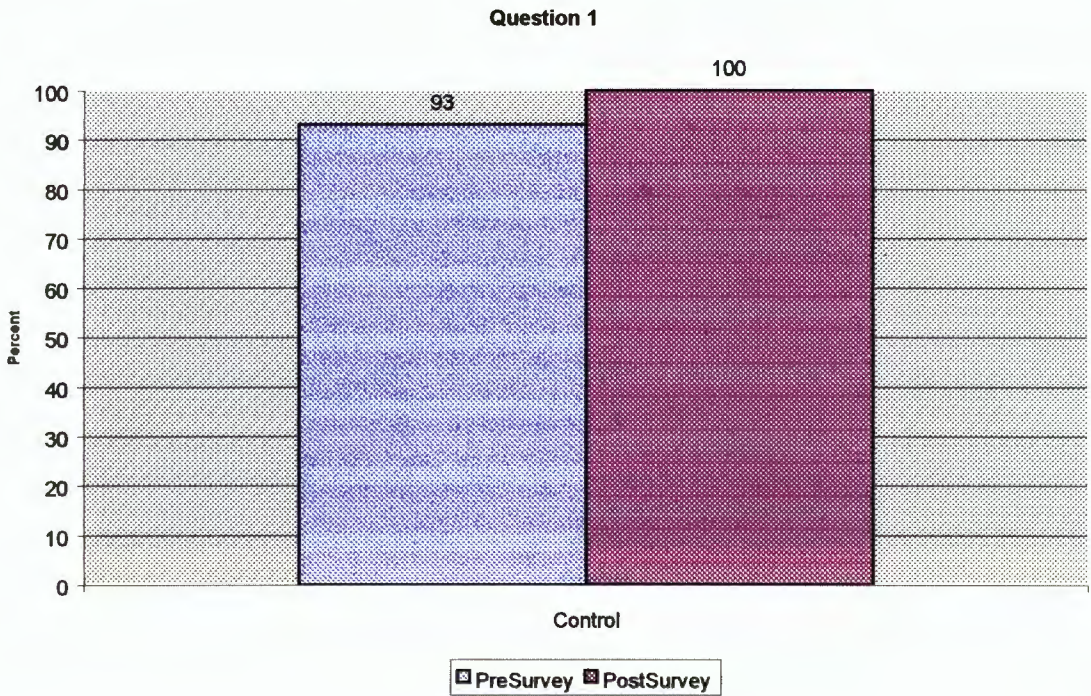
So, although the changes in the percentages for the experimental group were relatively small, I believe that on a larger scale the changes would be more significant. Also, after receiving the results of the surveys, changes were made in the actual novel so some of the misconceptions may be alleviated with this change. By doing so, I do not believe the experimental group would have shown any decreases in their understanding of suicide or depression.

All of the information included in the novel was provided to the students through the SAIVE pamphlet (see Appendix B). The pamphlet explained why people kill themselves, why they attempt suicide, whether suicidal people can hide their depression, if suicide is more likely if a family member or close friend has committed suicide, why depression and suicide are not talked about, if "talking things out" is a cure for depression, and if a person can be stopped if their mind is made up about committing suicide. It also explains the common misconceptions of suicide, the symptoms of major depression, and the danger signs of suicide. The results showed that neither group benefited from the

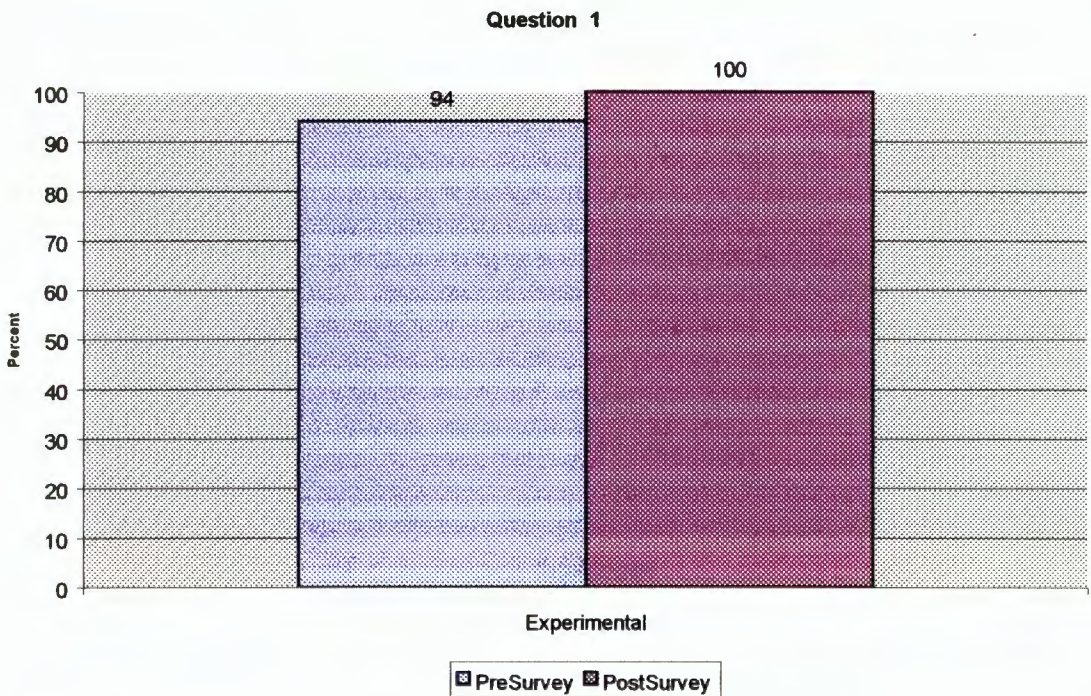
material covered in the pamphlet since the pre-survey and post-survey were developed using the information provided by SAVE in the handout.

The following graphs indicate the change between the pre-survey and the post-survey for both the experimental and control groups. The graphs indicate the percentage of students that answered the survey question correctly, or agreed with the true statements. The graph numbers match the question numbers on the pre-survey.

Graph 1 Control and Experimental Groups

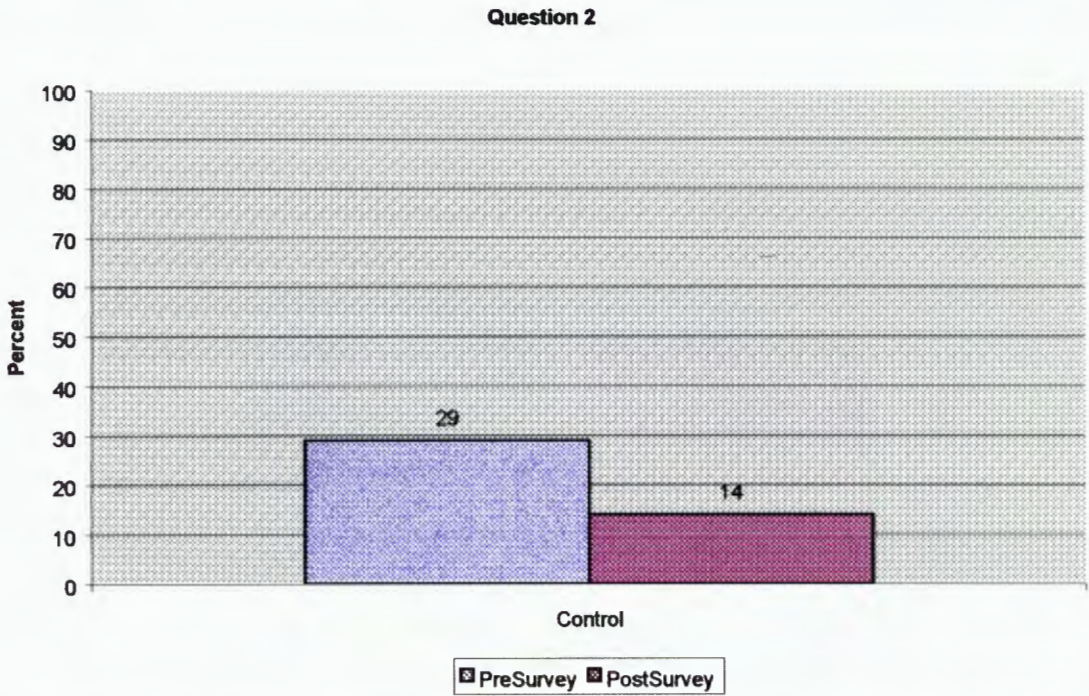


The control group showed a 7% increase in their understanding of depression.

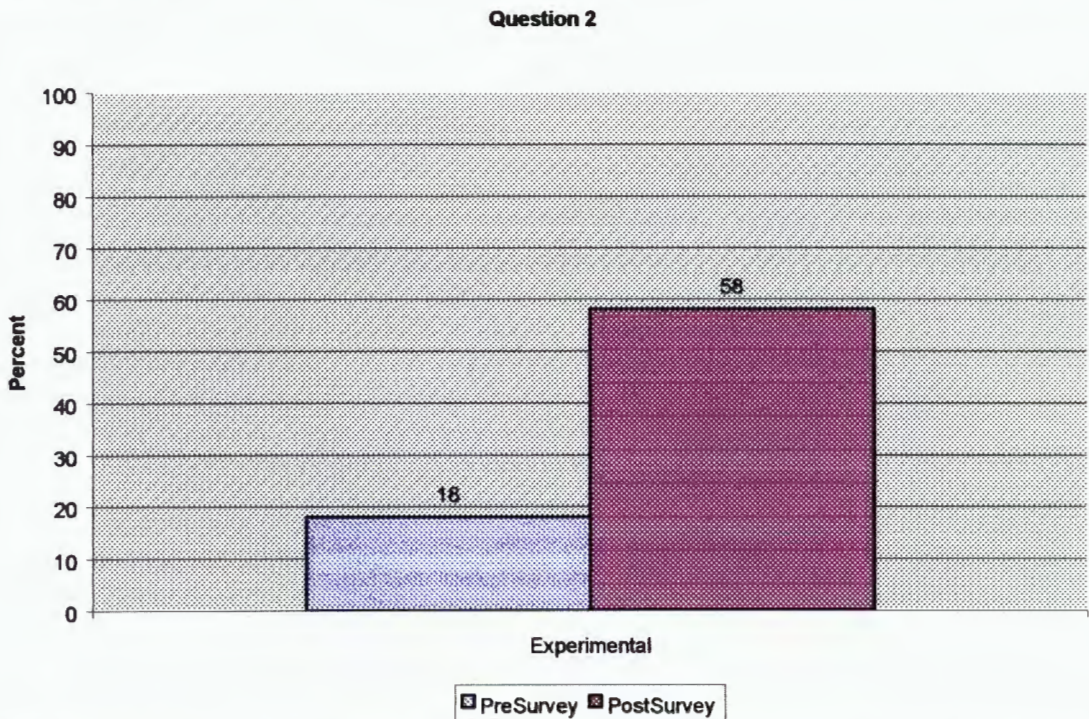


The experimental group showed a 6% increase in their understanding of depression.

Graph 2 Control and Experimental Groups

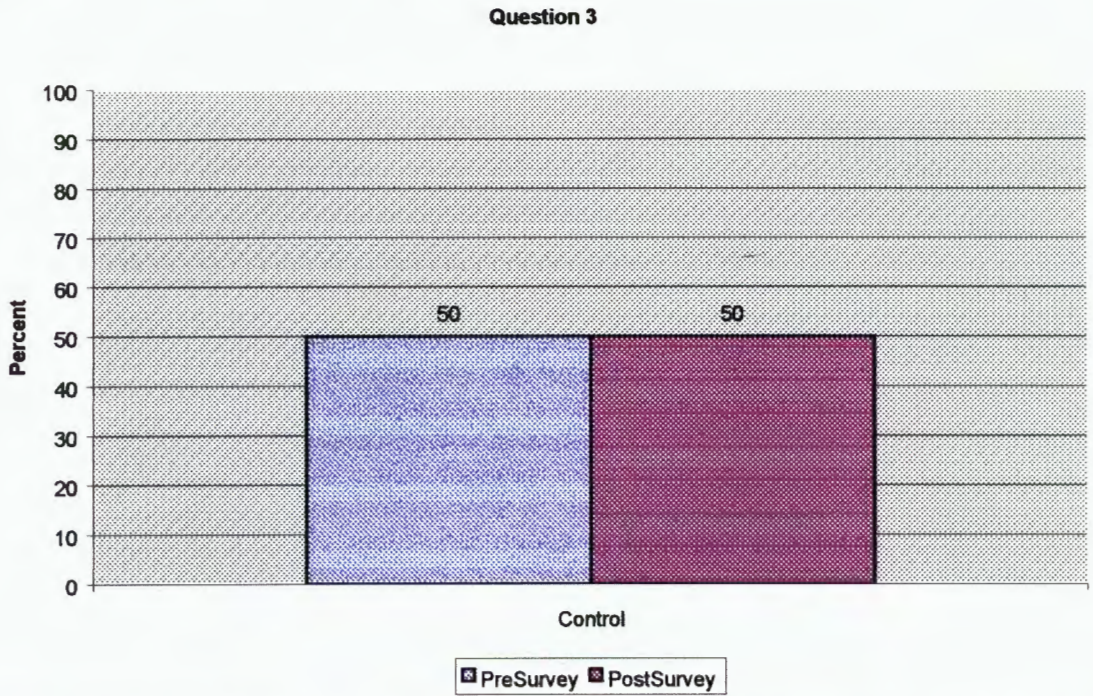


The control group showed a 15% decrease in their awareness that teens give verbal warning signs of suicide.

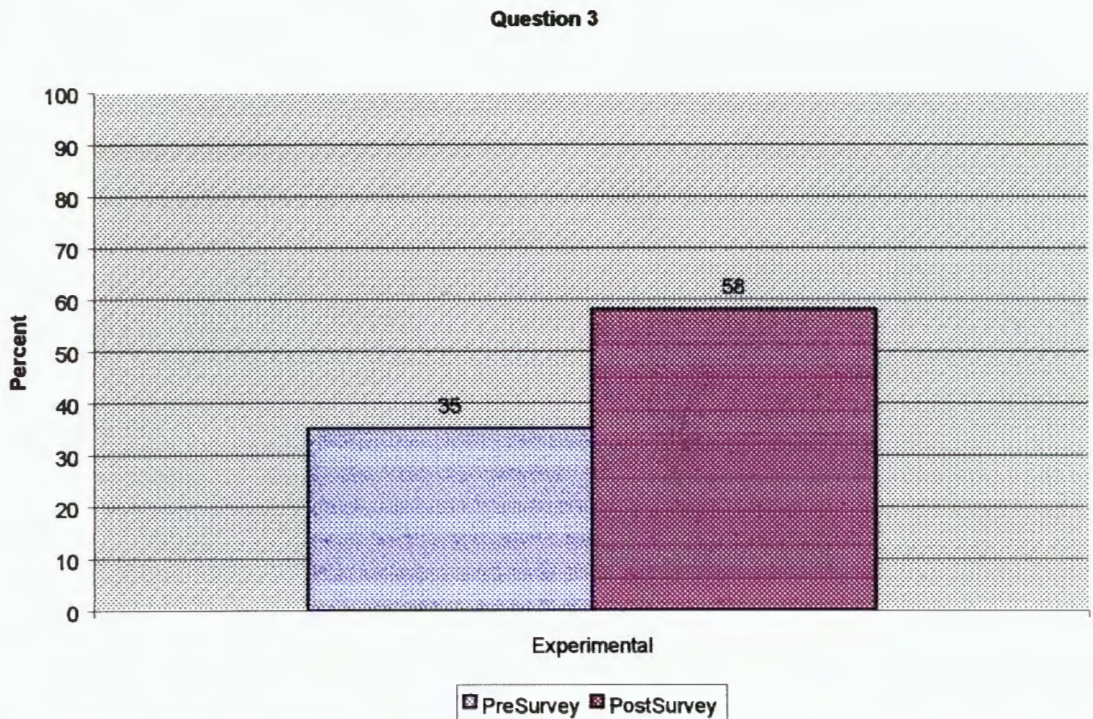


The experimental group showed a 40% increase in their understanding that suicidal teens give verbal warning signs.

Graph 3 Control and Experimental Groups

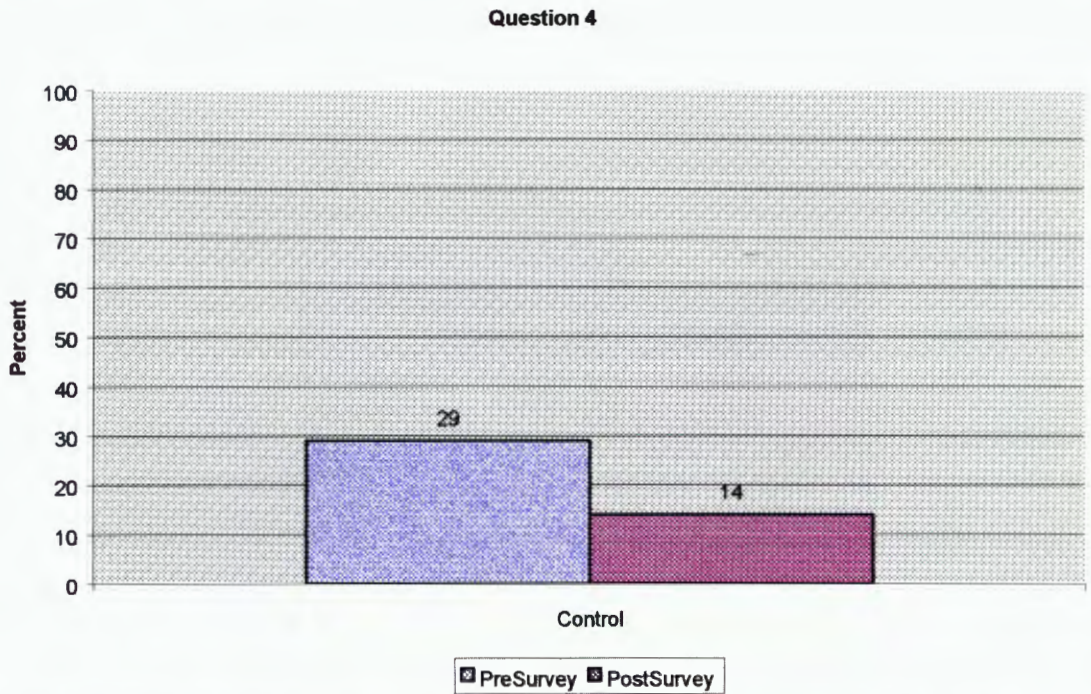


There was no change for the control group concerning the relationship between suicide and depressed.

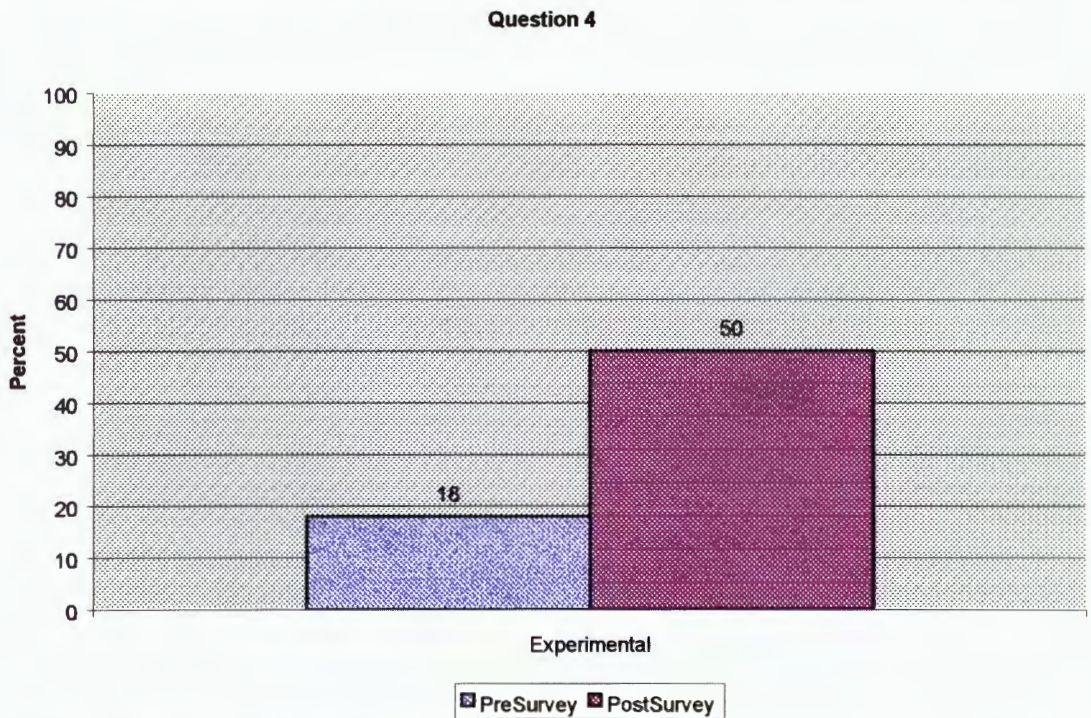


The experimental showed a 23% increase in understanding the relationship of depression and suicide.

Graph 4 Control and Experimental Groups



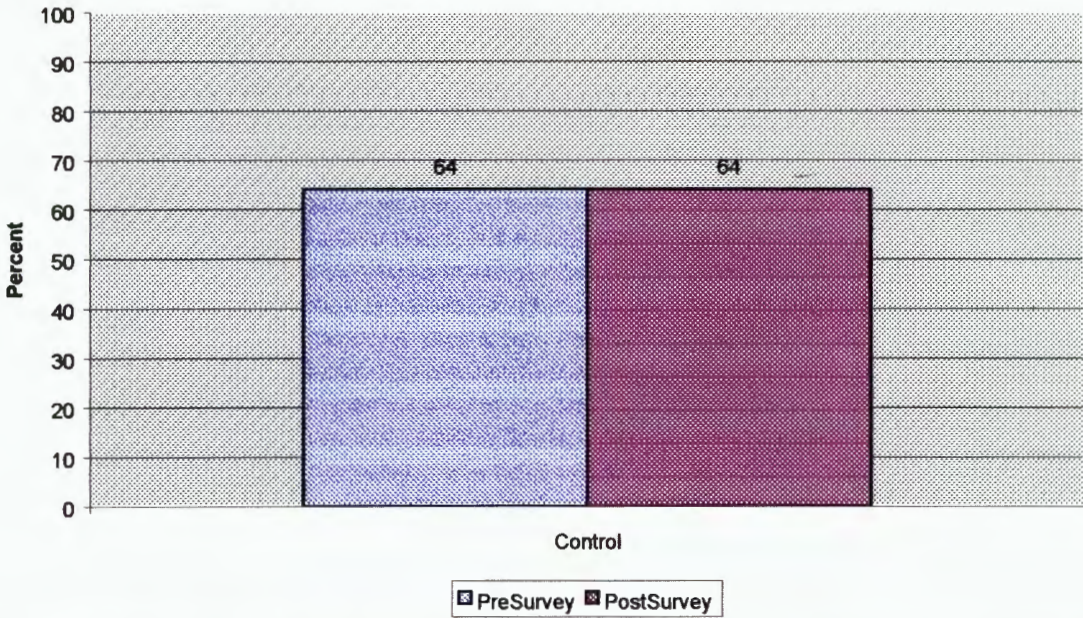
The control group showed a 15% decrease in their recognition of warning signs of suicide.



