

Originally posted on Frogi Israel, 7.21.2020

## **All that glitters isn't gold: See the distress behind the filter**

A this point, we can all recite COVID's symptoms: fever, cough and fatigue. It's clear to us how to act and how to stay safe – keep your distance! But no one is talking about symptoms that aren't as easy to see or hear, symptoms of painful hardships and emotional distress. Those who feel and experience that, put on masks to protect themselves from COVID, but mostly protect themselves from feeling the pain. Here's how you can tell if one of your friends needs help.

Written by Irit Aloni, Head of the Youth Centers Field at ELEM

The masks adolescents wear nowadays are varied and they come in many forms, such as tanning filters, sparkles. It sends the message "business as usual" to the world. Masks in the form of a tik tok video that gets hundreds of likes and fills the void in one's soul.

A girl once told us that she doesn't feel comfortable talking about her depression these days. "What room is there for my depression?" she asked, when millions around the world are sick. Another youth told us he didn't want to talk about the fact that he's being shunned, because he didn't want to make his parents feel even worse when they're already concerned and unemployed. A combination of guilt, shame and fear increase the complex feelings even more, and push those who suffer further from getting help and support. The path to the escalation of the feelings of loneliness and self-harm can be quick.

Since that's the case, we have to learn to get closer, it's not contagious. To listen and put on our sensitive, inquiring glasses that look deep. We have to be brave so we can manage to act in order to help.

The media talks about the first wave and then the second wave, and for many of the youth these waves already created a storm deep in their souls. The pressure at home, the financial situation, the concern for the health and well being of our families, school, the "how do I look?" (like a million bucks?) the army and the feeling of uncertainty, the vagueness in the guidelines and restrictions. It's chaotic.

My friend is probably not going to tell me that he's depressed and doesn't want to leave the house, and maybe another friend will feel ashamed to say that someone took pictures of her and threatens to leak it at school. So when's the time to worry about our friends a little more? How will we know if the fact that our friend is crying after her boyfriend broke up with her is normal, or a cause for concern? And when should we involve an additional party?

## **We created a short guide that will hopefully put things in order.**

### **What signs will manifest in youth who experience distress?**

In general, anything out of the ordinary, that's different from the usual behavior we're familiar with, can be a red flag that we should check. Trust your gut and your familiarity with your friends – if something doesn't seem right, better keep an eye. For example:

- Nerves and aggressiveness – “Leave me alone already. I don't feel like dealing with you” – a feeling that the friend is constantly angry, or aggravated, or reacts in a way that's aggressive even for things that are relatively small. Lack of patience.
- Sadness and gloominess – “I can't stop crying... but it'll be alright” – the friend is constantly crying and gets frustrated by many things.
- Inability to sleep – “Bro, I barely sleep” – falling asleep is hard, the friend is waking up a lot during the nights and sleeps for a small amount of hours.
- A complete lack of interest – “I don't wanna do anything” – a feeling of constant boredom, nothing is interesting, not even hobbies that the friend used to like, or going out with friends.
- An extreme change in looks – “I lost 20 pounds in no time. I want to lose at least 20 more” – it can manifest in the way the friend is dressed or in extreme change in weight.
- Shutting in – “I don't feel like going out today, either” – the friend doesn't want to leave their room or the house, constantly occupied with one thing or nothing at all.
- Decline in studies – “who cares about this stupid school?” – can manifest in change in grades, attendance, attitude towards the teachers.

Do these signs always point to distress, or does it have to be a combination of symptoms, and a certain frequency in which they appear?

Each one of these signs on its own can point to distress, but it depends on the length of the manifestation and the situation leading up to the manifestation. These signs don't point to real danger, but to the possibility that danger is on the way, so it's important to pay attention when they come to the surface, and if they don't go away, involve an additional party.

Aside from these symptoms, there are **cases that warrant the immediate involvement** of an adult, and you shouldn't wait and see if the friend manages to deal with it on their own:

- Self-harm or planning for future self harm.
- Mental, physical or verbal abuse by another person such as a parent, a teacher or a partner.
- Use of medications without prescription.

### **So how to approach the friend who's dealing with distress?**

- Don't be afraid to ask! Show your friend that you see that they're going through something, don't ignore it. Sometimes they just want someone to show interest. Ask them how they are, express concern and care. They'll appreciate it even if they choose not to share. Signal to them that even if they don't want to share now, you're there for them whenever they need you.
- Listen: if they choose to share, just listen. Don't judge, don't get angry and don't tell them what needs to be done. Try to let them speak of what really bothers them without plugging your own opinions into their story.
- Don't use clichés as replies. Phrases like "it's going to be okay," or "why are you crying?" will cause the person in front of you to shut down and not want to share with you anymore. Even if you don't get "what the big deal is," try to show that even though the situation would've affected you differently, you understand the distress of the person in front of you.
- Try to search and expand the options for dealing with the situation. Don't try and think what you would've done in their place – you're not in their place. Instead of saying what you would've done, try and ask them what are the options that are currently available for them, and try to brainstorm with them based on how familiar you are with them – what inner strengths they have that can help them confront the situation, and what external sources of support could assist them.

- If you think the situation is out of control – you’re probably right if you feel like the reaction to a certain instance is too extreme, and/or lasting for too long, or is concerning in a way that is out of the ordinary. Listen to yourselves – these signs can point to extreme distress.

### **So who should we tell?**

Basically, you can tell any trustworthy adult. It can be a big brother, a parent, a teacher, a guidance counselor or a youth movement’s counselor, as long as you don’t carry it alone. Telling another friend might help, but this friend probably won’t have the tools and the solutions, either, so it’s not recommended.

If you’re afraid of revealing yourself at this point for any reason, and you need help figuring out how to turn to that trustworthy adult, you’re welcome to reach out anonymously to our chat, forum, email, or any of our support centers.

On a personal note, if you read this entire article, it’s a positive sign. A sign that you care and have social responsibility and a lot of will to help others, which makes us proud and appreciative. ELEM is here for you.

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