The experimental group showed a 32% increase in their recognition of suicidal warning signs.

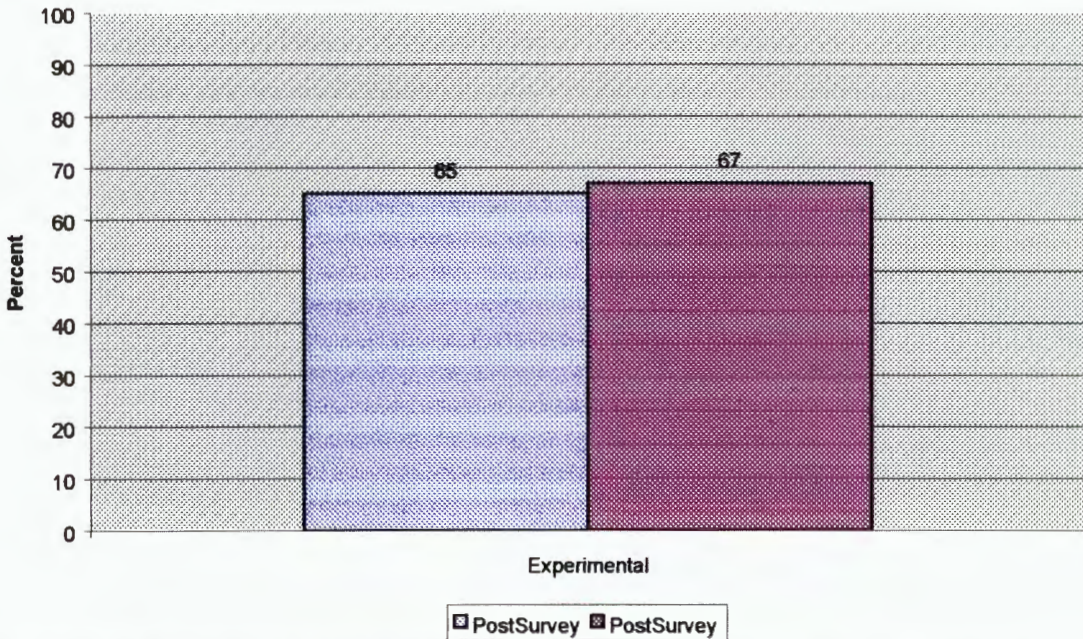
Graph 5 Control and Experimental Groups

Question 5



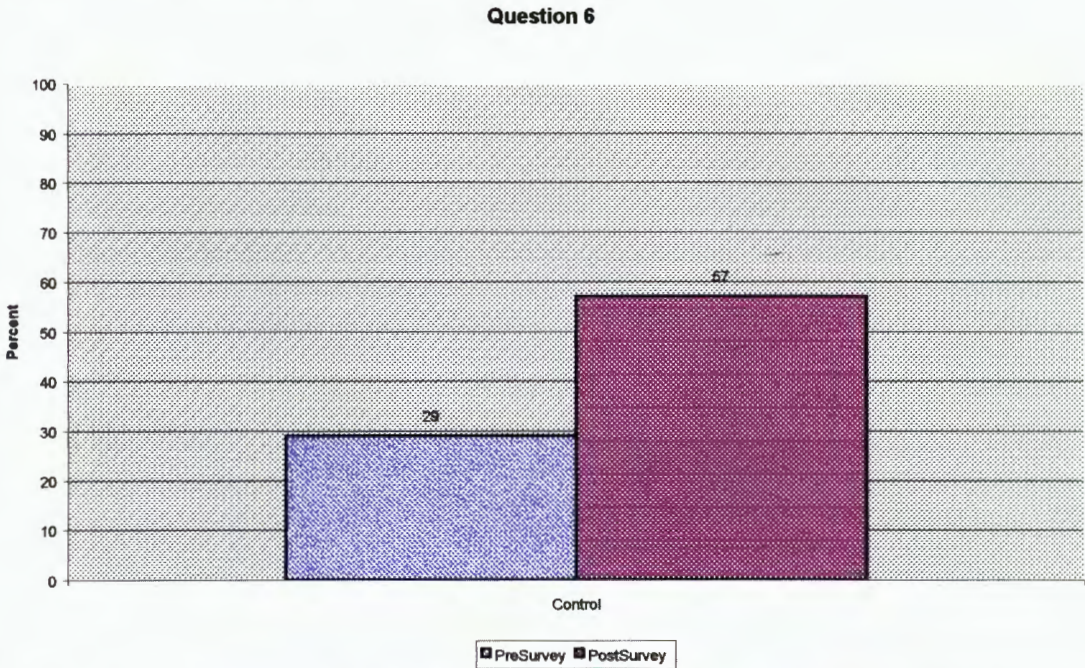
The control group did not show any change in their understanding of whether a person attempts suicide for attention.

Question 5

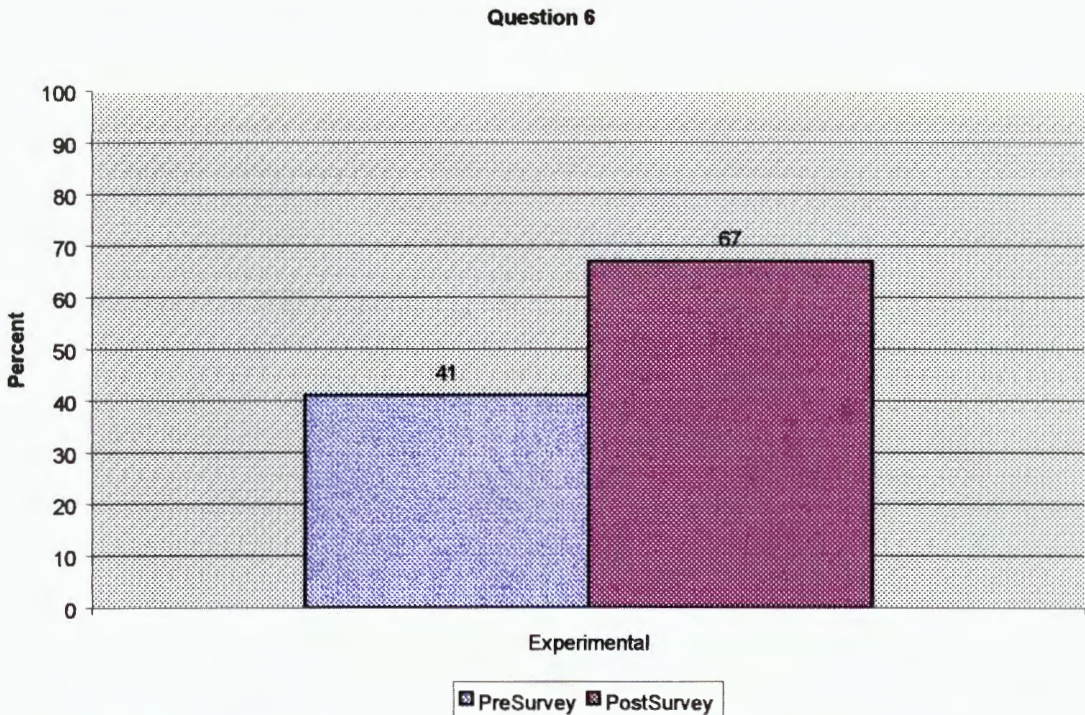


The experimental group showed a minimal 2% increase in their understanding of whether a person attempts suicide for attention.

Graph 6 Control and Experimental Groups



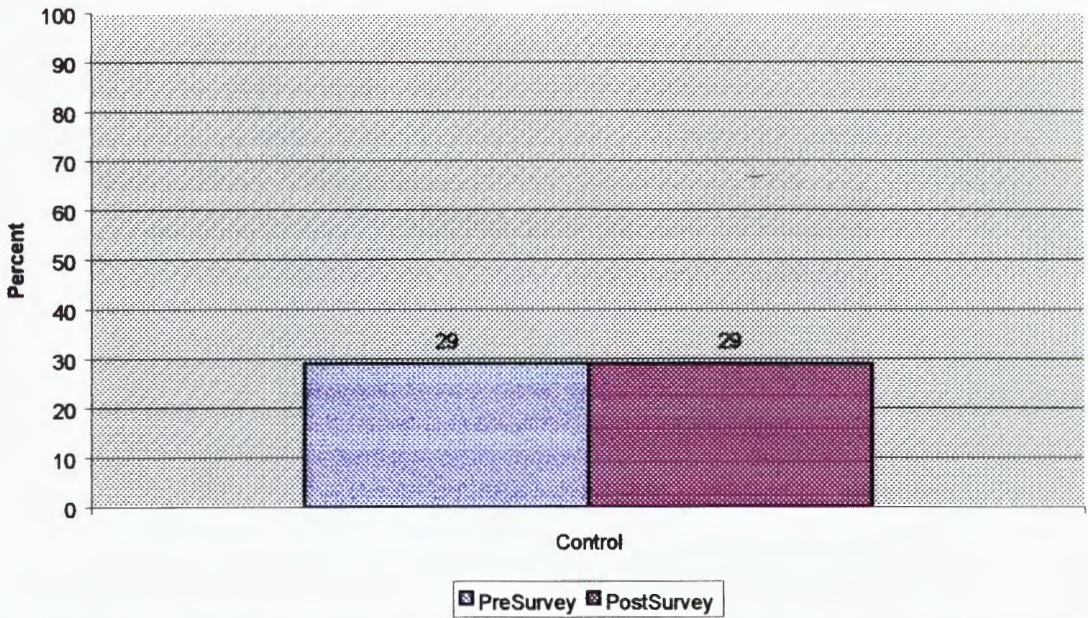
The control group showed a 28% increase in their belief that people who say they want to die do not really mean it.



The experimental group showed a 26% increase in their belief that people who say they want to die do not really mean it.

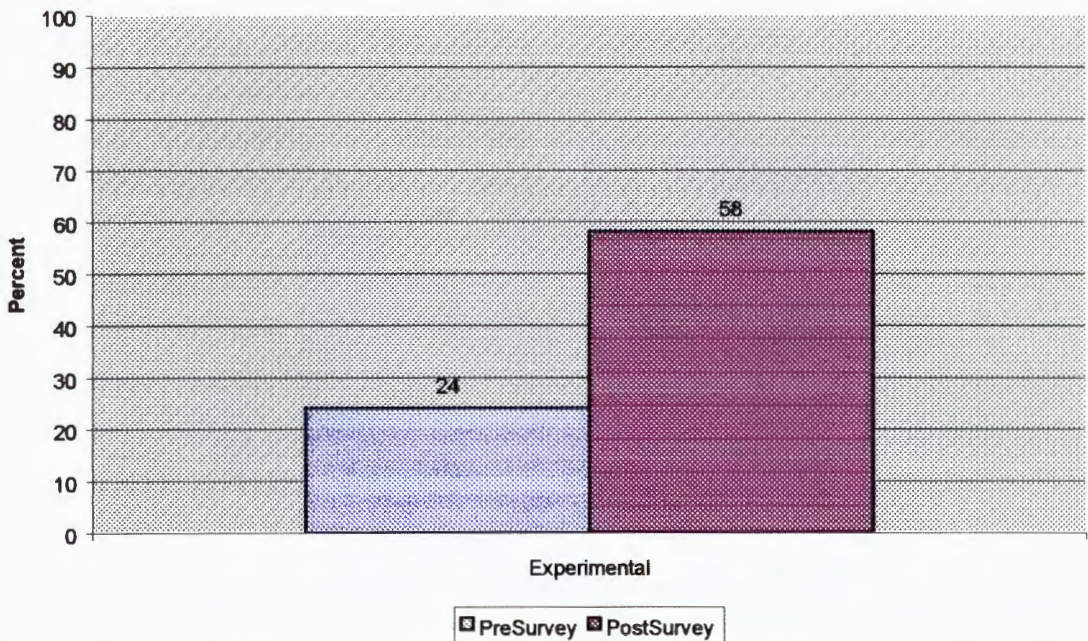
Graph 7 Control and Experimental Groups

Question 7



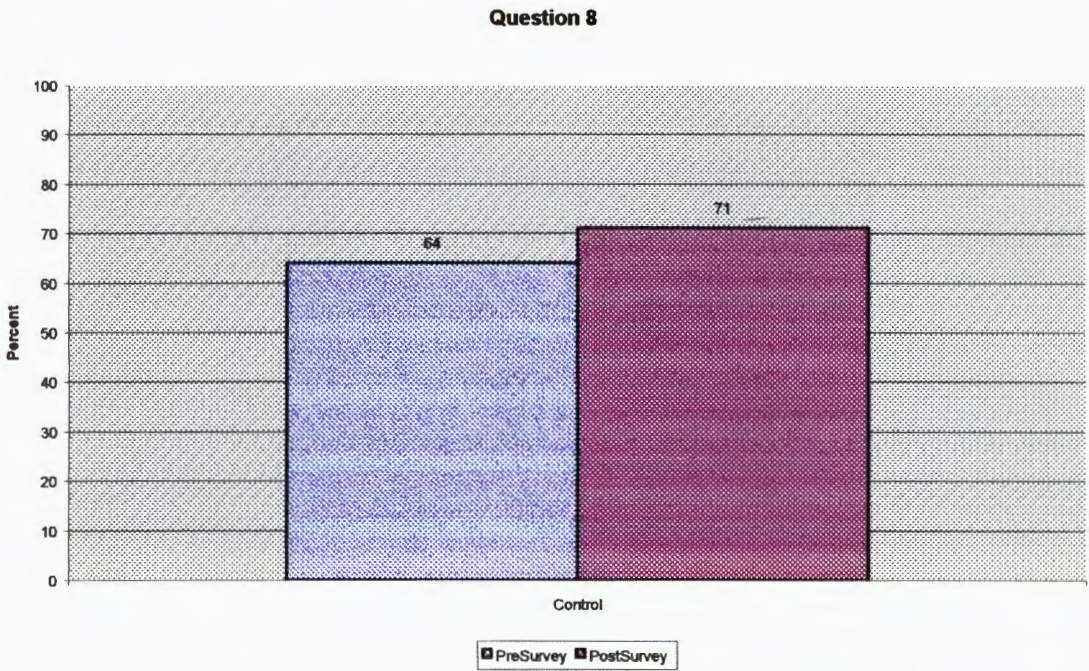
The control group did not show any change in their understanding that a decrease in grades at school is a sign of suicidal tendencies.

Question 7

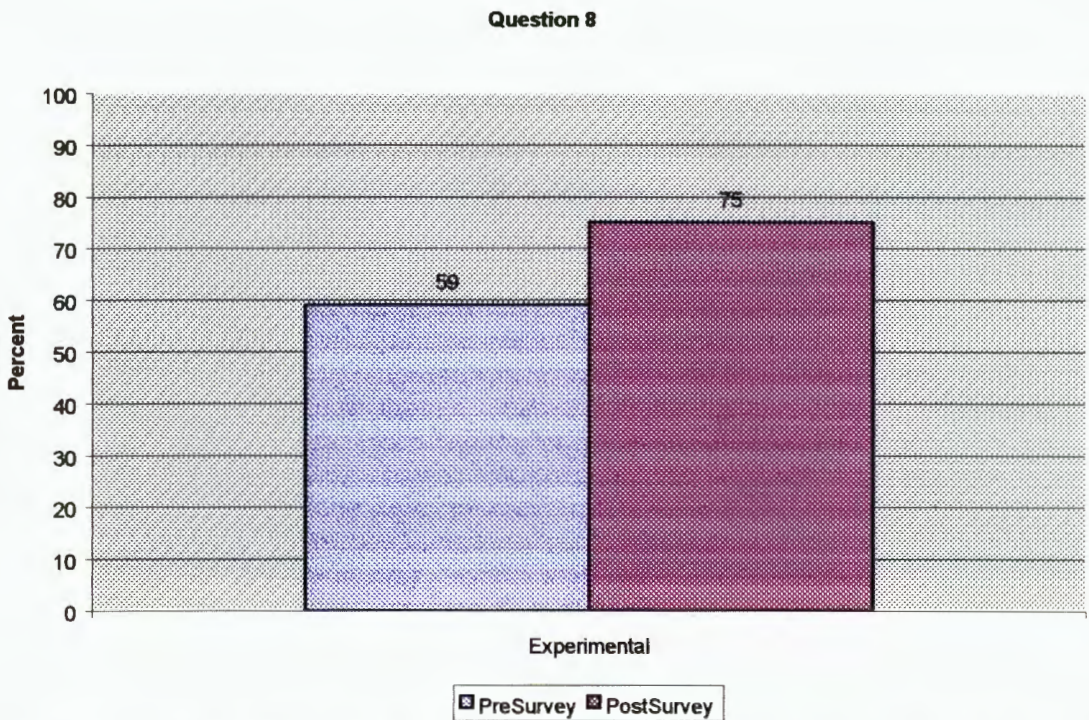


The experimental group showed a 34% increase in their understanding that a decrease in grades at school is a sign of suicidal tendencies.

Graph 8 Control and Experimental Groups

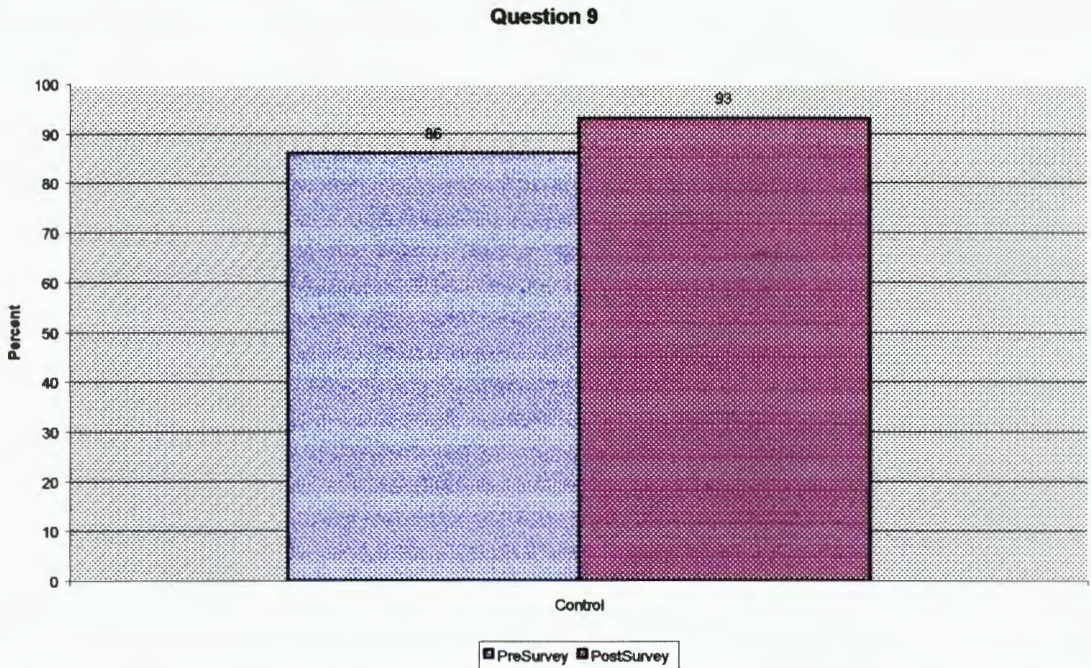


The control group showed a 7% increase in their understanding that suicide is really a cry for help.

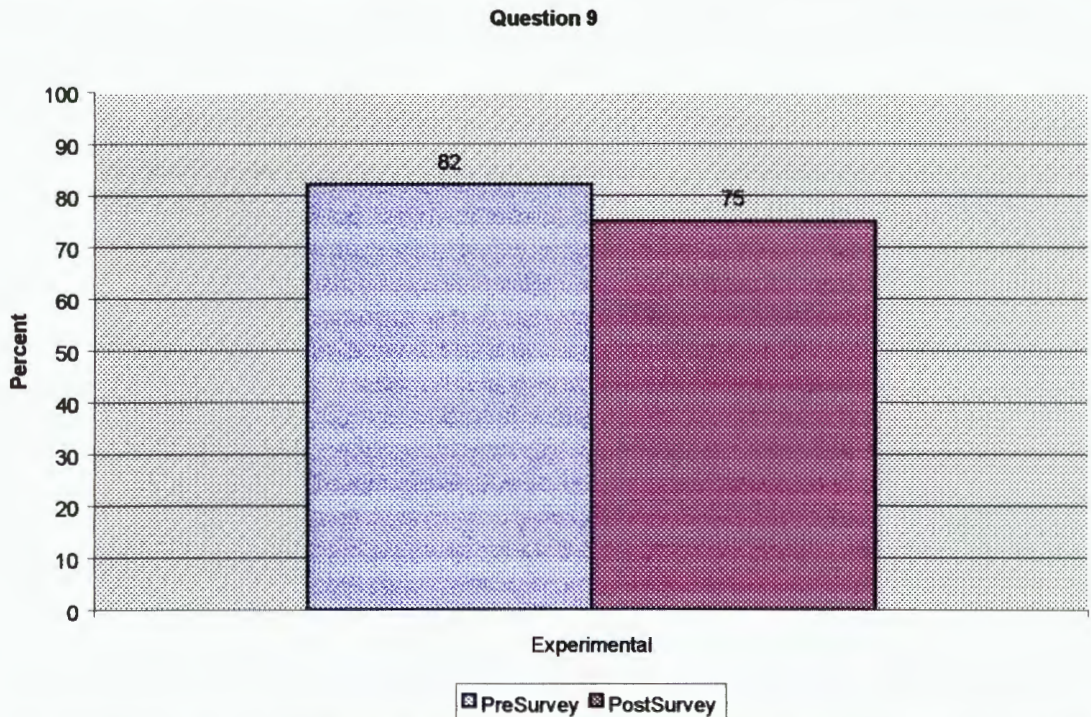


The experimental group showed a 16% increase in their understanding that suicide is really a cry for help.

Graph 9 Control and Experimental Groups



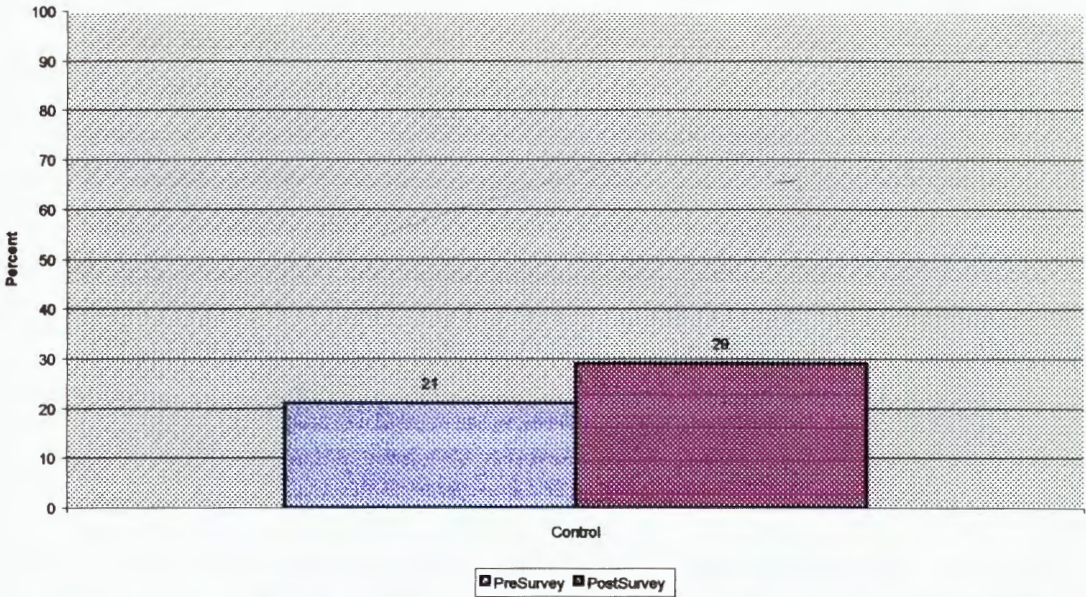
The control group showed a 7% increase in their understanding that drugs and alcohol can increase suicidal thoughts and make depression worse.



The experimental group showed a 7% decrease in their understanding that drugs and alcohol can increase suicidal thoughts and make depression worse.

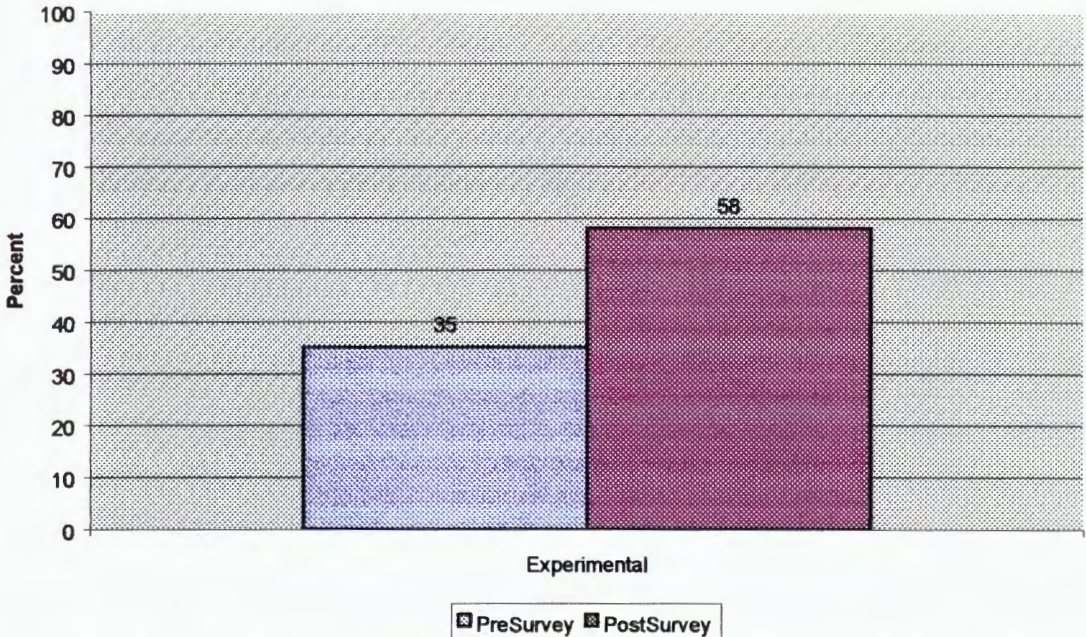
Graph 10 Control and Experimental Groups

Question 10



The control group showed a 8% increase in their understanding that teenagers may become suddenly cheerful after a period of depression.

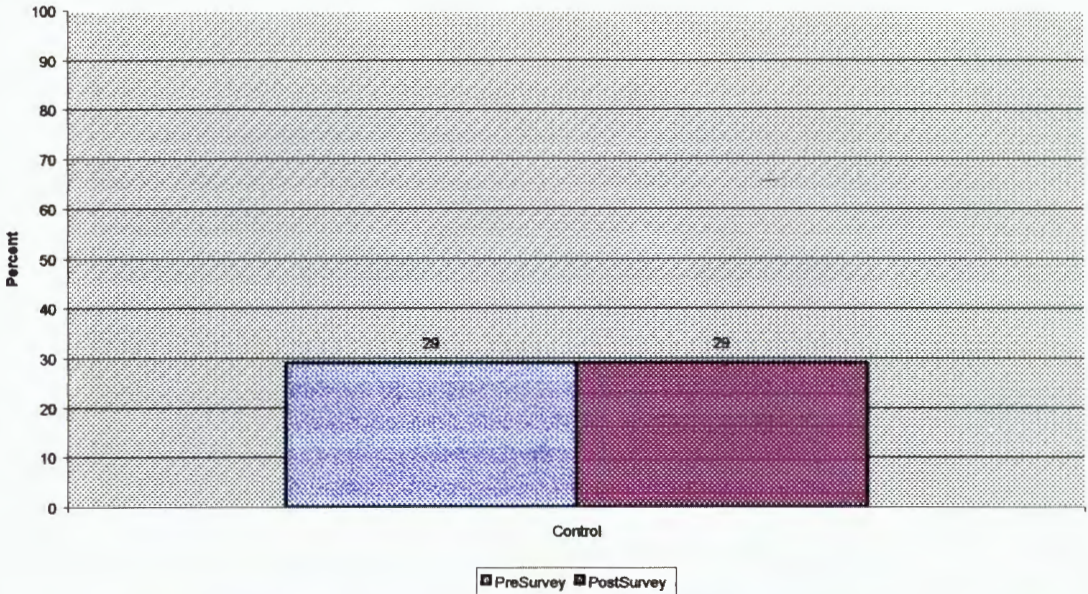
Question 10



The experimental group showed a 23% increase in their understanding that teenagers may become suddenly cheerful after a period of depression.

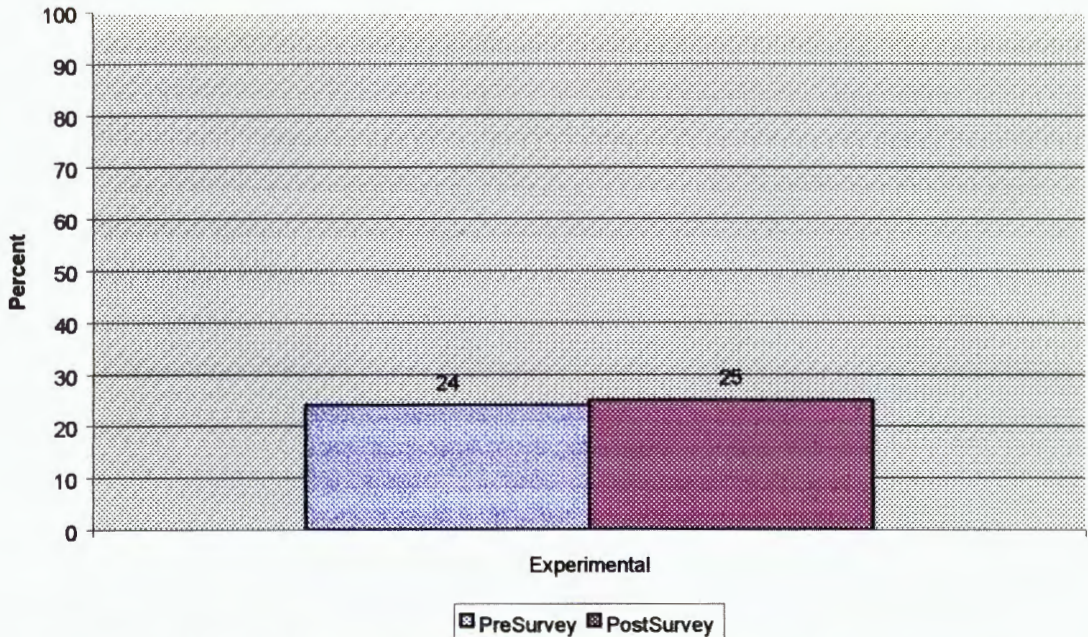
Graph 11 Control and Experimental Groups

Question 11



The control group showed no change in their understanding that hopelessness, despair, self-doubt, and unreasonable feelings are not normal for teens.

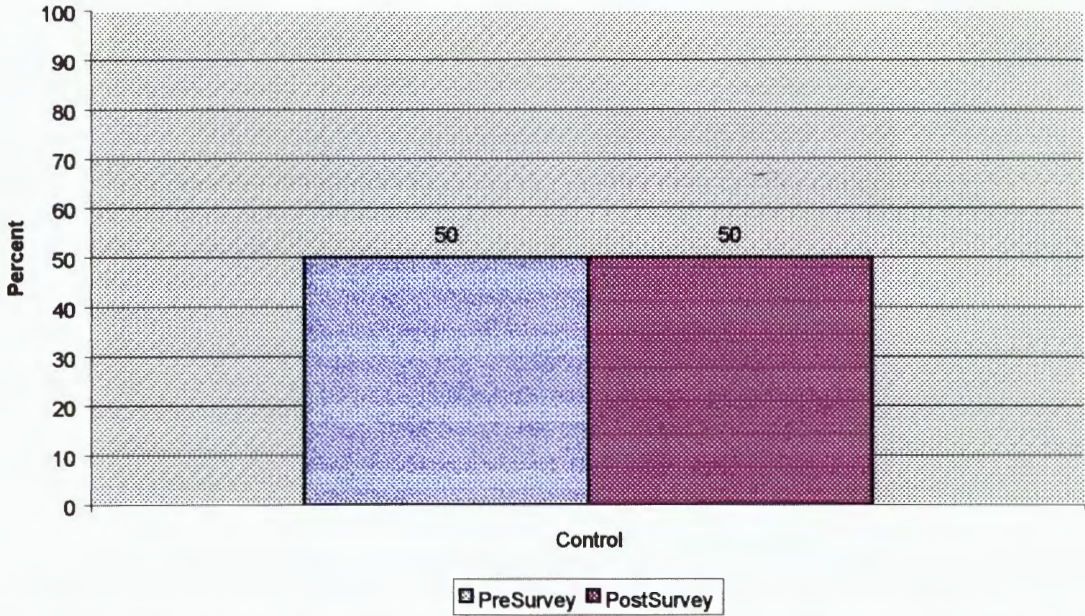
Question 11



The experimental group showed a 1% increase in their understanding that hopelessness, despair, self-doubt, and unreasonable feelings are not normal for teens.

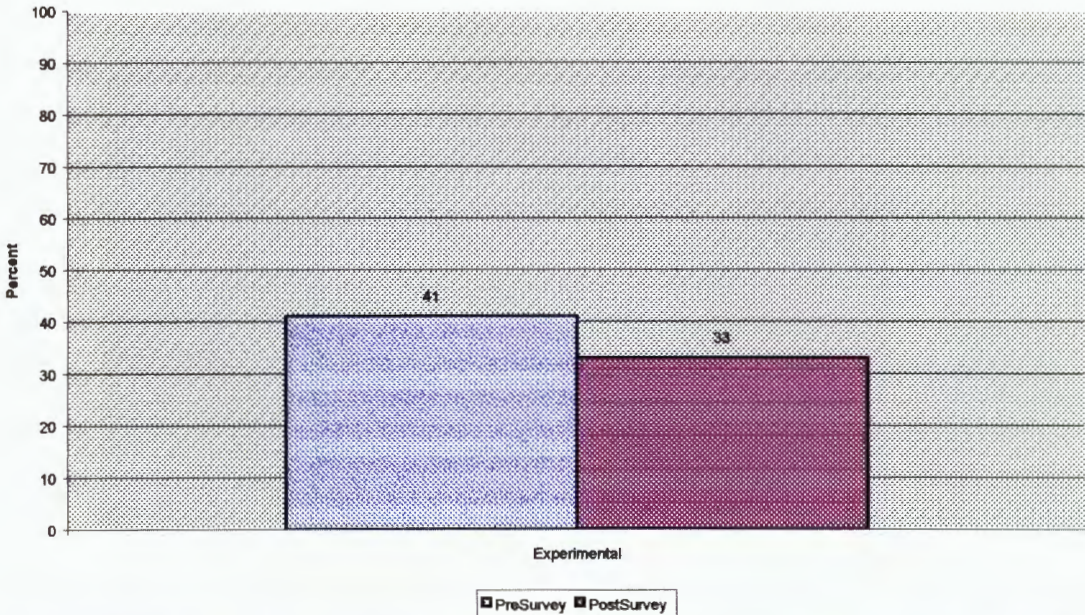
Graph 12 Control and Experimental Groups

Question 12



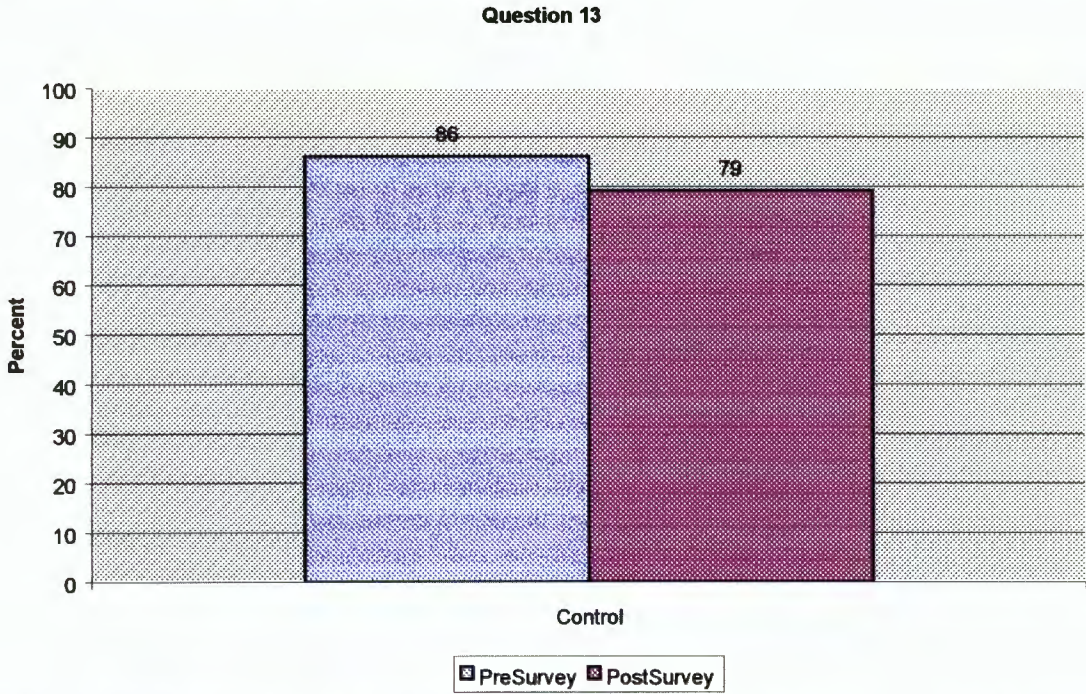
The control group showed no change in their understanding that if a friend says that he/she is thinking about suicide, the only way to keep it from happening is to stay with him/her at all times.

Question 12

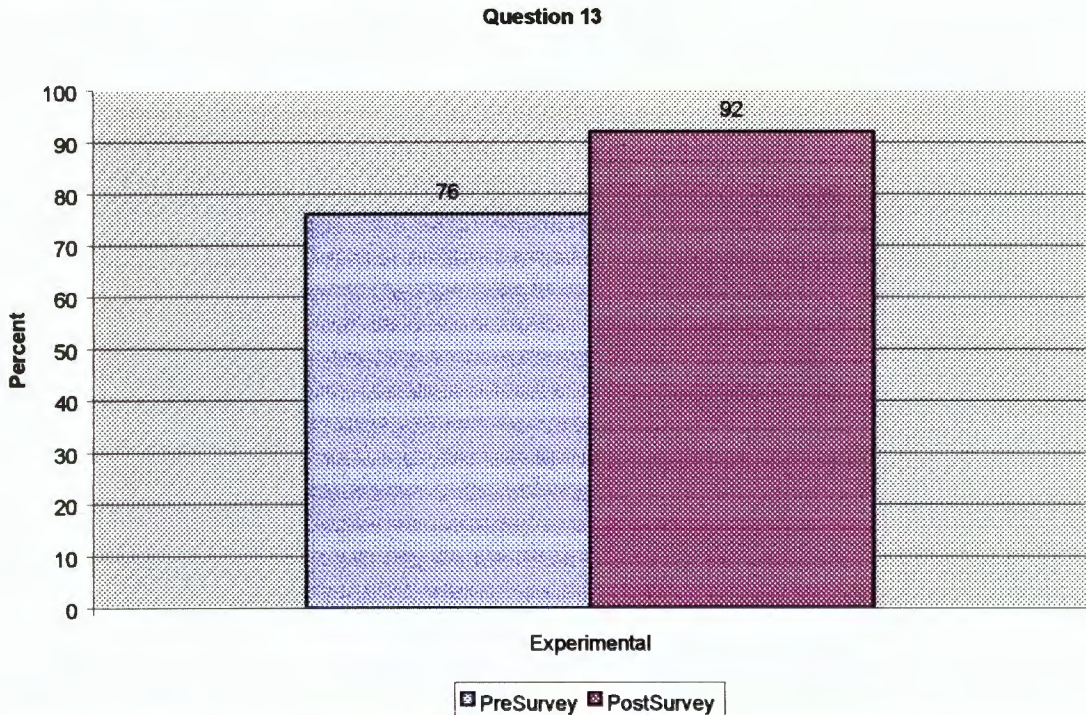


The experimental group showed an 8% decrease in their understanding that if a friend says that he/she is thinking about suicide, the only way to keep it from happening is to stay with him/her at all times.

Graph 13 Control and Experimental Groups

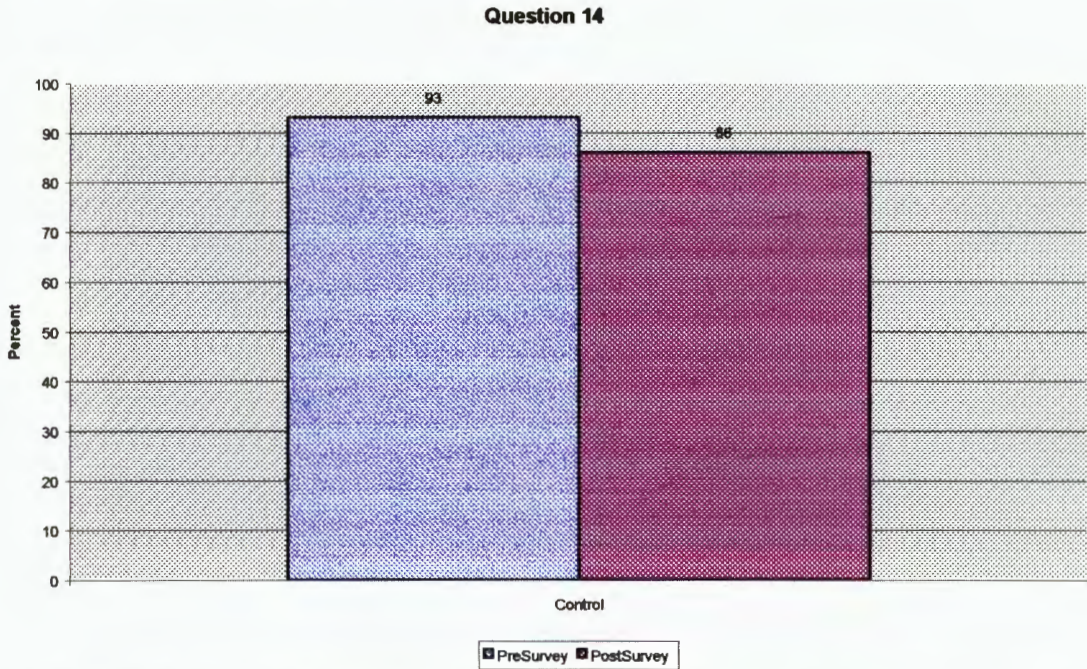


The control group showed a 7% decrease in their understanding that if a person's mind is made up about committing suicide they can be stopped.

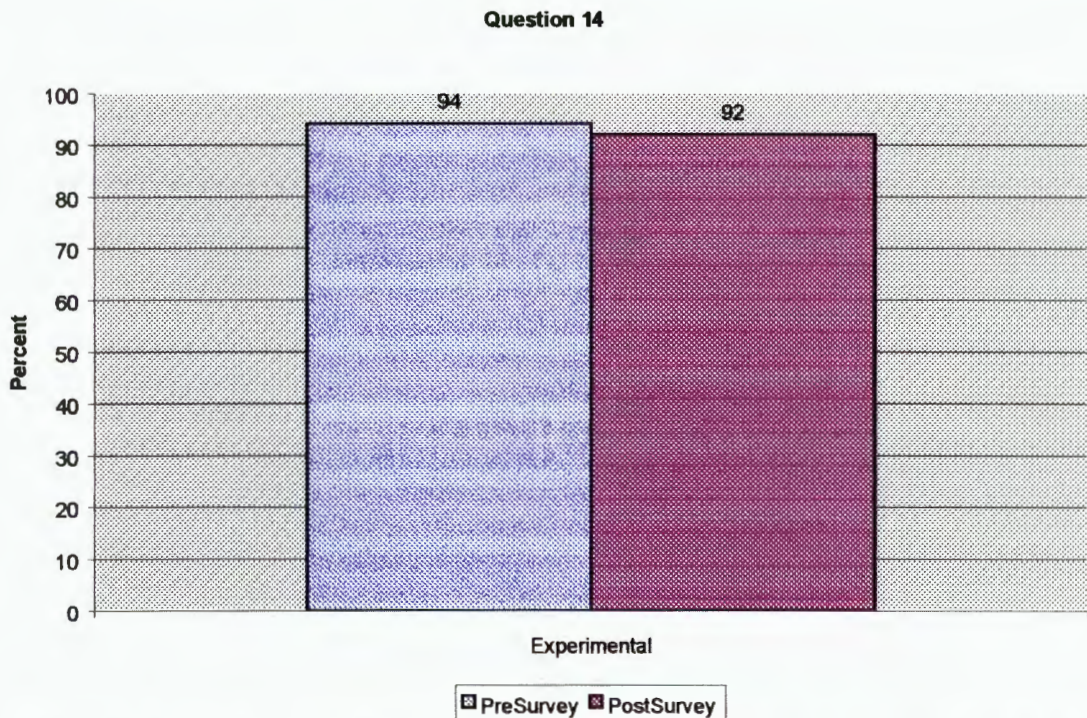


The experimental group showed a 16% increase in their understanding that if a person's mind is made up about committing suicide they can be stopped.

Graph 14 Control and Experimental Groups



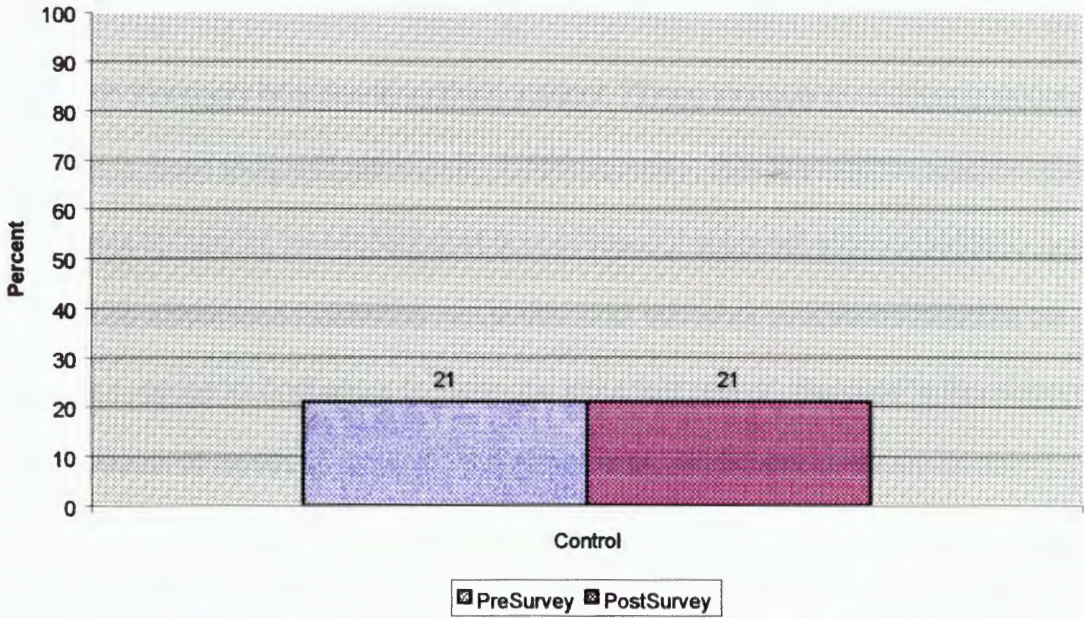
The control group showed a 7% decrease in their understanding that you should tell an adult even if you promised not to if you believe a friend is contemplating suicide.



The experimental group showed a 2% decrease in their understanding that you should tell an adult even if you promised not to if you believe a friend is contemplating suicide.

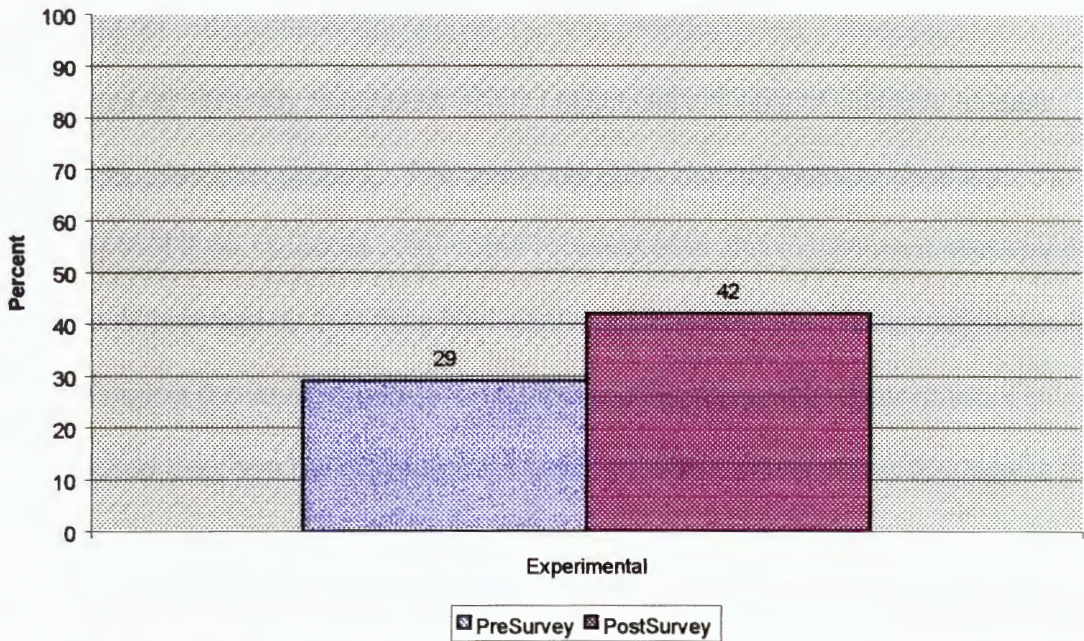
Graph 15 Control and Experimental Groups

Question 15



The control group did not show any change in their understanding that suicidal teens are preoccupied with death.

Question 15



The experimental group showed a 13% increase in their understanding that suicidal teens are preoccupied with death.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter 5

Through my research, I have found that many administrators do not want to bring up the topic of suicide in their school. They believe that if the students talk about it, then they will attempt it. Unfortunately, this leaves the suicidal teens with no one to turn to, or friends that do not have the knowledge or skills to help them. More advanced guidance programs and advisory programs need to be analyzed in order to find ways to help our troubled teens. Suicide is the second leading cause of death of America's adolescents, and if the problem is not addressed, the numbers will continue to increase. By not talking about suicide, administrators and adults are alienating the young adolescents who need help. Depression and suicide is a difficult topic and does not need to be glamorized, but health education programs and guidance programs can at least address the issues and let the students know that there is help for them if they need it.

I was continually frustrated when I approached school districts to gain entry for my research project. The administrators did not want to deal with the possibility that their students may come forward after the experiment and say that they were depressed or that they had contemplated suicide. They truly believed that by bringing the topic up, they would be putting ideas into their student's heads. What they are failing to accept is the fact that some of the teenagers at their school are depressed and already have thoughts of suicide. In my opinion, they are neglecting their student's needs and failing to acknowledge the second leading cause of death for youth. With changes in the novel, I am confident that

literature can be an educational tool for adolescents regarding the controversial concerns and challenges they face.

If I were able to do this project again, I would spend some time with middle school advisory programs or guidance programs while they conduct a unit on self-esteem, depression, and suicide. This way, I would be able to see first hand how the students feel about these topics. Due to time constraints, I had to make decisions based on my experience with middle school students; advisory programs; my experience teaching health education; textbook readings; interviews with guidance counselors, school psychologists, administrators; and suicide hotline help. In addition, I would like to conduct the study with a larger number of participants in a more diverse population in order to determine whether or not the increase in understanding would show any level of significant change.

As a result of this project, I have realized that teenagers are facing more difficult problems than past generations. With the increase in violence in the schools, students are forced to deal with situations even adults would have difficulty dealing with. More pressures are placed on them, and as a result, they need to develop coping mechanisms in order to be able to handle the stress. However, they are not adequately taught how to do this. Further research needs to be done in order to find ways that school systems can help students cope with day-to-day stressors or traumatic events.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Parent Letter & Consent Form

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am currently pursuing my Master's Degree in Middle School Education at the University of Northern Iowa. As a part of my program, I am required to complete a graduate research project. I chose to write an adolescent novel about teenage suicide titled "What about me?" I want to determine whether an adolescent novel can help teens and pre-teens learn the warning signs of suicide and understand the process of getting help for a teenager who is contemplating suicide.

I am writing you for your consent to use any data obtained from you and/or your child throughout the course of this study. The data collected will include a pre-survey and a post-survey about suicide awareness. It is composed of 15 questions about myths and facts surrounding suicide. All of the students will be given a pamphlet about teenage suicide, but no further instructions or education. Half of the students will be given the novel to read before the post-survey. The result of the post-survey will help me determine whether the novel was beneficial in increasing an adolescent's suicide awareness. I will document any changes from the pre-survey to the post-survey. Please understand that the names of the students, teachers, parents, and the school will not be used in the final research project.

If you agree to participate in this study, allow the use of your child's survey, and understand the above, please read and sign the attached consent form to Guidance Class at the Middle School by May 5th. I will return a copy of your signed form to you for your records. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or my advisor. Thank you for your cooperation in this study. These results will help determine whether novels can be used to educate students outside the classroom.

Sincerely,

Peg Kleve
Middle School Education, UNI

Research Participant Informed Consent

I, (PRINT FULL NAME) _____, have been informed about the research project, **What about me? The final question of a suicidal teen**, being carried out by Peg Kleve during the Spring 2000 semester. I understand that this project involves my son/daughter taking a pre-survey about teenage suicide, reading a novel about a 12-year old who tried to commit suicide but it saved by a caring classmate, and taking a post-survey. The surveys will determine whether the novel aided in a teenager's suicide awareness. The research group that actually reads the novel will also be asked what they did or did not like about the novel.

I am aware that the surveys will be used to determine the effectiveness of using adolescent literature as a tool to educate adolescents about real life issues. The student suggestions about the novel will be used to make final revisions to the actual novel. The names of the students will not be used at any point during the research project. The only demographics that will be used is age and gender.

I also have been explained and understand the following:

1. My participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without penalty.
2. The project involves minimal risks.
3. All records will be kept confidential and used for educational purposes.
4. I will receive academic credit for my participation.
5. Upon parent/guardian request, a written summary of the project's finding will be provided.

I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above and possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

Signature of Project Coordinator

Date

Contact Persons for this Project:

Peg Kleve
Project Coordinator
UNI Student
Middle School Education
301-10th Avenue
Charles City, IA 50616
(515) 257-2515

Dr. Charline J. Barnes
Assistant Professor of Reading Education
652 Schindler Education Center
Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-0606
(319) 273-6396

Office of the Human Subjects Coordinator
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-0702
(319) 273-2748

Appendix B

Student Awareness\Voices in Education Handout

SAIVE - Suicide Awareness\Voices of Education

P.O. Box 24507

Minneapolis, MN 55424-0507

Phone: (612) 946-7998

Word Wide Web Site: <http://www.save.org>

E-mail Address: save@winternet.com

Suicide Awareness \ Voices of Education (SA\VE) is an organization dedicated to educating the public about suicide prevention.

Why do people kill themselves?

Most of the time people who kill themselves are very sick with depression or one of the other types of depressive illnesses, which occur when the chemicals in a person's brain get out of balance or become disrupted in some way. Healthy people do not kill themselves. A person who has depression does not think like a typical person who is feeling good. Their illness prevents them from being able to look forward to anything. They can only think about NOW and have lost the ability to imagine into the future. Many times they don't realize they are suffering from a treatable illness and they feel they can't be helped. Seeking help may not even enter their mind. They do not think of the people around them, family or friends, because of their illness. They are consumed with emotional, and many times, physical pain that becomes unbearable. They don't see any way out. They feel hopeless and helpless. They don't want to die, but it's the only way they feel their pain will end. It is a non-rational choice. Getting depression is involuntary - no one asks for it, just like people don't ask to get cancer or diabetes. But, we do know that depression is a treatable illness. That people can feel good again! Please remember - Depression, plus alcohol or drug use can be lethal. Many times people will try to alleviate the symptoms of their illness by drinking or using drugs. Alcohol and/or drugs will make the disease worse! There is an increased risk for suicide because alcohol and/or drugs decrease judgment and increase impulsivity.

Do people who attempt suicide do it to prove something?

To show people how bad they feel, and to get sympathy? They don't do it necessarily to prove something, but it is certainly a cry for help, which should never be ignored. This is a warning to people that something is terribly wrong. Many times people cannot express how horrible or desperate they're feeling - they simply can't put their pain into words. There is no way to describe it. A suicide attempt must always be taken seriously. People who have attempted suicide in the past, are at risk for trying it again and possibly completing it, if they don't get help for their depression.

Can a suicidal person mask their depression with happiness?

We know that many people suffering from depression can hide their feelings, appearing to be happy. But, can a person who is contemplating suicide feign happiness? Yes, they can. But, most of the time a suicidal person will give clues as to how desperate he/she is feeling. They may be subtle clues though, and that's why knowing what to watch for is critical. A person may "hint" that he/she is thinking about suicide. For example, they may say something like, "Everyone would be better off without me." Or, "It doesn't matter. I won't be around much longer anyway." We need to "key into" phrases like those instead of dismissing them as just talk. It is estimated that 80% of people who died of suicide, mentioned it to a friend or relative before dying. Other danger signs are having a preoccupation with death, losing interest in things one cares about, giving things away, having a lot of "accidents" recently, or engaging in risk-taking behavior, like speeding or reckless driving, or general carelessness. Some people even joke about completing suicide but it should always be taken seriously.

Is it more likely for a person to suicide if he/she has been exposed to it in their family or has had a close friend die of suicide?

We know that suicide tends to run in families, but it is believed that this is due to the fact that depression and other related depressive illnesses have a genetic component. And that if they are left untreated (or mistreated), they can result in suicide. But, talking about suicide or being aware of a suicide that happened in your family or to a close friend does not put you at risk for attempting it, if you are healthy. The only people who are at risk are those who are vulnerable in the first place because of an illness called depression or one of the other depressive illnesses. The risk increases if the illness is not treated.

Why don't people talk about depression and suicide?

The main reason people don't talk about it is because of the stigma. People who suffer from depression are afraid that others will think they are "crazy", which is so untrue. And society still hasn't accepted depressive illnesses like they've accepted other diseases. Alcoholism is a good example - no one ever wanted to talk openly about that, and now look at how society views it. It's a disease that most people feel pretty comfortable discussing with others if it's in their family. They talk of the effect it has had on their lives and different treatment plans. And everyone is educated on the dangers of alcohol and on alcohol prevention. As for suicide, it's a topic that has a long history of being taboo - something that should just be forgotten, kind of swept under the rug. And that's why people keep dying. Suicide is so misunderstood by most people, so the myths are perpetuated. And the taboo prevents people from getting help, and prevents society from learning more about suicide and depression. If everyone were educated on these subjects, many lives could be saved.

Will "talking things out" cure depression?

The studies that have been done on "talk therapy" vs. using antidepressant medication have shown that in some mild depressions, talking to a counselor may ease some of the symptoms. But it has been proven that in severe depressions, talking things out will not cure the illness. It's like trying to talk a person out of having a heart attack. It just won't work. Most of the time, the person needs medication. Studies have shown that a combination of psychotherapy (talk therapy) and anti-depressant medication is the most effective way of treating most people who suffer from depression.

Why do people attempt suicide when they appear to have been feeling so much better?

Sometimes people who are severely depressed and contemplating suicide don't have enough energy to carry it out. But, as the disease begins to "lift" they may regain some of their energy but will still have feelings of hopelessness. There's also another theory that people just kind of "give in" to the anguished feelings (the disease), because they just can't fight it anymore. This in turn, releases some of their anxiety, which makes them "appear" calmer. Even if they do die by suicide, that doesn't mean they chose it. If they knew they could have the life back that they had before their illness, they would choose life.

If a person's "mind is made up", can they still be stopped?

Yes! People who are contemplating suicide go back and forth, thinking about life and death. They don't want to die, they just want the pain to stop. Once they know they can be helped, that there are treatments available for their illness, it gives them hope. We should never "give up" on someone, just because we think they've made their mind up!

Common Misconceptions About Suicide

The following are common misconceptions about Suicide.

1. "People who talk about suicide won't really do it."

NOT TRUE

Almost everyone who commits or attempts suicide has given some clue or warning. Do not ignore suicide threats. Statements like "you'll be sorry when I'm dead," "I can't see

any way out," -- no matter how casually or jokingly said may indicate serious suicidal feelings.

2. "Anyone who tries to kill him/herself must be crazy."

NOT TRUE

Most suicidal people are not psychotic or insane. They must be upset, grief-stricken, depressed or despairing, but extreme distress and emotional pain are not necessarily signs of mental illness.

3. "If a person is determined to kill him/herself, nothing is going to stop him/her."

NOT TRUE

Even the most severely depressed person has mixed feelings about death, wavering until the very last moment between wanting to live and wanting to die. Most suicidal people do not want death; they want the pain to stop. The impulse to end it all however overpowering, does not last forever.

4. "People who commit suicide are people who were unwilling to seek help."

NOT TRUE

Studies of suicide victims have shown that more than half had sought medical help within six months before their deaths.

5. "Talking about suicide may give someone the idea."

NOT TRUE

You don't give a suicidal person morbid ideas by talking about suicide. The opposite is true --bringing up the subject of suicide and discussing it openly is one of the most helpful things you can do.

SYMPTOMS OF MAJOR DEPRESSION

Not all people with depression will have all these symptoms or have them to the same degree. If a person has four or more of these symptoms, if nothing can make them go away, and if they last more than two weeks, a doctor or psychiatrist should be consulted.

Persistent sad or "empty" mood

Feeling hopeless, helpless, worthless, pessimistic and or guilty

Substance abuse

Fatigue or loss of interest in ordinary activities, including sex

Disturbances in eating and sleeping patterns

Irritability, increased crying, anxiety and panic attacks

Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions.

Thoughts of suicide; suicide plans or attempts

Persistent physical symptoms or pains that do not respond to treatment

DANGER SIGNS OF SUICIDE

Talking about suicide

Statements about hopelessness, helplessness, or worthlessness

Preoccupation with death

Suddenly happier, calmer

Loss of interest in things one cares about

Visiting or calling people one cares about

Making arrangements; setting one's affairs in order

Giving things away

A suicidal person urgently needs to see a doctor or psychiatrist.

Appendix C
Suicide Awareness Pre-Survey

Suicide Awareness Pre-Survey Age _____ Gender: **M or F**

Read each statement below carefully. Then circle the letters that show how much you agree or disagree with the statement. Use the following scale:

SA = Strongly Agree
 A = Agree
 U = Undecided

D = Disagree
 SD = Strongly Disagree

- | | | | | | |
|---|----|---|---|---|----|
| 1. Only mentally ill people are depressed. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 2. Teens who are suicidal do not give verbal warnings. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 3. People who contemplate suicide are depressed. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 4. Suicidal teens give away favorite possessions, put their affairs in order, or throw away important belongings. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 5. A person who attempts suicide just does it for attention. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 6. Teens who say they want to die do not really mean it. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 7. A decrease in grades at school is a sign of a teen who may try to commit suicide. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 8. Suicide is a cry for help. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 9. Drug and alcohol use can increase suicidal thoughts and make depression worse. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 10. Teenagers may become suddenly cheerful after a period of depression. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 11. Hopelessness, despair, self-doubt, and unreasonable feelings are normal for teenagers. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 12. If a friend tells you he/she is thinking about suicide, the only way to keep it from happening is to stay with him/her all of the time. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 13. If a person's mind is made up about committing suicide, they can not be stopped. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 14. You should tell an adult if you think a friend is contemplating suicide, even if you promised you wouldn't. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 15. Suicidal teens are preoccupied with death. | SA | A | U | D | SD |

Appendix D
Suicide Awareness Post-Survey

Suicide Awareness Post-Survey Age _____ Gender: **M or F**

Read each statement below carefully. Then circle the letters that show how much you agree or disagree with the statement. Use the following scale:

SA = Strongly Agree
 A = Agree
 U = Undecided

D = Disagree
 SD = Strongly Disagree

- | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|---|---|----|
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| 2. Teens who are suicidal do not give verbal warnings. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
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| 9. You should tell an adult if you think a friend is contemplating suicide, even if you promised you wouldn't. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 10. Suicidal teens are preoccupied with death. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 11. A person who attempts suicide just does it for attention. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 12. Teens who say they want to die do not really mean it. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 13. A decrease in grades at school is a sign of a teen who may try to commit suicide. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 14. Suicide is a cry for help. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 15. Drug and alcohol use can increase suicidal thoughts and make depression worse. | SA | A | U | D | SD |

Appendix E

What About Me? The final question of a suicidal teen.

What about Me?

The Final Question of a Suicidal Teen.

Peg Klevé

Ashley Lynn Gainsworth had to move away from all of her friends when her mom married Jacob Banks. They moved to a small town where there was nothing to do. It didn't matter because she didn't have any friends anyway. Her Advisory class at school talked about depression and suicide and she felt like they were talking about her. She tried to tell someone how she was feeling inside, but will they figure it out in time?

Suicide is the second leading cause of death of teens and preteens in the United States. The health and guidance education programs in many schools do not discuss depression and suicide awareness. This novel is intended to inform teens about the signs of depression and suicide and hopefully save the lives.

What About Me?

The final question of a suicidal teen.

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Dedication

This book is for all of the students that have come to me for help. Sarah F. for caring enough about Sarah P. to ask me for help. Sarah P. for having the courage to face life and calling when things were "tough". I still think of you both often. Heidi W. for the call at 2 a.m. You saved your life that night. I'm sure every time you look into your son's eyes you are reminded of how precious life is. Tim G. for the page. Although you may feel isolated and alone, remember how precious love can be, and your savior Jill.

Jeff, my cousin, you are dearly missed. Not a day goes by that we don't wonder what we missed, or what we could have done to help. May you rest in peace.....

Finally, I want to say "thank you" to my younger sister Karla, for being my mom's guardian angel at the age of 16 and not letting mom succeed at taking her life. You took a lot on your shoulders at a young age, but we all appreciate your bravery.

For all of my children, you are the greatest. Thanks for being so patient and understanding when mommy was buried in her research and book.

Most of all, I want to thank my partner in life, Chad, for all of his support, encouragement, and constructive criticism. Without him, this would never have become a reality. We have both been down some very rough roads in life, but God never gave us more than we could handle (he just tested us a TON). We both survived our trying times, and after years of struggle, we have both found what our souls were searching for unending, unquestionable, enduring, strengthening, undying, and encompassing love.

What About Me?

The Final Question of a Suicidal Teen.

Chapter 1

Dear Diary

Dear Diary,

Today, I decided to start this thing. I'm not sure why, but I guess it's because I don't feel like anyone else cares about me. Here I am, 12 years old, and I don't even care if I live to see tomorrow. I guess you could say school is the problem. I go there every day and I get good grades. The teachers seem to like me. The problem is, no one else does. Although I try to fit in, it doesn't seem to matter. I don't dress right because I don't buy the expensive clothes. Not that it would matter. I'm too fat to look good in those short shirts and low riding jeans. My hair isn't the latest style because it's too fine to grow out. I get good grades so that makes me a brownnoser. I talk to a lot of different people at school, but I wouldn't say that I have any real friends. I'm basically a loner. Sometimes, I wish I didn't have to go to school. Then I wouldn't have to go through getting teased or being left out every day. I wish my mom and step-dad understood me. I wish I had a best friend to confide in but I don't. Sometimes, I wish my mom never married Jacob. Then I wouldn't have moved to this boring, snobby town. I had to leave my best friend in the whole world. We had been together since kindergarten. Mom used to say that Candice and I were joined at the hip. She was there for me when my dad was killed in a car accident. She was the sister I never had. She's

still my best friend but it's not the same since I now live two states away. I wish dad never died. I wish things were the way they used to be. I wish we never moved. I wish, I wish, I wish..... I was dead. Maybe then I could be happy.

Sincerely, Ashley

Chapter 2

Snowball Pride

"Ashley, hurry up, you are going to be late for school," Mrs. Banks yelled from the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm coming, Mom," I hollered down just to let her know at least I heard her. Quickly, I put the diary in my book-bag. This was mine and I didn't want anyone else to read it, so I decided to keep it with me at all times. I ran to the bathroom and brushed my teeth before I flew down the stairs. As I was about to head out the door, I heard Mom telling me to eat something. Great, stuff a few more calories into this plumpy body.

"Ok, I'll grab an apple and eat it on the way to school, Mom," I hollered on the mad dash out the door. I made sure she heard the refrigerator open and close even though I didn't really take the apple.

The walk to school isn't too bad. I usually take the shortest way through a couple of alleys. It's only five blocks. This morning I decided to read another chapter of Are You There God, It's Me Margaret. As I was flipping the page, I managed to catch a glimpse of two of my classmates hiding behind the bushes in the alley. I wondered what in the world they were up to now. Usually, I left home before 8 o'clock and was able to get to school without having to face anyone. But this

morning I wrote in my new diary, so I was a little late. I guess I can blame Judy Blume for putting the idea in my head.

As I approached the bushes, I was bombarded with a ton of snowballs. I just kept walking. What was I suppose to do? Run? Then they would only laugh harder. I managed to hold my head high. I didn't even cry when one hit me right in the face. I just kept walking and reading my book pretending that nothing had happened.

When I finally got to school, I went to the bathroom to check the out the damage. I managed to escape with scratches across my left cheek from the ice. The red color should fade in an hour or so. My mascara was running down my cheeks. I guess that is the only tell tale sign that they hurt my feelings again. I can keep walking, but I can't keep the tears from falling.

I ripped off a sheet of paper towel and got it wet. Then I put some soap on it to clean the black smudges under my eyes. Once I was done, I was ready to face the rest of the day. I squared my shoulders and headed out the door.

I managed to get to my locker, find my books, and get to my English class without any problems. Usually I get my books knocked out of my hands or have to deal with some jabs about my clothes on the way. I really hate going to school because it seems like I just get teased and picked on all day long.

We have advisor/advisee time for the first 30 minutes of the day. This is where we have a small group discussion with the teacher about some topic the middle school teachers have decided was necessary for our social education.....at least that's how they justify it to us. However, I actually kind of like these meetings. My group has 16 kids in it. There are five 6th graders, six 7th graders, and five 8th graders. Although my classmates are usually mean to me outside of class, this is one place I can count on not getting picked on. They tried the first day but the teacher, Mr. Pedmont, told them that this was a "safe place" and that anything said during class was to stay in the room. Each person was to be treated equally and with respect. Students do seem to remember the rules in Mr. Pedmont's room anyway.

Chapter 3

Do I Like Myself?

As soon as the bell rang, Mr. Pedmont sat down at his chair within our advisor/advisee circle. "Ok everyone, today we are going to talk about self-esteem. Does anyone know what that is?" When no one answered, he changed the plan. "Ok, since no one wants to make a guess today, let's go around the circle and give it our best shot."

Justin, an eighth grader, was sitting to the left of Mr. Pedmont so he had to start. He kept looking down at his desk and then looked up when he finally knew what to say. "Well, I guess self-esteem would have to be how you feel about yourself." Mr. Pedmont answered, "Great answer, Justin! Now, we will go around the circle and the rest of you can tell me some of the things that affect how you feel about yourself."

Kristi was sitting next to Justin. But that wasn't a big surprise. I once heard the other kids talking about them. I guess they have been going out since 6th grade. She was smiling at Justin when she said, "I would have to say how other people treat you."

"Ok, now we'll move on to the next person and just keep going," Mr. Pedmont prompted.

"Your grades affect it. I know that because mine stink!" Billy boasted with a huge smile. The rest of the class snickered until Mr. Pedmont started giving the "evil glare."

Next was Todd. He and Billy are always hanging out together. It's like they are partners in crime most of the time. Take this morning and the snowballs for example. "I'm going to say your parents 'cause mine always make me feel bad." A few of the other students nodded their heads in agreement with him.

"I think my mood affects how I feel about myself," Samantha, otherwise known as "Sam" for short, added with a quick flick of her hair. She was "Miss High-and-Mighty" most of the time. She always moved if she got stuck next to me. I would never want to be like her.

Lisa, her best friend, was next to her. I can tell that Lisa doesn't always agree with what Samantha does but I guess to be her friend, she just goes along with it. If I had to deal with her snippy attitude, I would much rather be off by myself. She looked away from Sam and said, "Well, I think who you hang out with affects your self-esteem". Sam must have taken that as a compliment because she smiled at Lisa. But I could tell it wasn't intended to be one by the way Lisa grimaced and rolled her eyes.

"Teachers! Teachers definitely affect how I feel about myself. Sometimes, the way they react to my answers in class makes me feel like I'm really stupid. I really hate that!" Laura added immediately. She is an eighth-grade cheerleader. She's extremely popular but doesn't get very good grades.

"I know, Laura. Some teachers are very hard on their students," Mr. Pedmont added sympathetically. "Ok, I think we have a good idea about what affects how we feel about ourselves. Now, let's go a little bit further and talk about some of the things we really like about ourselves. We'll keep going around the circle."

"I really like to play on the Play-Station when I get home from school. I'm pretty good at it and it makes me feel good when I can get to the next level or beat the bad guys," Matt said with enthusiasm.

Chase, who is normally very quiet, thought about his answer for a while. When he finally said something, it shocked us all. "I really feel good about being able to play the piano. I can just sit down and take out all of my anger and frustrations when I play. My music means a lot to me." Chase must have thought the guys were going to give him a hard time because he never looked up when he talked about it.

"Well, let's see. I would have to say I really enjoy playing with my younger brother and sister. I love being able to make them laugh," Mark said. He started

a side conversation with Chase, the boy next to him, but quit when he noticed Mr. Pedmont looking right at him.

“Ok. Notice that each of them had something totally different that makes them feel good about themselves. Now, we are going to talk about the tough one. Things that make us feel bad about ourselves. When we get all of the way around the circle, I have an activity we are going to do.”

Megan, another 6th grader who I sometimes eat lunch with was next. She answered pretty quickly. “I really don’t like the fact that my teeth aren’t straight. I know I have to wait another year to get braces, but it’s really embarrassing to smile.”

“Oh, I know exactly what you mean Megan. I was so glad to finally get my braces,” Ann added with sympathy. “What I don’t like about myself is how clumsy I am. I would love to be able to play sports, but I get so embarrassed in P.E. that I’m afraid to even try out for a team.”

“I really hate being shy,” I said while looking down. I don’t like having to share things about myself in front of all of them. The first day I was in the group I had to introduce myself, where I came from, why I moved here. It was so embarrassing!

"I really hate how short I am," Aaron answered. I couldn't blame him. He's in eighth grade and he isn't even 5'5". He's the shortest kid in the entire 8th grade class.

"I don't like it that I'm an only child. I have no one else at home to mess around with except my parents and they are always working. I feel alone a lot," Ryan told everyone.

"Ok, thanks everyone. I know it's not easy to tell other people personal things about yourself. But, we are going to go through a list of things and I want you to raise your hand high if you agree, raise it halfway if you think it's important but you don't agree, and don't raise your hand at all if you don't agree. Does everyone understand?" Mr. Pedmont asked quickly.

The first one was easy. Everyone agreed that ice cream is one of the world's best desserts. We voted on: how much sleep we need a night, whether everyone should play one sport well, if bombs and weapons should be banned from the world, what we would do if a friend had bad breath, if we brush our teeth twice a day, if we keep a journal or diary, if we'll smoke, if we like school, and if we like who we are as a person.

I was surprised by the last question. I guess I thought everyone liked the way they were except me, but Laura, a cheerleader, didn't raise her hand either. I

guess I don't understand what she doesn't like about herself. I would love to be her for a day!

I saw Laura look at me. At first I thought she was thinking that she didn't want to be like me, a loser, but then I thought.....maybe she was thinking the same thing because she smiled at me. It wasn't much but it was nice to get a smile for a change. Normally the "jock crowd" is the one that teases me. I still couldn't help but wonder how someone who seems to have everything going for her could not like herself.

Chapter 4

Billy the "Pain"

When the bell rang, it was a mad dash to the hallway. Since my next class was in the same room, I didn't bother trying to leave. It was safer in here than out in the hall.

Mr. Pedmont was erasing the chalkboard and turned around to ask me how things were going. I gave my usual response of "fine."

He came over by me and said, "You know, if you ever need to talk you can come to me. Is something going on that you would like to talk about?" I never see you smile.

I just looked down and said sarcastically, "No, everything is wonderful."

He hesitated for a moment and then walked away. The class was starting to fill up anyway so he had to get started. I knew that deep down he wasn't going to let this go. I was going to hear from him again. Maybe teachers weren't so bad after all. He really did seem to care.

English class was my first class of the day. I really like English because I get to read. One of my favorite things to do is read. There are nights when I stay up

until 3 in the morning just trying to finish a book. Of course my mom doesn't know this. I just can't leave a character until I know there is a happy ending. I can't fall asleep until I have finished the book. I also like Mr. Pedmont as an English teacher. Maybe it's because he's also my advisor, but I get the impression that he really does care about his students. He also tries to find interesting things to do in the class.

As Mr. Pedmont was taking the attendance, Billy, one of my favorite pains, decided to let a gooey spitball fly. Luckily, I was able to move my books in time. It landed right on my desk. I guess I should be glad that he has terrible aim; otherwise, it would have hit me.

As luck would have it, Mr. Pedmont caught him. Billy was sent to the office to call home to tell his mom that he has a detention after school. The rest of the class was laughing until Mr. Pedmont reminded them that there was to be no disrespecting of others in his class and that spitballs fell into that category.

Chapter 5

What's To Like?

The rest of the day went well. I got 100% correct on my math test. In social studies we watched a movie about the Revolutionary War. The movie was extremely boring! I read the homework assignment last night and that is basically what the movie was about, so, I decided I would write more in my diary. It wouldn't matter because Mrs. Jefferson doesn't really pay that much attention to what we are doing as long as we look busy. She is one of those teachers who wears her hair in a bun and doesn't like anyone goofing around in any way, shape or form. She does things the old-fashioned way. It's all lecture, movies, and note-taking. It makes her class pretty boring. So, I got my diary out and started writing about what's been bothering me all day.

Dear Diary,

I can't stop thinking about the question this morning. Do I like me? I keep trying to find things about myself that would make other people like me.

But I'm coming up with zip, zilch, nada! My good grades make me a brownnoser. Since I can't spend a ton of money on a pair of jeans, I don't meet the fashion requirements at school. I wear glasses so that makes me a geek. My teeth are crooked, but I'm getting braces soon. But, what everyone sees on the outside doesn't show the true me. I love to sing, I love to dance, I love to talk about movies, about music, about anything,

but I don't have a best friend to share these things. I did but I moved away from her. Candice does write but we aren't as close now. At my old school everything was different. It didn't matter what I got for grades, it didn't matter what I wore, and it didn't matter if I wasn't athletic or very pretty. I was good at listening to my friends and I did have friends. We hung out after school at the mall or at one of our houses. It didn't matter. We talked about boys and music. We tried to dance like they do on MTV. I had fun. I liked me then.

But now I don't have any of that. Here I don't like who I am because no one appreciates me. How can they when they don't try to get to know me? I have been here for over a month and a few girls do talk to me in class. But, they have never asked me to hang out with them. What is it about me that they don't like? Why do they always turn away? I'm a real person. I have feelings. Can't they see that the "new kid" is lonely? Sometimes I am so mad at my mom for moving here! I wish I still went to Hoover Middle School in Indianapolis. I wish I could still hang out with all of my old friends. It isn't fair that she is happy and can't see how miserable I am.

As Mrs. Jefferson walked by my desk, I quickly flipped the page so it would look like I was taking notes about the Revolutionary War. It must have worked because she gave me a big warm smile as she walked past. I just smiled back.

Since the bell was about to ring, I closed my notebook and put everything in my bag. The end of the day was just about here. I plan on finishing the rest of this diary entry.

Chapter 6

Mom Runs My Life

"Ashley Lynn Gainsworth, where in the world have you been?" Mom hollered from upstairs as soon as I walked through the door.

"At school, Mom!" I hollered back up as I plopped myself in front of the television. I can't believe she is already on my case again. I walked home as fast as I could. Since the geeks from this morning made it into the alley ahead of me I decided to take the longer way home on the sidewalks. It added five minutes to the walk.

"Well, I told my friend Tracy that you would watch her kids for her tonight. So you need to get ready because she will be here in ten minutes," Mom informed me with a pleading look.

"You know I don't like you telling people I'll babysit for them when you haven't even asked me. What if I would have had a lot of homework tonight?" I questioned with annoyance.

"Oh, like you need to worry about your grades and you know she can't afford to pay the childcare provider for all four kids while she is in class. Please, just do this as a favor to me. Besides, it will get you out of the house."

"Alright, I get the picture," I hollered over my shoulder as I bounded up the stairs to my room to put my books away. I guess writing in my diary will have to wait. Just what I wanted to do tonight, take care of four kids that I have never seen before in my life. I hope they aren't brats. That would just make my day if I have to fight off screaming kids that won't go to bed.

Chapter 7

Hide and Seek

Tracy arrived right on time, with all four kids peering out of the car windows wondering if I was going to be their next conquest. They look like little angels now, but I could tell by their little smirks that I was in for a really trying night. As soon as I got in the front seat, Tracy started rattling off my instructions at 100 miles an hour. I was still trying to register the first two things that she said when she asked, "Ok, do you have any questions?"

I politely answered, "No." However, what I really wanted to ask was why she didn't bother asking me directly if I could babysit. From what I have figured, her children must be so horrid that no sane teenager would agree to sit with them. Since she only lived a few blocks away, we were pulling into the driveway in no time at all. When she put the car in park, she looked at me, smiled, and said, "Good luck."

The kids all scrambled out of the car and flew into the house. From what Tracy had just said, Bryce and Brittany are the twins. They are six years old and very intelligent, so I will need to be on my toes. She also told me that Bryce would try to pull something over on me since I'm a new sitter. The next in line is Quade. He is four years old. Tracy described him as very rambunctious and active. Tagging behind the crew was Melody. She is only three but she does her best to

keep up with the big kids. Tracy told me that she needs a lot of attention and has been that way since their daddy left them suddenly six months ago.

As I was getting ready to get out of the car, I looked over at Tracy and was surprised to see that she wasn't making a move to get out. I couldn't believe it. Tracy wasn't even going to show me around. She just sat there looking at me with this pleading look. It was like she was saying "hurry up and get out of my car because my kids are going to drive me crazy if I sit here another minute." But instead, she said with a smile, "the door's unlocked, help yourself to anything you need."

I grabbed my backpack and walked slowly to the front door. As I opened it, I was mentally preparing myself for a tornado. But, when I had it opened there was nothing but silence.

"Ok you guys, where are you?" I hollered. "Hello? Bryce? Quade? Brittany? Melody?" Again there was nothing but silence.

Great! They are hiding from me. I briefly wondered how long it would take them to come out if I don't go and find them? This could actually be a good thing I thought with a smile.

I went into the kitchen and looked at Tracy's "list" of instructions and phone numbers. I was supposed to make macaroni and cheese with hotdogs for supper. That seems to be the traditional babysitter's menu item.

Since the kids were still hiding, I decided to take a walk through the house. I found the bathroom and looked in the medicine cabinet for the band-aids. There were right where I thought they would be. With four kids, I figured I would need them before the night was out.

The rooms were all down the same hall. I could hear Melody talking really loudly. I guess it's tough for a three-year-old to understand what "be quiet" means. As I walked into the Sesame Street decorated room, I heard a rustling under the bed. I chose to ignore it and walked right back out the door saying out loud, "Hmm, I wonder where all the kids went?" There was a muffled giggle in response.

Next, I went to the boys' room. There was a Jeff Gordon comforter on one bed, and a Dale Earnhardt comforter on the other. They are NASCAR fans, but they picked the wrong drivers. We'd have to discuss that later on. "Gee, I wonder whether Quade likes Jeff Gordon or Dale Earnhardt?" I commented with a sigh. I heard whispering from the closet. As I turned off the light, I heard Quade holler, "I like Jeff Gordon!" In answer to that, I heard Bryce whisper, "Shut up! She'll find us if you keep talking." They were wrestling around in the closet as I headed out the door.

Across the hall, I entered a pale green room. Among all of the homemade artwork hanging on the wall, I could see a bulge in the curtains. I couldn't help but laugh at the failed attempt to appear invisible. That was the most obvious hiding place of them all. However, as I did with the other kids' rooms, I walked out the door saying, "I wonder where Brittany could be?"

When I reached the end of the hall I said, "Good, they are gone! That leaves more macaroni and cheese for me to eat."

Those were the magic words! Like the start of the Daytona 500, they all came flying out of their rooms, bumping and pushing to try to get the lead. Poor Melody, she didn't have a chance. Bryce and Quade came flying out of their room and leveled her. She went down but bounced right back up screaming, "I'm hungry! I'm hungry!"

When they saw me standing at the end of the hall, they all stopped short with a look of surprise. At that, I yelled, "I GOT YOU!"

Bryce mumbled, "I knew you wouldn't eat all of the food anyway." Brittany was yelling at the boys, "I told them it was a stupid idea to hide anyway." Melody just kept asking, "Where's the food?"

As I started walking toward the kitchen, I said, "Sit down in the living room and watch 'The Rugrats' until I have supper ready." They were too willing and that made me wonder whether they were up to another trick. Time would tell I guess. I went to the kitchen and had supper on the table within 20 minutes. When it was done I hollered, "It's ready! Now, go wash up and get to the table." They must have assigned seats because there wasn't a problem deciding where to sit.

Once they were all settled, I bribed them, "If you eat your food without fighting, and drink all of your milk we'll play out back on the swing-set until bedtime." I don't think I've ever seen kids eat so quickly.

Chapter 8

Hopes of A Friend

When we headed outside, the sun was still shining but it was quickly going down. All four of the “brats” were playing nicely on the slide and the swings. Melody kept running over to me for a hug. “I want a hug Ashwee. Then I’ll play nice,” she begged. So, I gave the hugs willingly.

Across the lot, I could see a young girl coming out of the neighbor’s patio door. I didn’t think much of it. She looked a little familiar. Then, the next thing I heard was, “You are Ashley Gainsworth, right?”

When I looked up, I could see that Laura from my advisory class was walking across the backyard toward me. I answered with a nod of my head. Inside, I was kind of nervous though. I mean, she is so popular and pretty. What could she possibly want coming over here?

When she got to the lawn chairs, she plopped down in the one next to mine.

“So, how are the little terrors tonight?” Laura asked with a snicker.

“Actually, they aren’t a problem at all,” I smiled back.

"Usually I get to watch the kids for Tracy, but with cheerleading I can't get home in time."

"They are pretty good kids and Melody is adorable!" I chimed in.

Wow, I couldn't believe it. Here I am sitting in a lawn chair actually talking to someone. It has been over a month since I have been able to do this.

"So, what do you think of this wonderful town?" Laura asked with concern.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I hate it. I wish we hadn't moved here. I wish my mom would move us back to Indianapolis. The people here aren't very nice and the kids at school are mean." It was almost a shock that I said that much. I looked up hesitantly. I wasn't sure what she'd think when I dumped all of this on her right off the bat. When I looked up, she was smiling.

"We moved here about three years ago. I was in 5th grade. That isn't much different than you. I've been watching you though and I see a lot of myself. I was scared, alone, gangly, and angry at life. I know where you are coming from though. It took a long time before I made any friends here."

"You were gangly?" I couldn't help it. It just slipped out. I mean Laura is so beautiful. I can't imagine her ever being gangly.

"Yep! I was short, extremely overweight, wore braces, and had zits. But, I grew the summer before my 7th-grade year."

"That's incredible!"

"Hey, I just wanted to come over here and tell you that if you are ever feeling lonely, call me, ok? I know what this town is like for newbies. I just want you to know that I'm here if you need me. Ok?"

As she got out of her seat, I looked up and smiled at her. "I will and thanks," I said almost in disbelief.

As Laura walked away, she gave Melody a big hug and waved back at me as she crossed over into her yard. When she was in the house, I hollered at the munchkins, "Let's get in the house and get ready for bed."

"Awww, just a few more minutes," pleaded Quade. "I need to finish my castle".

"Nope, sorry! It's already past your bedtime. Your mom will wonder why you are so crabby tomorrow if I let you stay up any longer. Let's go!" I said as firmly as I could. Muttering the whole way, the kids followed hesitantly and headed to bed.

Chapter 9

Am I Depressed?

The next day at school started off as usual. I walked by myself into Mr. Pedmont's room. Advisory was first hour. I was the first one to arrive so I went to my desk and sat down. Just as I was getting my books out, Mr. Pedmont walked into the classroom with a bunch of worksheets in his hands.

"Good Morning Ashley! How are you today?" he said with his normally bubbly enthusiasm.

"I'm ok," I answered without much thought.

"Hmmm, that doesn't sound very convincing! Is everything going ok?" he asked as he walked to his desk and sat the stack of papers down.

"No, I'm really just fine. I'm tired, that's all. I can't sleep at night." I tried to make myself sound as convincing as possible.

"I have noticed that you don't really hang out with any of the students here. Has the move been pretty difficult for you?" Mr. Pedmont sat down in the desk beside me and looked me right in the eye.

"Well, the kids here aren't exactly the nicest I've ever met. Maybe it's me? Maybe I just don't understand this small town stuff," I questioned.

"A move to a new town is a very stressful thing. It will get better. Just give it time. I will do my best to try and get you involved with the other students in the classroom. I know it seems that they are always picking on you, but for some reason the small town students have a hard time letting new students in, especially when they feel threatened for some reason. I'm not sure why they have singled you out but I will try to make things better. Just let me know if you need anything, ok?" he stated as he looked me in the eye again.

I tried to look away, I didn't want him to see the deep hurt, and I sure didn't want to cry. Not now, not where the other kids can see. "I'll be fine Mr. Pedmont, and I'll let you know if there is anything you can do to help."

He placed his hand on my shoulder and gave it a pat, smiled at me, and got up out of the chair. Just as he sat down at his own desk, the first bell rang and the other students started filtering into the room.

Billy was the first one through the door. He sauntered right past my desk and sat down behind me. I cringed on the inside bracing myself for the war that was about to start. Surprisingly, he just sat there staring at me.

"So, you lived in Indianapolis?" he questioned with curiosity.

"Yeah, in Plainfield, a suburb near there," I answered with reluctance. I wasn't sure why he was asking me questions.

"Yo, Billy, whatcha talking to her for?" Todd hollered across the room as he walked through the door.

"Well, I just wanted to know if she was really from the city," Billy answered and then got up out of his seat and moved to the other side of the room with Todd.

"Alright, Todd, that's enough. There is no reason to tease Billy because he was talking to Ashley," Mr. Pedmont commented from his desk.

The classroom filled quickly and soon the tardy bell rang. As soon as it did, Mr. Pedmont sat down at usual place in the circle.

"Good morning everyone," Mr. Pedmont said with a smile.

"Good morning Mr. Pedmont," everyone said in unison.

"Now, does anyone have anything that they want to share today before we get started with the lesson? Any questions, concerns, problems, issues?" he asked while he looked around the room at each of us. "Ok, let's get started then."

"Last class, we talked about whether we liked ourselves. Today, we are going to talk about depression. Does anyone know what depression is?"

Aaron, the smartest one in the class, raised his hand immediately, but Mr. Pedmont waited a few seconds before letting him answer. "It's when someone is blue all the time and they have a hard time dealing with life."

"That's a very good answer Aaron, but it's a little more involved than that. Here is a handout that we are going to go over today. We are also going to talk about people who are depressed to a point where they no longer want to live. This is someone who is suicidal," he said as he passed the stack of papers around the room for each of us.

When everyone in the circle had one of the handouts, Mr. Pedmont started with the discussion. "Ok, everyone look at the top of the page and follow along with me as I read some facts about depression and suicide."

Mr. Pedmont started reading, "Depression plagues some people with powerful, extreme, and unreasonable feelings, hopelessness, despair, self-doubt and

'world weariness'. Seventy percent of people who die from suicide suffer from depression! Suicide very often is a desperate, final, effort of control over the symptoms of depressive disorders."

"Now, I don't want to hear names, but has anyone ever known anyone that was suffering from depression?"

"My mom was depressed after I was born. I don't remember what they called it, but she had to take special medicine so she would feel better," Laura said after a short silence.

"My cousin killed himself right before his 30th birthday," Ryan said quietly. "My uncle is still blaming himself. But, he didn't know. He didn't think he was that bad. No one in the family understands why he did it."

"That is very difficult Ryan, and I'm sorry to hear about your cousin." Mr. Pedmont said sympathetically.

"Are there any other comments?" Mr. Pedmont asked with growing concern. When no one had anything else to say, he continued. "Ok, now that we have read what the signs of depression are, let's go over the signs of an adolescent who may be suicidal."

Again Mr. Pedmont started reading from the handout, "According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, there are several signs of adolescents who may try to kill themselves. Some teens may display changes in eating and sleeping habits. Others may withdraw from friends, family, and regular activities that they used to enjoy. Other teens may act out with rebellious behavior, display violent actions, or running away. Another sign might be unusual neglect of personal appearance or a noticeable personality change. Suicidal teens may experience persistent boredom, have difficulty concentrating, or have a decline in the quality of schoolwork. If a teen's grades change dramatically, this is a sign that there is something wrong. The teens may complain about not feeling good all of the time. This is usually because they don't feel well emotionally. Another sign would be a loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy. Also, not tolerating or accepting praise or rewards could be a sign. So, does this mean that a person that is suicidal will display all of these symptoms?"

"No, they may just show a few of them," Laura said quietly. "I knew someone who was suicidal that only had a drop in grades at school."

"You are right Laura, not all people who are contemplating suicide are going to show all of the signs. Those are just some of the things you need to look for," Mr. Pedmont added. "Now, does anyone know what some verbal hints may be?"

“Well, maybe they would say that they aren’t going to be around for long?” Brent added with uncertainty.

“Great answer Brent,” Mr. Pedmont praised. “Anyone else want to give it a try?”

Kristi reluctantly raised her hand but then said, “I had always heard that people who are suicidal give away their prized possessions. Is that true Mr. Pedmont?”

“Yes Kristi, in some cases that does happen. That is another sign that you can look for,” he assured.

Mr. Pedmont took a little bit of a breather, and looked around the room at all of us. After he made eye contact with each of us, he continued reading. “A teenager may also become suddenly cheerful after a period of depression. This is because when a person is really depressed, they don’t have the energy to follow through with suicide. But, as they are being treated, they start regaining some of their energy. It may also be due to the fact that they have made the decision to end their life and it gives them some peace of mind.”

“Now, those are the things you should be watching for. It may be you, your friends, family, and sometimes it’s a parent. Once you start recognizing the signs, you need to know what to do. You need to take the person seriously. What are some things that you can do?”

"Well, we could be good listeners if they want to talk," Justin stated.

"If I thought a person was suicidal, I would flat out ask them if it is true," Laura said.

"Good thinking Laura," Mr. Pedmont encouraged.

"I wouldn't leave the person alone if I knew they were going to try something like that!" Todd said with vigor.

"Well, Todd, you are right. But just staying with the person won't keep them from trying something. You need to make sure to tell an adult. You don't have the skills that are needed to try and get them to work through their feelings. They need to talk to a professional counselor or psychiatrist. But, when they do go get help, you can be there to support them and let them know they are important to you," Mr. Pedmont said as he looked around the room. He was continually gazing at all of the students in the class. I'm not sure what he was watching for, but he seemed to be taking everything in.

"What can you do for yourself?" Mr. Pedmont asked the class.

"I think you need to recognize how you are feeling and maybe write things down," Laura said with confidence.

"Great Laura!" Mr. Pedmont smiled at her.

"Mr. Pedmont, my cousin shut himself off from everyone. How are we suppose to help them if they don't let us be around them long enough to realize they are having problems?" Ryan asked with tears in his eyes. —

"That is a tough one Ryan. But, I guess if you know someone who is normally a social person, and they no longer spend time with their friends, then you should take that as a warning sign and make it a point to go visit," Mr. Pedmont suggested. "I'm sure your family has had a very difficult time dealing with what happened to your cousin Ryan. The ones that are left behind are filled with many questions that will never be answered."

Sam, who had been listening half-heartedly the whole class period finally spoke up, "I had heard only people who are alcohol or drug users commit suicide. Is that true?"

"Not always Samantha. If a person suddenly starts using alcohol or drugs that could be a sign. But they do tend to increase a person's suicidal tendencies," Mr. Pedmont stated to the whole class. "Are there any other comments?"

When no one answered, Mr. Pedmont continued, "Now that we have gone over the signs and symptoms, it's really important that if you ever feel this way

yourself, that you let someone know. So, what I am going to do is give each of you a card. The card is a "Help, I'm feeling depressed/suicidal, and I don't know where to turn." Each one has your own name on it. All you need to do is give this to someone and they will know how you are feeling and not have to ask questions. Give it to a person you know will take you seriously and will try to get you some help. Sometimes it's really hard for a person who is feeling this way to tell someone because they are afraid they won't be taken seriously. But, this card is a way that you can alert someone without having to say anything at all." Mr. Pedmont passed the laminated cards around the room and everyone in the class took one.

As I looked around, I could see everyone reading over the card and then sticking it in their folders. I placed mine in my diary and used it as a bookmark.

"Now are there any questions about what we have discussed today?" Mr. Pedmont asked. "If not, I'm just going to review what you need to do if someone you know and care about is depressed and thinking about ending his or her life. You let an adult know as soon as you find out. Remember, time is a major factor with suicide. Even if you promised not to tell anyone, you are not capable of keeping your friend safe by yourself. You need to get someone else involved. The person may feel like you betrayed him or her, but you have to look at the big picture. Although you may lose a good friend, it's more important to save a life. So, does anyone have any questions now?"

Before anyone could say anything, the bell rang. "We'll finish our discussion the next time. Have a great day everyone," Mr. Pedmont said to the class as the students put their books together and left the room.

I sat there and read over the handouts again. Something in me kept saying that these worksheets were describing me. But, then again, they weren't talking about someone who had just moved two states away, or someone whose mom got remarried and forgot about her daughter. However, I couldn't help but wonder if what I was feeling was depression, not that I was worthless as a person.

"Are you ok Ashley? You look like you are a little upset about today's discussion," Mr. Pedmont asked quietly as he came closer to my desk.

"No, I'm ok. It just reminded me of someone I know, that's all," I said as I quickly put the handouts away.

The rest of the class was coming through the door and moving the chairs back into the usual rows.

When the bell rang, Mr. Pedmont said the first thing we were going to do was 15 minutes of free writing, so we needed to get out our journals. I thought about writing in my classroom journal, but I took out my diary instead.

Dear Diary,

Am I depressed? Well, I don't sleep very well at night. I'm never in a good mood. I don't like myself. I don't eat. I worry about everything. I do think about giving up on life in general. But is this depression or is it just because of all of the changes the past few months? If I told someone I thought I was depressed, would they think I was making it up? Would they think I was crazy? Would they take me seriously? I wish I had the answers. I can relate to what we talked about in class, but what should I do? Maybe I should talk to someone. It would be nice to get this off of my chest.

Love, Ashley

"Ok class, the time is up," said Mr. Pedmont. "Put your journals away, get out your literature books and open them up to page 115. We are going to read about Tom Sawyer."

The rest of the class seemed to fly by. I wasn't really paying attention, except when it was my turn to read. I kept wondering whether I had a serious problem or not, and if I should tell anyone. I mean, I have been thinking that I would be better off dead.

The rest of the day went by in a haze. I moved from class to class without much thought. I was trying to decide whether I should let someone know that I hate

myself and feel like I would be better off dead. I was going to babysit Tracy's kids tonight; maybe I can talk to Laura about things. Hopefully, she won't think I'm weird or a nut case.

Chapter 10

Homework HELP!

I arrived at Tracy's house promptly at 7 o'clock. The kids had finished eating supper and had plopped themselves in front of the television for their evening fix of a Disney movie.

"So, who wants to see my Tony Stewart collection?" I asked as they noticed me walking into the room.

Immediately the boys were flying toward me with curious eyes. "What did you bring? Can we see?" they cried with squeals of glee.

"Well, I brought the model of the rookie car that he ran in the 1999 Daytona 500. I also brought my stickers, key-chain, fan club hat, and t-shirt. I wanted to give one thing to each of you so you don't forget who is the BEST NASCAR driver," I added with a smile.

Immediately the boys started fighting over what I had laid out on the couch.

"There is one rule. If you fight, you lose out. So, you need to decide who gets what nicely," I scolded them gently.

By this time, Melody had made her way to ask for her hug. As I pulled her up into my arms, she clasped her hands around my neck and squeezed with all of her might. I hugged her back, but she didn't let go. Melody kept squeezing me. I felt something. It was like she was scared. I was too, so I hugged back like I never had before. Why does it take a toddler to figure things out?

"I wuv you Ashwee," Melody muffled into my dark blonde hair.

"I love you too kiddo," I sniffled. Just then, Tracy had walked into the living room.

"Melody, don't hug Ashley so hard next time. Look what you did. You made her eyes water. You can't squeeze people's necks; they can't breathe," Tracy sternly informed her little one.

"I sowwy Ashwee," Melody whimpered out.

"It's ok kiddo; you didn't hurt me," I winked back at her.

"Ok, I'm heading to class. I should be home around 10:15. The kids need to be in bed by 7:30 sharp," Tracy said loud enough for the kids to turn and look right at her. "Got it you guys?"

"Yes mam!" they all grunted in unison.

With that, Tracy grabbed her keys, looked at me again, and hesitated. "Are you ok Ashley? You don't look like you are feeling the best? Do you feel up to watching the kids? If not, Laura will be home in an hour or so. Give her a call if you need to go home, ok? Her phone number is on the refrigerator."

"It's ok; I'm just really tired. I haven't slept very well the past few weeks. I'll be fine. Go learn a lot; we'll be fine," I tried to sound as convincing as possible.

With a shrug, Tracy was out the door.

"Ok you two, who gets what? Have you two decided yet?" I asked with a muffled laugh. They were fighting over the car because they both wanted it. "Hey, I have an idea. Let's keep it on your dresser that way you both get to see it every day. One of you can have the hat and one can have the t-shirt. Melody can have the key-chain and Brittany can have the stickers. How does that sound?"

"That will be ok with us!!" the boys hollered as they took the car to their room.

"Where my car Ashwee?" Melody asked with tears in her eyes.

"Well, it's right here Melody. It's just your size and it's on the key-chain. Can you see it now?" I explained as I placed it into her little hands.

"Thanks for the stickers Ashley," Brittany hollered over the top of her book. She didn't get up to look at them though. She seemed to be engrossed in Little House on the Prairie. Her mom said she has been able to read since she was four. It's pretty impressive.

"So, Brittany, do you and Melody want to take a shower first, or should we let the boys?" I asked even though I knew the answer.

"The boys can. I'm still reading," Brittany responded.

"Quade, Bryce, you two need to get in the shower, it's almost bed time," I hollered down the hallway as I walked to their room. As I peeked through their door, I could see that they had cleared off their entire dresser, and the only thing on it was the #20 car. It didn't quite fit the #24 and #3 décor previously adorning the walls, but they didn't seem to notice.

"Ok you two, shower time!" I restated as I guided them to the bathroom.

"Thanks Ashley!" Bryce said over his shoulder.

"Yeah, thanks Ashley!" Quade repeated.

While the boys were taking a shower, I read a book to Melody. She listened carefully to every word I said and read along with the pictures. I never knew that Beauty and the Beast was such a long story. By the time I finished, it was 7:45PM and the boys still weren't out of the bathroom.

"Melody, Brittany, you two go get your pajamas from your rooms and head to the shower. I will go get the boys out of the way and into bed in the meantime."

I headed to the bathroom and heard hysterical laughter from the other side of the door. When I knocked, the laughing stopped immediately. "Ok you two, I'm coming in. You better have your pajamas on," I said as I opened up the door.

"Hmmm, Quade, I'm not sure your mom would appreciate that you are wearing her lipstick," I told him as I started wiping it off with a Kleenex. "You two need to head to bed. We'll say prayers when your sisters are done with their shower. But, for now, I want you to be in your beds and quiet! Got it?"

"Yeah, but will you promise to tuck us in first?" Bryce asked as he headed out the door.

"You bet!"

While the girls were in the shower, I called Laura. Her mom answered so I asked her to have Laura call me at Tracy's when she got home. As soon as I got off the phone, Melody came streaking out of the bathroom with Brittany close on her tail with a towel. She finally caught Melody in her bedroom's doorway. By the time I got there, she was wrapped tightly in a towel.

"Well, little lady, are you ready to visit dreamland?" I asked tiredly.

"Yep, but Ashwee, I need a bedtime stowy." Melody whined.

"Not tonight Melody, your mommy said you were suppose to be in bed by 7:30, it's way past your bedtime." I said with relief. I was really exhausted and didn't want to read another story.

"Ok you guys, let's get in bed and pray. Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. God Bless.....Brittany, your turn."

"I bless my Mom," Brittany said without hesitation.

"I bless my new car," Quade said with a snicker.

"I bless the whole wide world," Bryce said with conviction.

"I bwess you Ashwee," Melody chimmed in happily.

"I bless ALL OF YOU! Good night guys," I chirped as I walked around to each of their doors and shut off their lights.

When I finally sat down on the couch to do my homework the phone rang.

"Hi Ashley, this is Laura. Mom said you called. Wassup?" she asked.

"Well, I was just wondered if you wanted to come over and talk until Tracy gets back," I held my breath for the answer.

"Sure, I'd love to but I do have algebra homework. Do you know much about algebra? I am doing horrible in that class," Laura laughed as if she really didn't care.

"Actually, I do. I was in advanced math back in Indiana. Bring it over and I'll see if I can help," I chirped.

"Okie dokie, I'll be there in a few seconds," Laura laughed. "Just let me change and grab a bite to eat quick."

It didn't take Laura long. She was knocking quietly on the door within 15 minutes.

"Hi Laura. How was practice?"

"Oh, it was ok. If you take away all of the girls who talk about boys and put down other people, I would have more fun. I just don't understand why they talk about people like that." Laura said sarcastically as she plopped herself down on the floor beside the couch. "Whatcha working on?"

"Oh, I'm trying to get some reflections written for English class. It's not that big of a deal. I like to write anyway."

"Well, here is the math page we are working on. It's factoring. I kind of know what I'm doing, but I really don't like math all that much. I would rather stick to things I can do on a calculator," she said while laughing. "Besides, I don't think I'm going to be working with algebra when I become a nurse."

"You want to be a nurse?" I asked with curiosity.

"Sure, I mean, what other job would be more fun. You'd get to work with different people all the time and take care of them. I love helping people, especially when they are sick. What do you want to do Ashley?"

"Oh, I don't know, I don't have any plans for the future. When I lived in Indianapolis, I knew what I wanted to do. My friend Candice and I were going to race Indy cars. I know it sounds stupid but I always wanted to be able to drive as fast as I could around a racetrack. That would be such a rush. But, I don't care about that so much anymore. I even gave Tracy's kids all of my Tony Stewart stuff. I just don't need it anymore," I told Laura with disappointment.

"Wow, it sounds like you really loved living in Indianapolis. I'll bet any place would be better than "dink town USA". There is absolutely nothing to do here. It's a drag."

"Yeah, tell me about it. I have no desire to do much of anything anymore. You are pretty much the only person I even talk to, other than adults. Thanks for coming over tonight. I have been feeling pretty down. I just needed to talk. Let me see your book, and see if I can figure this out for you." When she handed me the book, I opened it to the page with the bookmark. I reached into my bag for a pen, and the "Help Me" card Mr. Pedmont had given us in class. As I put it in her book, I kept thinking that Laura really cares. She will get me some help. I just don't want to hurt inside anymore.

"Well, it looks like you need to figure the equations like this. FOIL. First, Outside, Inside, Last. If you do it in that order, you will be able to come up with a new

equation. You can then add or subtract the numbers that are alike. Do you think you can get that?" I asked.

"Actually, Ashley, I get it. I just didn't want to sit at home tonight. Besides, I will do this later. Let's just watch a movie and eat popcorn. I heard that "Scream" is on cable tonight. My mom won't let me watch it at home. She hates scary movies. She claims they still give her nightmares.

"Oh, ok. Just make sure you get your homework done. I heard that Mr. Wright, your math teacher, is tough if you don't complete assignments and I don't want to keep you from getting it done." I tried to sound like it didn't bother me. But, at the same time, I really wanted to talk about how I was feeling. I left the card in her math book with the bookmark, closed it, and handed it back to Laura.

After she put her homework in her bookbag, she flipped through the channels until she found "Scream" and then ran to the kitchen to put some popcorn in the microwave.

"Please tell me you like butter Ashley, because I love popcorn with tons of butter," she pleaded.

"Anything is fine with me. I'm not really that hungry anyway," I answered with defeatedly.

When she got back, we turned off the lights and watched the movie in silence. It wasn't what I had planned, but she was there, and I didn't feel as alone as I did most of the time.

Before the movie was over, Tracy blew through the door with her usual burst of energy. "Oh, hi Laura. I figured you might be here. Would you mind staying here while I drive Ashley home?"

"Not a problem Tracy," Laura muttered with her mouth buried in the pillow. She had been jumping with fright throughout the entire movie and now had a death grip on one of the couch pillows. It was a good thing she was squeezing the pillow and not my arm or she might have broken it.

"Night Laura! Thanks for keeping me company tonight," I said with finality as I passed Tracy and went out the door.

"Nighters Ashley! Don't let the killer get ya," Laura added with a huge giggle.

As Tracy drove me home, she bantered on about how her classes were and about the guy that sits beside her. She thinks he's going to ask her out but wasn't sure if she wanted to date again or not. She was asking me for advice. I just watched the traffic and prayed that Laura would find the card and call me tonight. I still needed to talk. Tracy was too happy tonight. I didn't want to bring

her mood down, so I didn't say anything. When we pulled in my driveway, I reached for the door and was about to get out when Tracy said, "Hold on a second, you still aren't looking the best. Are you coming down with something? You just seem so down today. Anything I can do to help?"

"No, I'm just tired, but thanks for asking. Thanks for letting me watch the kids Tracy. They are the best. Give Melody tons of hugs and kisses for me. That way she won't forget me," I added as I headed out the door. I could hear Tracy saying I'll see her soon enough, but the rest was muffled behind a closed door. There was no way I was going to explain that one to Tracy. If that happened, she'd call my mom for sure. Mom would never understand and tell me to just "Get over it, we moved, make the most of it. I'm happy for a change Ashley, please try for me". I think I can repeat that conversation in my sleep.

Quietly, I headed for my room. Since I still wasn't ready to go to sleep, I figured I could write in my diary until Laura calls me.

Chapter 11

The Plan

Dear Diary,

I have tried. I REALLY have. I just can't take life anymore. Sometimes the hurt is too much to bear. I miss my friends. I miss my mom. It's like I have no one in the entire world that I can talk to. I wish I didn't live here. I want so much to be able to go back in time. I wish I was back in Indianapolis, with Candice, and the rest of the gang. I felt great when I hung out with them. We used to go to the mall, buy CD's, hang out at Union Station, and check out the boys. Now, I just stay at home in my room and block out the world. The boys here don't even notice me much less ask me out to the upcoming dance. I have no friends to go with and no date. So, I won't even go.

Dancing. Now that is another sore subject. Mom used to take me country line dancing on Friday evenings in Indianapolis. From 6-9 pm they gave free dance lessons, and minors could go. It was called "Little Bit of Texas". We had a blast. My mom was more like my friend. We could talk about anything. She told me all about what was going on in her life. I told her all about mine. Back then she was actually interested. I loved hanging out at the INDY 500 with her. We would walk up and down the strip before the Indy and the Brickyard races. Last year, we watched Tony

Stewart race the Indy 500, and then raced home to watch him in the Coca-Cola 500 on TV.

But then she met Jacob Banks and she forgot about me. At first he seemed to be interested in me too. We did things together. But slowly, they started leaving me at home. Mom said it was because I was old enough to take care of myself. I don't believe that. I know it was because they didn't want to spend time with me though. I still can't believe she married the guy; she hardly knew him. They met last summer and got married a month later.

He's the reason we moved to DeWitt. He got a job with John Deere in Moline and mom got a job in Clinton. So, I was forced to move two states away from everything that meant the most to me. I had to leave after the first month of 6th grade. It wasn't fair. No one asked me what I wanted. No one asked if I cared. Since my real dad was killed in a car accident two years ago, I didn't have the option of living with my "other parent". I was trapped.

Did I tell them what I thought? No. How could I? I have never seen my mom so happy. Besides, I know now that she can manage without me. Why ruin her happiness?

It's late and I still haven't gotten a phone call. I tried to tell Laura tonight, but I couldn't find the right words. How do you tell someone that you really appreciate the kindness but you still want to die? I left the card in her book on the page her teacher assigned for homework. But, she didn't call. I guess I was wrong again. I guess she didn't care enough to see if I was serious. It doesn't matter though. I've made up my mind.

*It won't be long now though. I can't take the loneliness much longer. I can't eat. I can't sleep. I just hurt inside. It's like my heart aches and I feel like I'm in this bottomless pit. Every time I feel a little bit better, something happens and I feel like someone has come along and thrown another pile of dirt over my head. No matter what I do or how hard I try to get out, I just sink in deeper. I can't fight anymore. I'm tired of crying myself to sleep and not having anyone come and give me a hug. I'm tired of walking down the halls at school only to be razzed as I go. I'm tired of trying to talk to my classmates only to be ridiculed. I'm tired, just plain tired. I give up. I don't have the strength to keep climbing the walls that I run into. I'm going to go to sleep, forever, and never wake up. Maybe then the hurting will stop. Maybe then I will find peace in Heaven.....
Tomorrow, tomorrow I say "goodbye".*

Regretfully,

Ashley

As I finished writing, I looked up at the clock. It was 1 AM. Mom and Jacob were sound asleep. I reached over and shut off the light. Silently, the tears slipped down my cheeks and dampened the pillow. Sniffing, I closed my eyes and dreamed of what Heaven was like. In the background, Garth Brooks was singing "The Dance". I drifted off to sleep knowing that tomorrow I would get to see my Daddy again.

Chapter 12

Just Leave Me Alone!

The alarm clock buzzed loudly at 7 AM. Rapidly, I hit the snooze button and not all too kindly.

"Ashley!! Ashley! Ashley, it's time for you to get ready for school," Mom hollered as she blew past my bedroom door.

"I don't feel good today Mom," I whispered as loud as I could without further adding to my headache.

I could hear Mom quickly turning around and heading back to my door. When she peeked through the door, I tried to give my best "sick" look.

"Oh, honey, what's wrong? Does your stomach hurt? Are you running a fever?" she asked, coming to the side of my bed and putting her hand on my forehead.

"Well, you don't feel warm, but you do have really dark rings under your eyes. Does your head hurt?"

"Yeah, really bad. It's throbbing behind my eyes," I added with a quiet moan for effect. "I don't think I can go to school today Mom. Can you call and let them know that I'm sick?"

"Sure sweetie. Anything else you need before I head out the door? Jacob and I are already running late, but I'll get whatever you want after I make the call," Mom chirped out.

"No, I'm fine, just leave me alone and everything will be fine, the way you want it. Honest," I whispered. She didn't hear the last part because she was already heading down the stairs with the phone in hand. I could hear her talking to the school secretary.

As she flew out the door, she hollered up the stairs. "I love you, honey. Page me if you need anything today, ok?"

"I will if I need you mom, don't worry," I hollered as best I could. She didn't hear it anyway. She had already closed the door.

"Just leave me alone, Mom; you have Jacob to fill your life," I whispered as I heard the car zoom off down the road. Silently the tears started to roll down my cheeks.

Chapter 13

What About Me?

Dear Diary,

I can't help but wonder why no one cares. Everyone else just walks by without really looking at me. I am hurting inside, but no one notices. I am dying inside, but no one is saving me. I wish things could be different. I wish it didn't come to this, but I can't keep living and hating who I am. If only I could be someone different. If only I wasn't so.....me. But, as I say goodbye.....I just have one question.....WHAT ABOUT ME?????

Ashley

As I started to put the pen and paper away between the mattresses, I realized that no one would think to look there. I want them to understand why I can't live anymore. I want my mom to understand that I am a no one, that no one will care when I'm gone. No one sees me anyway. So, I decide to leave my diary open on my dresser.

I gaze across the room at the bottle of pills. It's almost full. The sleeping pills my mom used to rely on, that were forgotten in the medicine cabinet, will gradually lull me into my "nothingness". I won't feel any more heartache. I won't feel any more pain. I will just "be" in the afterlife, where ever that may be.

Slowly, I walk over to the dresser and pick up the bottle. I struggle with the lid and finally it pops off. The pills are little and white. They look so harmless. I wonder briefly if I am going to feel any pain or if I will just never wake up. My heart is pounding with fear.

One by one, I take the little pills and wash them down with water. The tears are coming faster now. It's like a flood that has been held back for so long. With a sigh of relief, I give into them.

With every pill I swallow, I pray that God will forgive me. I pray that He will understand what I am doing. He knows what I have been feeling. But, at the same time, I wonder why He let it come to this.

The bottle is half empty now. I'm tired of the slow, tedious pace, so I put the rest in my palm. Silently, I say goodbye to all of the people who have hurt me and made me feel worthless. I stuff them all in my mouth and take a big gulp of water. I gag at the bitter taste, but manage to take them all.

I put the empty bottle beside me and lay my head down on my pillow. The tears are still sliding down my face, but I'm beginning to feel at peace with the world. I know I won't be here much longer. I close my eyes and wait for what is yet to come.

Chapter 14

A Cry Too Late?

"Mr. Pedmont! Mr. Pedmont!!" Laura screamed as she flew through the door of his classroom. "Mr. Pedmont!!!"

Mr. Pedmont had been sitting at his desk going over his lesson plans when he was suddenly taken by surprise. Laura was obviously upset by something so he jumped up and led her over to a chair by his desk. She was on the brink of tears and looked terrified.

"Laura, what is going on?" he questioned as pulled his chair closer to her.

"Mr. Pedmont, I think Ashley is going to do something stupid. You know, Ashley from our advisory group."

"Laura, slow down, take a deep breath, and tell me why you think that." He asked with growing concern. At the same time, he was praying that his suspicions were not correct. He had been watching Ashley closely the past few days. She didn't seem to be adjusting to school here. She didn't have any friends and stayed off by herself. He had tried to get her involved with other students but she pushed them away.

"Well, for starters, we have been talking about what it's like to be the new kid in town. And, well, she told me she is not at all happy. Then, last night, I went next door to my house where she was babysitting. She was helping me with my math homework. She must have slipped this into my book. I never saw it. What if I didn't find it in time? What if it's too late and she is already dead?" Laura cried as she handed him the "Help Me" card they were given in class.

"Ok, you are saying that Ashley gave you this card last night?" Mr. Pedmont probed for more details. He saw Ashley's name in bold print at the bottom of the card. Through a flood of tears, Laura nodded her head in a definite yes.

Quickly, Mr. Pedmont got up from his desk, went to the office call button, and pressed it. When the secretary, Mrs. Meany, asked if he needed anything, he requested that the guidance counselor and the principal come to his room immediately.

Within minutes, the principal and guidance counselor were walking through the door. Mr. Pedmont, who was normally a very calm teacher, was suddenly flushed and his face was set in obvious distress. Upon seeing this, both Ms. Hutchinson and Mr. Truman realized that there was a grave situation at hand.

Ms. Hutchinson over went to Laura and put her arm across her shoulders.

"What's wrong Laura?", she asked with sympathy in her voice.

Laura repeated the same story to both the counselor and the principal, "I think Ashley Gainsworth is going to commit suicide. She left her card in my math book last night."

Immediately, the principal called Mrs. Meany over the intercom to find out whether Ashley was in attendance at school. They wanted to bring her into the room and talk to her. However, Mrs. Meany replied, "I'm sorry, but Ashley's mom called in early this morning and said Ashley was sick."

Mr. Truman asked, "Can I get her address and phone number from you?" As Mrs. Meany relayed the number, he wrote it down on a scratch pad that he took from Mr. Pedmont's desk. He then tried to call Ashley's house from his cell phone, but no one answered. Then, he tried to call Mrs. Banks at work. But when her voice mail answered the phone, he quickly left a message for her to call the school as soon as possible.

With no other options available to notify her mom, Mr. Pedmont called 911. With growing concern he told dispatch, "Yes, I have a student that I think is suicidal. She is not in attendance here today and I tried to call her house but no one answered. Ok, yes, her number is 555-6794. She lives at 616 Brentworth. I'm the Principal, Nathan Truman. Yes, call me as soon as you know anything."

When he hung up the phone, he looked at the room and smiled at Laura. The next words he spoke hung in the air for what seemed like an eternity. "Laura, what you have done is one of the bravest things I have ever seen. I want you to know that whatever happens you can't blame yourself for not finding the note last night. You did the right thing as soon as you knew and this is not your fault. Do you understand?"

Laura nodded and put her head down on her desk. All that could be heard throughout the room was her gut wrenching sobs. Mr. Truman looked at Ms. Hutchinson as she soothed Laura and tried to reassure her. But as he looked up at Mr. Pedmont, he knew that this was out of their hands. There was nothing to do but wait and pray that Ashley was ok.

Chapter 15

Fight For Life

Suddenly through a haze, I could hear a phone ringing. It kept ringing. I wondered why no one was answering it. Then, I realized it was the phone beside my bed. I tried to raise my hand to answer it but it was paralyzed on the bed. I tried to get up, but I was unable to do so. I was so drowsy. I thought, "Why can't I get up? Why can't I move my arm? What's wrong with me?"

Suddenly, I realized what I had done. It was like waking up from a nightmare. Only this time, I was waking up to the truth. I had taken the entire bottle of sleeping pills. Fear gripped at every part of my being. I didn't want to die.

Silently I pleaded, "Oh, please help me. Please.....".

I tried to call for help, but I couldn't speak. Desperately, I tried to get to the phone, but it was no use. It was only inches from me, but I couldn't answer it.

"If only I could get it off the hook then maybe I could ask for help," I thought with a glimmer of hope. Maybe I wouldn't die after all. But then, it quit ringing. "Even the phone has given up on me....."

"No, please ring again. I'll answer this time, I promise! Please don't leave me here to die," I thought to myself. Inside, I was crying and begging for help. "I don't want to die," I kept thinking. But once again, I fell back into oblivion.

The next thing I knew, I was looking down at a helpless body lying on a bed. It was like I was watching a movie through a long tunnel. The room was so quiet; too quiet actually. Why was this girl just laying on her bed? It was a bright day outside. Shouldn't she be in school?

All of a sudden, I realized I was looking at myself. That poor helpless girl was ME. "What have I done? I don't really want to die! Get up, get off the bed, call for help, do SOMETHING! Don't just lay there!" I found myself yelling to the girl on the bed. But, nothing happened; she just lay there.

Then, a bunch of people came flooding into my room. They were wearing bright blue shirts and navy pants. One was carrying a bright orange backpack. The other was talking into a radio telling someone all about this young girl who had taken a bottle of pills. The one on the radio picked up the bottle and read the label to person on the other end.

I wondered, "What were they doing in my room? What are they doing to me?" Numbers are being shouted through the air. "Blood pressure is 60 over 40, we are losing her!" one of the paramedics shouted above the voices. They were

sticking me with needles and shoving a tube down my throat. As they loaded me onto the stretcher, I felt myself move down the hall with them. A police officer was leading the way. He was talking to another officer that was standing in the living room.

Deep down, I felt every part of me tense up as I began to pray for help. "Please help me, I didn't mean to do this. I just wanted someone to notice me. I just wanted the pain in my heart and my head to go away, if only for a little while. Please, don't let me die." I realized no one could hear me because my mouth was motionless.

Everyone was in such a hurry. Just as they got me to the door, I saw a flash of my mother. She was running along beside me, screaming at me as usual.

"Why can't she ever give me a break?" I wondered with exasperation.

I could barely hear what she was saying. "I love you, Ashley, I love you baby. Please hold on."

"Why didn't she tell me that before? I wouldn't have done this if I had known!"

"I'm sorry mom, I'm so sorry," I found myself screaming back. But she couldn't hear me. No one could hear me. My mom got into the ambulance with me. She was holding my hand.

There were so many people standing around the ambulance. The doors of the ambulance were shut and everything went black again.

Chapter 16

A School In Pain

During lunch period, Mr. Truman called an emergency meeting with the teachers. He announced to the staff, "Ashley Lynn Gainsworth tried to take her life this morning." He kept talking as he passed out a piece of paper to each teacher. "Mrs. Banks gave this to one of the police officers shortly after they arrived at the hospital and found out that Ashley was in a coma. She wants us to announce what has happened to the student body to waylay any of the rumors that are bound to start flowing. It's a small town and word will travel fast. Later this afternoon, we will meet in our advisory classes and read the announcement to the students. There will be additional counselors available in the office. If you find your class needs additional assistance please press the intercom. Now, if any of you have any questions, we have a few more minutes before the students will be returning from lunch break."

"I want the counselor to be in our room when the announcement is made. I'm not so sure I will be able to get through it," Mr. Pedmont said through tears. "I was suppose to be able to recognize the signs. I knew Ashley wasn't happy, I just didn't take the time to reach her like I should have."

"Eric, you can't blame yourself. You may have known, but I'm sure you didn't realize how grave the situation was. She was very quiet and kept to herself most

of the time in my classroom. That alone should have been an indication to all of us that she was not adapting well to her new school surroundings. We all should have seen the signs," Mrs. Jefferson said soothingly as she comforted Mr. Pedmont.

Later that afternoon, Mr. Truman announced over the loudspeaker. "Teachers, please dismiss your students to their advisory groups until further notice."

When all of the students had walked to their classroom, each of the advisory teachers solemnly read the piece of paper that they were given at an emergency meeting during lunch period, "Mrs. Banks, the mother of Ashley Lynn Gainsworth, a 6th grader, wants all of you to know that Ashley has overdosed. She is currently in the Intensive Care Unit at University Hospital. She is in a coma, and they aren't sure she is going to wake up."

As the intensity of what happened sank in, some of the students began to cry, while others hugged. The whole school was silent. Then slowly, student spoke as they were dragged out of the initial shock of what had happened.

Mr. Pedmont's room was the quietest of all. You could have heard a pin drop. Each student looked around. They all seemed to be drawn to the empty chair, Ashley's chair. Laura reached out to grab Jessica's hand. One by one, the

whole class joined hands until the circle was complete. Mr. Pedmont asked, "Would anyone like to talk about Ashley?"

Laura was the first to speak. "You know, she was so quiet but I got to know her a little bit. None of us really reached out to her and I feel bad about that. I tried to talk to her but she had this wall up. She never really let me in but I knew what she was feeling. I knew, because three years ago, I felt the same. I was ready to quit. I didn't think anyone would understand. But, I had a good friend who helped pull me through. Ashley had no one. I just hope she gets the same chance to find out that life really isn't that bad."

Then, Mr. Pedmont looked up to find Billy crying and fighting for words. "Take your time Billy, go ahead when you are ready."

"You know, this is all my fault. If I hadn't teased her so much, or thrown snowballs at her, or knocked her books out of her hands, or told her she was a toad. I wish I could tell her I didn't really mean it. Heck, I always thought she was kind of cute. I just figured she knew it," he choked back through tears.

"Me too," piped Todd. "We didn't mean to make her feel bad. We were just joking. So, why did she do it anyway? I don't understand why anyone would want to die!"

Mr. Pedmont was at a loss for words. He, too, struggled with his emotions, but finally said, "Sometimes people feel things and don't let others know. Ashley left her card in Laura's textbook and Laura came and told me as soon as she found it. She was in math class, but she knew how important it was to tell an adult. Laura was very responsible and she did everything she could to try to save Ashley. It is out of our hands now. Unfortunately, suicide is the second leading cause of death of young people. The problem is that the kids who are suffering from depression feel so alone and feel that life is hopeless. Oftentimes, they don't want to die, but think that is the only way to stop their pain." As Mr. Pedmont was talking about what Laura had done, everyone looked at her.

Laura told them, "It doesn't matter if she is mad at me for the rest of my life. I just couldn't live with myself if I didn't tell anyone. I remember what I felt like when I was depressed and felt like I wanted to die. I just wanted someone to care. I think she was hoping I would care enough to try and stop her. But, when I didn't call her last night, she probably figured that I didn't care either. But, I really do. She is a great person. I just pray that she lives to find that out."

Thoughtful silence

While wiping a tear from his eye, Mr. Pedmont added, "This was Ashley's cry for help. She didn't do this for attention. The warning signs were there, we just didn't take them seriously. Let's all hold hands and take some time to quietly reflect on what has happened."

Chapter 17

Second Chances

Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep.....

“Would somebody please turn off that noise. It’s driving me crazy!” I thought to myself. I carefully opened my eyes. There were machines all over. I blinked a few times because the lights were so bright. I tried to swallow, but my mouth and throat were too dry. I lifted my arm and looked at the IV taped to my hand. I hate needles so I was surprised to realize that it didn’t hurt.

Slowly, I started putting everything together. “I must be in the hospital,” I said with a dry, hoarse voice. I could hear people talking but I couldn’t see past the drawn curtain around my bed. There was a video camera pointed right at me, so I quickly looked away. Suddenly, the curtain was pulled back, and a man walked to the side of the bed.

“The nurses said you were moving around in here,” he explained. “I’m Dr. Carter your psychiatrist. Once Dr. Trask, the cardiologist, releases you from Intensive Care we are going to move you to the 5th floor. That is where we are going to help you Ashley. We will talk through what you’ve been feeling and help you find reasons to live again.”

"That's right! I took a bunch of pills. I tried to kill myself," I said as I remembered what had happened in vivid detail. I winced with pain. The doctor poured me a glass of water and said, "You might have a sore throat from the tube we had to use to pump your stomach. Can you talk?"

"Who found me? How did I end up here? I should be dead right now."

"Well, you didn't die. The doctors and nurses fought hard to save you. You have been given another chance. A girl found your card in her math book the morning you did this. She told a teacher that she thought you were going to do this. The school tried to call you at home and when you didn't answer they called 911. You were in and out of consciousness when the ambulance arrived at your home. Then, on the way to the hospital, your heart quit beating. The paramedics were performing CPR when you arrived here. For 20 minutes, the emergency room fought to keep you alive. They had to counteract the drugs you took. That was two weeks ago. You have been in a coma ever since. You gave everyone quite a scare."

With tears welling in my eyes I whispered, "But I didn't want to live! I just wanted the pain to go away forever!"

"I want to show you something, Ashley." Dr. Carter walked to the curtains and pulled them back. On the other side was a vibrant display of color. There were

roses, carnations, balloons, and cards. He just stood there letting me look around.

“Ashley, for someone who wanted to die, you sure were going to be missed,” Dr. Carter explained. He walked over to the display and picked up a card and began reading. “Dear Ashley, please pull through this. Your chair is empty in every class and waiting for you to fill it. We miss you.” It was signed, “North Middle School Staff and Students.” The card was attached to a bouquet of roses. There must have been at least three-dozen. They were red, white, pink, peach, yellow, and orange. They were all for me!

Dr. Carter moved to the next card and read, “Honey, I’m sorry we failed you, please give us the chance to try again. Love, Mommy and Jacob.” I rolled my eyes doubting that I could have hurt “him” by doing this. He wouldn’t care if I had succeeded.

The next one he picked up put me in tears. “I’m sorry, Ashley. I told Mr. Pedmont as soon as I found the card. Please don’t make me regret for the rest of my life that I didn’t do my homework like I was suppose to. Please live.....Laura.”

“That’s enough,” I cried out. I tried to hide the tears. “This isn’t about them. I’m the one that wanted to die. No one cared before this, why do they now?”

Dr. Carter came back over to the bed, pulled the chair closer, and sat down. It seemed like an hour before he finally asked, "So, why did you do it Ashley?"

"I don't want to talk about it. You wouldn't understand anyway." I rolled over and shut him out. He sat there a few moments before he got up.

"I'll send Dr. Trask in now," he stated as he walked to the door. "We'll have plenty of time to talk later."

Once he was gone, I looked around. There were flowers and balloons everywhere. But I couldn't understand. "Where they all came from? I don't even know this many people," I voiced aloud to the empty room.

Then, a silver milar balloon caught my eye. It didn't say 'Get Well Soon, or Hope You Are Feeling Better.' It was a huge kiss. The lips were bright red. I could see a card and wanted to see what it said.

I sat up and threw my legs over the edge of the bed. I felt a little dizzy, so I sat there for a second just looking around. When the world quit spinning, I slowly eased my feet to the cold floor and started walking across the room. I was just about there when I had to stop. My IV tubing wasn't long enough. Looking back,

I could see that it was attached to the bed, so I tried to stretch out a little farther to get the balloon. Just a few more inches.....

“Can I help you get that?” a deep baritone voice called from the doorway.

I looked up with a start and stammered, “Ummm, I was just, I was going to, it’s not that big of a deal. No, that’s ok.” Holding the back of my gown together, I crept back to the bed and got in.

A tall, handsome doctor walked into the room and moved over to examine what had gotten me out of bed. While looking at me, he pointed to one card after another. When he touched them, he just lifted his brow inquiring silently if that was the one. When he intentionally skipped past the card on the balloon, I let out a stuttered, “That’s not fair!”

Smiling, he grabbed the card off the ribbon and with a smile read, “You didn’t have to do this to avoid me asking you to the Christmas Dance.” The doctor raised his eyebrows and looked at me and laughed, “Hmm, it seems you have an admirer.”

My eyes widened and looked at the grinning doctor. “Well, who sent it? Don’t leave me hanging!”

"I guess the sender didn't want you to know," he said as he placed the card back on the ribbon. "I'm Dr. Trask. I'm glad to see you trying to sneak out of bed. Two weeks ago, I wasn't too sure you would be able to. When your heart quit it took us several minutes to get it to beat on its own again. We weren't sure if there was going to be any long-term effect on your brain. Then, when you slipped into a coma we were forced to wait and see. I do want to have another EEG performed to verify normal brain wave activity. But, for now let's have a listen to your heart."

Chapter 18

The 5th Floor

Dr. Trask gave me a clean bill of health, so I was given a navy colored sweatsuit and taken up to the 5th floor in a wheelchair. When I got off of the elevator, there was a wing to the left and just a single door on the right. There was a doorbell and an intercom on the right. Bob, my nurse, pushed the button. After a short wait, a female voice answered, "Yes, can I help you?"

Bob pressed the talk button, "I have a new patient from ICU, Ashley Gainsworth."

I could hear a buzzing noise and Bob reached for the doorknob, turned it, and opened the door. He pushed my wheelchair through the doorway. The room was filled with a table, a couch, a TV, and there was an office to the left. A woman came through the office door carrying some sheets, another sweatsuit, some pamphlets, and a bag with personal hygiene products.

"Hi Ashley, my name is Morgan. I am the floor nurse supervisor. If you have any questions during your tour, just ask, ok?" She handed me the pile she was carrying and said, "Ok, let's take these to your room."

I quickly glanced back at Bob. He was just standing there with his hands on the wheelchair. He smiled and said, "This is where your chariot ride ends. Sorry, but I have some more patients to escort."

I got up out of the wheelchair and when Morgan motioned for me to follow, I fell in line behind her. We went down a long corridor at the far side of the main room. There were several open doors. About halfway down, Morgan turned into a doorway on the right. There were two beds in the room. The one near the window had a stack of sheets at the foot of it, so I walked over to it and put my stuff down.

"Your drawer is the one on the top. You can put all of your stuff in there. Each day, we will leave a clean towel and washcloth on your bar in the bathroom. You will need to be showered by 7. Breakfast is served in the main area. You will be assigned to kitchen duty once a day. That means you are responsible for getting the food for your table. You will also have to clean up the dishes. After breakfast, we have large group for an hour and a half. After large group, we have activities until lunch. After lunch there is small group for two hours. At 2:30, you will get an hour of free time. You can watch TV, read, talk to the other patients, put puzzles together, that sort of thing. The doctors meet with their patients after that on an individual basis. Supper is at 6 p.m. At 7 p.m., you may have visitors, or use the phone. Visitation is over at 8:30 p.m. and lights are out at 9 p.m.. While you are here, we will monitor what you eat and your

medications. Your doctor has prescribed Effexor. It's an antidepressant. You are not allowed in your room from 7 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. because you must be supervised at all times during the day. The only things you can have here are what we have provided. This is for your safety and the safety of the other patients. Now, do you have any questions?"

"Yeah, what if I have to go to the bathroom? Do I have to ask permission?" I asked sarcastically. This was like a prison. Morgan watched me so closely, I felt like I was in the middle of a stage starring, "Ashley, The One-Eyed Freak".

"Ashley, I know this is a little overwhelming but it really isn't that bad. There are other patients here that do understand what you are going through. They will talk if you are willing to listen. When we feel that you no longer pose a threat to yourself, you will get to go home. We are here to help you. Now, I will give you 15 minutes to get settled. When I come back, I will introduce you to the other patients."

As soon as Morgan walked out the door, I plopped down on the bed. I looked around the empty room. The clock was ticking away as I stared out the window. Out in the real world, everything still went by without me. I wondered, "Where is Mom? Why haven't I gotten to see her yet? Maybe it's better this way. I don't want to talk to her anyway." I got up and put my things away.

Chapter 19

Never Alone

Upon her return, Morgan could see that I was finished putting everything away, so she said, "Ok, Ashley, let's go meet some of the other patients who are here. You have been admitted for a 3-day evaluation. You will be released after that time if we feel confident that you are no longer a threat to yourself. That could be as early as 3 days, or possibly longer. It will depend on how well you accept the help we are trying to provide to you."

As we walked into the main area, I could see people of all ages. There were a couple of women who looked like they were my mom's age talking on the sofa. There were some teenagers over at one table playing a game of Monopoly. A couple of kids were watching TV. There was an older gentleman talking on the telephone on the far wall. A few others were off to themselves, just reading books.

"Are you ready to meet some of the other teens who are here, Ashley?" Morgan questioned with a smile.

"Yeah, sure, whatever," I tried not to seem too interested. I thought, "What if they treat me the same way the kids at school do? I don't think I can take that, not now. "

Morgan led me over to the table where the kids were playing Monopoly. "You guys, I'd like you to meet Ashley. She just joined us a little while ago."

"Hey Ashley!" a really pretty skinny girl with dark hair said, "I'm Angela."

"Howdy Ash, I'm Mike," said the boy with sandy brown hair and glasses.

"Nice to meet you Ashley," stated the third teen. He was really tall and his voice cracked when he spoke. "I'm John, would you like to play?"

I looked over at Morgan to see if she would mind. When I met her eyes, I could see that she was leaving it up to me. "If that is what you want Ashley, you can meet the others later."

"Sure, I'd like that," I answered with a hushed voice. I hesitated, but then sat down in the empty chair at the table.

"So, what do you think of the situation so far?" John asked with a smirk.

"You mean what do I think of being here?" I questioned with uncertainty.

"Yep, that's what I meant," as he gave me some Monopoly money.

“Well, aside from the fact that I don’t think I need this place, I’m ok, I guess. I’ll be out of here in a few days, right?”

Angela let out a cute giggle. “I’ve been here for a couple of months. They are trying to get me to quit throwing up my food. They think I’m way too skinny. I’m doing pretty good though. I’ve put on 5 pounds and I haven’t made myself sick for a week. They think I’ll be able to go home in a few weeks.”

“I’ve been here since yesterday. My foster parents seem to think I’m a threat to them and their kids. I did something pretty stupid so I guess I don’t blame them for sending me here. Besides, I have learned something already; it’s better to talk things out when you are mad than to start ranting and raving and destroying things. They thought I was having a nervous breakdown. The doctor agreed. I was just so mad I couldn’t think straight, that’s all,” Mike said with a shrug.

“Well, I have been here a few days. I shouldn’t even be alive, but I am because my mom found me in time. Here I am, 18 years old, a senior in high school, and I’m in here,” John said with a strange sadness in his voice.

“You tried to take your life, John?” I asked with growing curiosity. He just nodded in response. He was like me. I thought I was alone but something made him want to die, too. “Can I talk to you about what happened?”

John shrugged his shoulders with indifference, "Sure, it's ok Ashley, you aren't going to offend me. These guys know all about it already. I had to face up to what I did. I didn't really want to die. I just thought I did. This has really opened up my eyes. I can see now that if I had succeeded, my whole family would be lost. My mother is blaming herself, my dad is a mess, and my little brother is having nightmares that I'm going to leave and never come back. That makes me feel really bad. I didn't think about them. I was just so wrapped up in how rotten I was feeling on the inside. I just didn't think. We already know why you are here. It's not a secret. We probably have a lot of things in common. I'd love to talk to you about what you are thinking and feeling. Maybe we can help each other out. These two have been incredible!" John added with a shake of his head in Angela and Mike's direction.

Angela leaned forward and whispered, "You know what, Ashley? I thought I was fat! Can you believe that? I would look at myself in the mirror and think that I needed to lose more weight. I am 5'4" and I only weigh 80 pounds. My grandmother saw me at Thanksgiving and almost had a heart attack. My parents didn't notice how much weight I've lost because I was really good at covering it up. I wore really baggy clothes and I ate a ton around them. What they didn't see was what I was doing with the food when I left the table. My heart is really weak and the doctors are limiting my activity until I can rebuild my strength and gain some weight. I didn't realize what I was doing. I thought I was finally in control of something in my life but I was actually losing it. I know that now."

“Ashley, don’t let these two let you think that they know everything here. They haven’t figured me out yet,” Mike added with an ornery grin.

“Thanks for telling me all of that you guys, but it’s different for me. No one liked me, no one at all. I got teased all the time at school because I’m a geek. I get good grades, but I’m fat and I’m ugly,” I added with confidence. “Now that I’ve been in the hospital, I have gotten all of these cards, flowers, and balloons. But, who are they trying to kid? I’m the same person they used to tease. The same one they didn’t care about.”

“Hold on a second Ashley! We heard about you even before you came upstairs. We knew there was a 12-year-old girl in the hospital in a coma. We heard that she had visitors everyday and her mom didn’t leave her side until she collapsed from exhaustion. There were two kids in particular who spent most of their evenings just reading to her and there were also four little kids she used to babysit who came to see her because they missed her. We also heard that also the entire school was praying for her. Because of what she did, the school realized that they needed to get to the bottom of what had happened. They didn’t realize that she was being treated with disrespect. We also heard that they are going to start a new program to help students get along. They must really care about that girl to go to all of that trouble,” John said with a sparkle in his eye.

"I would have given anything for that Ashley. But, I'm a home-schooled student and I don't have a support network at school like you do. I don't have counselors, friends, or classmates to turn to for support. I have had to deal with this all by myself and with the people here," John added.

"I'm sorry John, I guess I didn't realize what I was saying." I quickly turned away, because I didn't want to see the hurt and loneliness in his eyes.

"It's ok Ashley, but you need to realize that you are not alone in how you feel. There are others out there just like you. What you have to do now is make sure that you don't keep things inside like before. You need to tell someone before it gets to this point no matter what!"

Chapter 20

Breaking Free

Dear Diary,

After three days on the 5th floor, I am ready to go home. I have been talking to Dr. Trask a couple times a day about how I feel and why I feel the way I did. I feel like I talk until I'm blue in the face. It seems that I am perfectly normal. I just had a lot of changes that I had a hard time dealing with lately. But, instead of talking to people about it, I kept it all inside which was wrong. When I feel like I'm not important I need to talk to people about it. They will help me see the positive things. I have also been taking an anti-depressant. I can't believe how much better I feel. I'm not as tired as I was before. I don't seem to dwell on the bad things. I can actually look ahead a couple days and find things that I want to do. I have made a list of things in my life that I like, and a list of things in my life that I hate. It's kind of funny. There are more things in my life that I actually like than hate but I didn't see that before. I was writing things down, just never the good things. Now, Dr. Trask has told me to start a third list. A list of the things in my life that I hate that I can change. At the top of my list is the way I look. When I told Angela about that, she helped me out a ton. She convinced Morgan that she needed her makeup bag. Then, she talked Morgan into letting her work on me yesterday afternoon. You know, when my hair is down and I have makeup on the right way I'm

not too bad. At least I must not be because both Mike and John gave me a funny look. It was almost as if they were looking at someone they didn't know. Last night, John even told me that I had a very pretty face. It embarrassed me but it felt good at the same time. Now that I'm not so hung up on how horrible I look I can hold my head higher. I don't think people are staring at me because I'm some sort of freak show. I just never knew that doing your hair and putting makeup on could make you look so different. I don't look like a tomboy anymore. I actually look like a young lady.

The second thing on my list was my weight. Dr. Trask said that it is perfectly normal for a girl my age to be a little overweight. He said that puberty affects everyone a little differently. But, he also said that if I did some physical activity I could firm up and actually feel better about myself. The last thing on my list was not having any friends. I realize that I can't make friends overnight. I have to prepare myself to be alone for a little while. But that's ok too. I plan on spending some time with my mom and Jacob. She seems to think this is all her fault and has scheduled enough stuff for us to do together until I die a ripe old age of 99. But, Dr. Trask has pointed out that making friends is a two-way street. I can't just sit around and wait for the kids to be my friends. I need to try to reach out to others too. This isn't going to be easy because I am quiet. I don't usually go up to people and say 'hi' but I do need to do that. I also need to take

Mr. Pedmont up on his offer of helping me get acquainted at school. Time has proven that I can't do this on my own. I now know I'm not a terrible person. I'm going to keep writing in my diary, but I have promised Dr. Trask that I will bring it with me whenever I come to see him. He seems to think he needs to talk to me every week until he knows I've adjusted to life in my new town. I guess he's probably right. For a doctor, he's pretty cool. Anyway, I think I'm ready to do this. It's Saturday today and I get to go home. I get to face the world.....

Love, Ashley

Chapter 21

A New Start

The drive home was pretty quiet. I could tell mom kept looking over at me. I could feel her eyes once in awhile. Every now and then I could hear her start to sniffle and I knew she was crying. She'd put her hand on mine and just squeeze it. She's still having a hard time dealing with what I tried to do. She keeps telling me, "Ashley, I love you more every single day. Although sometimes it may seem like I don't like you very much, because of something you said or did, or because I'm wrapped up in my own life. I always love you. Please remember that, ok?"

When we turned the corner and started down the street towards our house, I could see a ton of balloons tied to the front door of the house. As soon as we drove up into the yard, four little terrors came racing across the lawn and opened up my car door.

"Ashweeee!!!" Melody screamed at the top of her lungs as she latched on to my legs. She made it pretty difficult to get out of the car. The boys were pulling my hand, telling me to hurry up.

"Come on Ashley, let's go. We have something to show you." I laughed as I let them drag me into the house and down the hall to my bedroom. Just outside the door, I hesitated. It seems like it was years ago since I was here last. Looking

around I could see that nothing had changed. Then I noticed something. All of my Tony Stewart stuff was back in its place. I looked down at the boys and they had grins plastered on their faces, wondering if I'd seen it yet. "Did you two put those things back?" I asked with growing curiosity. "I gave these things to you guys. Don't you want them anymore?"

"Well, it's not that we don't want them," Quade said with regret.

"Yeah, we really like the things you gave us, but they are yours, Ashley. These are your 'special things' and we wanted to make sure you had them back," Bryce said like such an adult. I had the feeling that Tracy had to do a little coaxing to convince them to give them back because I could see her standing on the other side of the doorway holding her breath.

Through tears, I knelt down on the floor beside them and squeezed them both and said, "Thanks for taking care of my stuff while I was in the hospital. I knew I could count on you." With that, the kids took off to the basement to play with my old toys and Tracy followed them down the hall.

As soon as I stood up and turned around, I saw my mom in the doorway. She was holding a pamphlet. "This is what the hospital gave me. I have memorized every single detail." She held up the paper and started reading it aloud.

"The warning signs parents can look for are: withdrawal from friends and family, inability to concentrate, talk of suicide, dramatic changes in personal appearance, loss of interest in favorite activities, expressions of hopelessness or excessive guilt, self-destructive behavior, preoccupation with death, and bequeathal of their favorite possessions." She had tears in her eyes as she came over to me and held me in her arms like she used to when I was younger.

"I don't ever want to look at you and not see you again. I feel so awful that you had to go through this. I wish I had seen the signs. They were all there. I can see everything so clearly now. I can't turn back time, Ash, but I can promise that from here on out I am here for you. If you want to talk I'm here for you. I want you to promise me something. Please promise me that you will never, ever, ever do something this extreme without talking to me first. I want you to sign this piece of paper and I want you to post it in your room. Ok?"

I took the piece of paper that she was holding and read it aloud, "I Ashley Lynn Gainsworth promise my mom, Jacob, my friends, my school, and myself that I will talk to someone if I ever feel depressed or feel like I want to die." With tears in my eyes, I looked up at my mom and cried, "Oh, I promise mom, I promise." Within seconds, I could feel her arms wrapping around me again. It seems like years since my mom held me like this. I cried and let everything out. I cried for all of the terrible things I thought about her. I cried for thinking she had abandoned me. I cried because it dawned on me that if I had succeeded, I would

have never felt my mom's around me again. I also cried because I realized that my mom never stopped loving me, or trying to spend time with me. I was the one who pushed her away. I was the one who didn't want anyone to know what I was feeling. If I would have succeeded, my mom would have never understood and she never would have been able to go on with her life like before.

As soon as I was able to dry the tears, I went to my dresser and grabbed a Kleenex. I blew my nose and then searched for a pen. By now, Jacob and Tracy had worked their way to my room. Mom, Jacob, and Tracy were all watching me when I signed the paper and placed it on my mirror as a reminder to myself. I looked at all of them through the mirror and caught a reflection of myself. Although this time I saw something different. When I saw my mascara running down my cheeks, I noticed that I didn't care what the others thought. I didn't try to hide the fact that I have been hurting inside. I was glad they knew. I was glad they were there to help me get through this. I need them as much as they need me. With all of this out in the open, I don't feel like I am closed off from the world.

Chapter 22

A Friend for Life

Monday morning arrived all too soon. Mom hollered up the stairs to make sure that I was getting ready for school. She took the day off of work to be there for me if I needed her.

I wasn't sure what to expect. The whole school knows what I did. They even know why I tried to kill myself. They all know that I was in a coma for two weeks. Are they going to pretend they like me because of that? I don't want to make friends just because they feel sorry for me. I want real friends.

With one last look in the mirror, I glanced at my reflection. I look a little different since I gave up the ponytail, curled my hair, and put on makeup like Angela taught me to do. I applied another layer of lip-gloss, smacked my lips, and jokingly said to no one in particular, "Look out world, here comes the new and improved Ashley Gainsworth!"

When I heard clapping in the background, I twirled around. Mom and Jacob were standing in the doorway with smiles on their faces. "I'm glad to see you are taking that approach to the day Ashley. Go show them who you really are!" Jacob said as he moved in the room and gave me a quick hug. "I love you kiddo!

Let's get a move on and get the hardest part over with, ok?" I nodded in agreement and took a huge breath.

As soon as the car pulled up in front of the school, I could feel the eyes turning and staring. I took one last deep breath and reached for the door handle. I got out and held my head high. Something in me kept saying "don't look down, you are the same as the next person." I walked ahead of mom and Jacob. As I passed the groups of students, I could hear them whisper, "there she is, she's the one." I didn't let it get to me. I made it to the front doors with my head held high and not a single tear.

I could feel mom's hand against my back as we walked through the doors. Just knowing she was there helped. I fought the depression for too long by myself. It's a great feeling knowing that there are people around me who know and understand what I'm going through.

We walked straight to the office. As soon as I walked through the door, Mrs. Meany came over and gave me a huge hug. "Oh Ashley, it's great to have you back. We have all been so worried about you. I have been praying for you." She gave me another hug before she went to her desk and announced through the intercom that Ms. Hutchinson and Mr. Truman were to come to the office.

It didn't take very long before they were both giving me hugs and saying that they were glad I was ok. "Now, come in to my office for a few minutes before you start class." Mr. Truman said as he walked toward his door. I was laughing a little inside. I had never been in a principal's office before. Of course, I wasn't in trouble, but I still had this weird feeling in my stomach. He motioned for me to sit next to him and mom and Jacob sat to my right. Ms. Hutchinson sat between Jacob and Mr. Truman. They all looked so serious.

"Ashley, we are concerned that we are not meeting some of the needs of our students. When Laura came to Mr. Pedmont and told him what you had planned, the whole school went into shock. This isn't something we have ever had to deal with before. The students have been very quiet. While you were in a coma, we had a general assembly. Some of the students in your advisory class spoke to the rest of the school. They expressed their concerns that the school as a whole needs to change and make new students feel more welcome. They talked about you and how not one person tried to reach out to you. They all stayed in their cliques and left you to fend for yourself. As a result, Mr. Pedmont's advisory group had come up with a plan to welcome any new student to the building. They are trying to find ways that they can help students who are new to the building or students who have been shunned by the class body. In essence, they are trying to come up with some solutions to all of the problems that you faced when you first came to school here. We feel as though we failed you. We want to fix that and we are asking for your help. When you get a chance, we want you

to give us some suggestions about what we can do to help new students get adjusted," Mr. Truman said sincerely while Ms. Hutchinson nodded.

"Ashley, the point is, we need to make sure that the students at this school do not take the drastic measures that you did to try and get away from bad feelings. Your cry for help is our eye opener that our school is not meeting all of the needs of the students. We want you to feel like you belong here. So, if at any point and time you feel that you need something from us, Mr. Truman and I are more than willing to listen. It doesn't matter how trivial you may think it is. We wish we had noticed that you were not being accepted in our school and we apologize for all of the hurt that you had to suffer. Although you may not think that you were a part of the school, I want you to look around at the changes that have taken place in the last three weeks. I want you to see what a difference you have made here." Ms. Hutchinson took my hand across the table and added one last comment, "Ashley, you are a very intelligent young lady and you have a second chance at life. Thank you for letting Laura know that you were hurting inside."

Mom , Jacob, and I sat silently listening to them. Although they may not have done anything before, I do believe that they are going to try to help make the situation at the school better.

"Well, Ashley, if you are ready, we will let you go to your class. I do believe that they are waiting for you." Mr. Truman said as he stood up. "Welcome back, Ms. Gainsworth."

I led the way out of the office with mom and Jacob following me. The hall was quiet with the exception of the voices filtering out of the classrooms. As I walked past the bulleting boards, I started noticing the messages that were posted. One of them was filled with words describing depression. Another one was a boost for self-esteem. Then we rounded the corner and headed to Mr. Pedmont's room, I saw a bunch of envelopes hanging from the ceiling. They all have my name on them. They were sealed shut and just drifting around on their strings. They were hanging all the way down the hallway. "Mom, what do you think all of these envelopes are for?"

"I'm not sure honey but I think you are about to find out," mom said with awe.

Just as I was about to reach for the doorknob, it was whisked open. "Ashley, come in, we've been waiting for you," Mr. Pedmont said as he gave me a hug.

One by one, all of the students came up to me and told me they were sorry about teasing me and not trying to make me feel welcome. Many of them had tears in their eyes, even the boys.

Then Ryan explained the envelopes to me. "After the school assembly, all of the students put a quality that they liked about you in an envelope. Whenever you feel like your getting down about yourself, we want you to open them up one at a time until you feel better. With as many students as there are in the school, we figure that these should at least get you through 8th grade," he added with a wink.

At the end of the line was Billy, "the pain". He held back and just looked at me. For what seemed like an eternity he just stood there. Then, as if nothing had happened he gave me some crap. "Well, although the makeup thing is going to be an adjustment and your hair is different but you're still the only girl I have ever considered asking to a dance." Holding up his hand to keep me from talking he added, "Now, you can't say 'no' right away. I want to plead my case first. It may seem like all I ever did was tease you, but I had a good reason for it. I was trying to get your attention. I guess I did but not in the way I wanted. I didn't know how to treat you so I just teased you like I would have teased one of the guys. Only, I was wrong. So, if you don't hate me for life I would really like it if you would go to the Christmas dance with me."

I couldn't believe it. Billy, turning red, was talking a mile a minute. From what I gathered, he was actually asking me out. "Well, Billy, I would really like to go with you, but I have an admirer that I think I should go with. He sent me a balloon while I was in the hospital and he thinks I did this just to not go with him.

Since he didn't leave his name, I'm going to have to wait and find out if he is serious though. Maybe another time?" I tried to let him down gently.

To my surprise, he turned around to the whole class and screamed, "Wahoo, I have a date!" Then, he turned to me, gave me a hug and said, "I'm glad you liked my balloon Ashley, and that you didn't figure out that it was me." With that he winked and walked back to his desk.

While I was letting the reality that "Billy the Pain" was my secret admirer sink in, I noticed Laura sitting at her desk with her head lowered. I looked over to Mr. Pedmont and he nodded his head in her direction. The room was deathly silent as I worked my way across the room and sat down in the desk beside her. When she looked up, I could see that she was crying and there was fear in her eyes.

"I'm sorry Ashley, I'm so sorry. This is my fault. If I had done my homework like I was suppose to you wouldn't have had to go through all of this. I'm so sorry," she cried and burst into tears again.

When she had calmed enough to look up again, I smiled at her. "You know Laura, I was just too afraid to tell you myself. It's not your fault. You didn't know I put something in your book. But, I do need to get something off of my chest. Thank you! If you hadn't cared, I wouldn't be here. It doesn't matter that the timing was a little off. What does matter is that I now consider you the most

important friend I will ever have. Without you, I wouldn't be here at all. Thank you for telling someone. Thank you for being a friend for life." I leaned over and put my arms around her. We both just sat there and cried.

The next thing I knew, the whole class was clapping. When we both looked up, someone snapped our picture and to this day I keep it as a reminder of what is true friendship.

Dear Diary,

By the looks of things, I think I'm going to be ok here. I have made an incredible friend. My mom hasn't forgotten about me. Most of all, I realize that I'm not a bad person. Depression has an amazing way of keeping a person from seeing things for what they really are. I know now that it's far better to talk to someone than to keep the pain and hurt inside. Trying to take my life was the wrong decision, and I'm very thankful that I didn't succeed. No one would have understood why I did it. My mom and Jacob would have never gotten over it, the kids I babysit for would have missed me terribly, and the school would have felt the tremendous loss of a classmate. Even though I thought I was alone and had no other options, suicide was not the answer. Talking about my feelings and thoughts with other kids and adults has helped me see that I'm a normal kid dealing with normal feelings. I'm not alone. I never was. I also know that I was

suffering from depression and with medication and counseling I'm going to get through this. It is just going to take some time.

Sometimes I can hear kids talking behind my back. They still think I did all of this for attention, but they are wrong. Everyone who knows me understands that this was my cry for help. But, I can't change the way other people think. To some, I will always be the "weirdo or psycho that tried to kill myself". Those kids won't talk to me and laugh as they walk away. But, I don't let the name calling get to me, I can't. I know who I am even if they never give me a chance to explain why I tried to kill myself. They will also never realize that for the rest of my life I am going to have to live with the health problems that I have created for myself. My cardiologist has told me that my heart has weakened as a result of the drugs I took and the fact that it took them so long to get it beating again. So, I won't ever be able to push myself athletically. I won't be able to participate in a lot of the school sporting events. But, on the flip side of that, I don't have any permanent brain damage. I am very thankful for that. I heard that I could have ended up a vegetable having to wear diapers and live in a nursing home because I wouldn't be able to take care of myself anymore. The thought of that scares me to death. I had no idea that was a possibility. I can't imagine what it would have done to my family if they had to visit me in a nursing home and know that I had no

idea who they were. I am very thankful that God gave me a second chance at a normal life.

Love, Ashley

About the Author

Peg Kleve lives in Charles City, Iowa with her husband, Chad and four children, Brandon, Taylor, Clint, and Nathan.

She graduated from the University of Northern Iowa in 1992 with her Bachelor of Arts degree in Safety Education and a minor in Health Education. She has taught driver education and health education at both the middle and high school level.

During the summer of 1999, she went back to UNI to get her Master's Degree in Middle School Education. This novel is a part of her graduate research project.

Appendix F
Student Feedback Questionnaire

What about me? Novel Feedback Sheet

Age: _____
Gender: M or F

1. Did you like the novel? Why?
2. What was your favorite part?
3. What didn't you like about the novel?
4. Did the novel teach you anything about suicide prevention or depression?
5. What would you change about the story if you could?
6. Do you have any suggestions for the author about the novel?

Thank you for taking the time to read the novel and participate in the research project. Your time and effort was greatly appreciated.

-Peg Kleve