

## mPower Award Nomination – Contents:

### 1. Statement Essay ('Asking for Help is Humiliating')

- a. Main Points:
  - i. My personal experience dealing with my friend's depression and suicide attempt
  - ii. My work addressing mental health issues and the stigma surrounding mental health in my community and around the world (TeenzTalk.org)

### 2. Biography: (below)

- a. I'm the founder and CEO of **TeenzTalk.org** – a **501(c)3 nonprofit organization** with a focus on harnessing peer support and sharing personal stories through short video clips, in order to fight the mental health stigma and promote teen wellness globally.
  - i. *TeenzTalk will be partnering with Mental Health America (MHA) as a means of involving more teens in increasing mental health awareness, and embracing and understanding MHA's #B4Stage4 philosophy.*
- b. Over the past year, I've **led a team of 20 teens from around the world** and worked closely with them on various initiatives and campaigns for TeenzTalk.org.
- c. I'm a **junior at Los Altos High School** in Los Altos, California – a short 5-min drive from Palo Alto, where the suicide clusters of teens took place in recent years. I'm **17 years old**.
- d. I'm the **author of the children's book**, *Growing A Brain: A Journey of Resiliency Starting in the Classroom*. I've written this book to empower younger children and teach them about the importance of harnessing a "growth mindset". Living in a culture of achievement, it's vital to learn how to face difficulty and challenges, with a positive outlook. Available on Amazon, best for children ages 4-9: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/1684182689>
- e. I'm an **active member of various teen mental health committees** including:
  - i. Child Mind Institute's Teen & Young Adult Council, based in New York
  - ii. Children Health Council's Leadership Committee (a collaboration with Stanford)
  - iii. Children Health Council's Teen Committee in Palo Alto
  - iv. Stanford's Youth Mental Health Innovation Challenge Teen Advisory Board
- f. I'm **QPR Certified** – Gatekeeper Training for Suicide Prevention.
- g. I've done **interviews with various press organizations** on my mental health advocacy work, including ABC 7 News, The Psych Central Show, San Jose Mercury News, Young Minds Advocacy, and more. I've also **written about my experiences** for The Huffington Post and Bright Reads Magazine. I've **presented** at various mental health conferences and high schools [bottom right photo on this page - my speech on fighting stigma at the 2017 [CHC Annual Conference](#)].
- h. I love interacting with people – especially my peers – and hearing their diverse stories. In my free time, I enjoy bonding with my three younger siblings, playing the piano, reading, writing, or playing tennis.

### 3. More about TeenzTalk (included in **Additional Materials PDF**)

- a. Video categories - mental health/wellness categories on the site
- b. How teens both locally and around the world can get involved
- c. Corporate partners - locally and nationally
- d. Press/media coverage



## **Asking for Help is Humiliating, So I Started a Mental Health Website for Teens, by Teens**

A little over a year ago, **my best friend tried to kill herself**. On the night of her suicide attempt, we were texting back and forth – just like any other night – until I soon realized she needed more help than I could offer. She was texting me about details of a suicide plan she had set for herself, which involved various drugs from the medicine cabinet in her mom’s bathroom. I could tell she was feeling very hurt and unhappy; her scariest text read, “I’m home alone. It’ll all be over tomorrow.” I called 911 immediately – even though she didn’t want me to – and the rest of that night is a complete blur of terror and worry, as I waited for a response from the police officer who was sent to check on her.

Thankfully, she made it through and is now seeing a therapist. At first she was really angry that I called 911, but when I saw her the next week she thanked me. This experience opened my eyes to the **power of peer support**. If my friend hadn’t reached out and told me that she was desperately unhappy, who knows if she would even be alive today? I realized then that it’s vital to have at least one person to confide in when life becomes too hard to face alone.

Many teenagers feel humiliated about wanting to see a counselor or looking for help through anonymous referral boxes at school. The **stigma and negative perceptions** of going to therapy keeps teens from receiving the help they may need. I truly believe we have to change that. As motivational speaker Les Brown said, “Ask for help. Not because you’re weak but because you want to remain strong.”

One way to chip away at the stigma of counseling or seeking help is to form more student-led support groups within schools. This can be done by holding regular open meetings for teenagers to come together and talk about wellness strategies or simply to have a conversation about how life is going. This encourages students to advocate for and support each other, which could make it easier to ask for help. A teen-run network would not be the be-all-and-end-all of mental health support but it would be a big step forward, especially when combined with mental health education and a list of readily available professional resources. This three-pronged approach could start a revolution in adolescent mental health care.

However, most schools don’t have peer support groups, which is why **I started an online wellness forum for teenagers around the world called TeenzTalk.org**. My friend’s thoughts of suicide made me realize how important it is to simply start the discussion about mental health and spread the message to those who are hurting: *you are not alone*. For teens, me included, turning to an online platform is a natural way to go.

Dr. Steven Adelsheim, clinical professor and child and adolescent psychiatrist at Stanford University, gave me an invaluable piece of advice for all teenagers: “Reaching out to people early and **sharing how we’re feeling** not only helps you, but it helps those around you feel more comfortable talking about how they feel, too.” Dr. Adelsheim’s advice highlights one of TeenzTalk’s main goals: **erasing the shame in talking about mental health**, and rather, embracing sharing our feelings.

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During psychology class my sophomore year, before my friend’s crisis, I learned about the widespread problems of stress, anxiety and other mental health conditions common among teenagers, and I read about past suicide clusters of high school students in my neighboring city of Palo Alto, CA. I saw the obstacles teens face when trying to get help, which include the high cost of mental health services and the generation gap between teenagers and their counselors, parents, teachers, and pediatricians. The generation gap really struck me. Unlike younger kids, who adore their parents’ advice and bask in their praise, adolescents want autonomy from their parents and other adults, while simultaneously craving acceptance from their friends and others their own age.

The term ‘peer influence’ usually refers to the negative influence teens can have on each other, but **peer influence can be positive, too**. According to recent research, teenagers are more likely to confide in, listen to and relate to other teenagers – rather than their parents – on topics such as stress management and overcoming adversity.

This is why I set out to create a platform to harness these powerful peer connections and reach teens from all backgrounds, ethnicities and social groups. TeenzTalk.org **first launched last April (2016)**, and now has over 100 videos from teenagers from more than 20 different countries. With each video and blog contribution, we spread the message that **“it’s okay to talk” about mental health and how we’re feeling**. The site gets rid of the generation-gap problem and relies on positive teen-to-teen influence instead – combined with a “Resources” page with readily accessible



helplines to call/text and other professional mental health resources. By connecting to a larger and more diverse community of teens, we can encourage and motivate each other while also finding similarities where only differences may be seen at first – for example, with teens from entirely different countries, hometowns and backgrounds.

The website now gets **over 1,000 unique visitors every week**, and I currently lead an international team of 10 boys and 10 girls who work to find people to post videos on the site and bring new perspectives to teens around the world. We let our peers know that moments of despair and discouragement are normal, and there are numerous resources available to help them feel better.

**Our site is all about sharing stories, experiences and coping strategies so others can get information, comfort and feel like part of a community.** Teens share their experiences with mental illness and other topics through 3-5 minute video clips. Most mental illness story submissions we receive discuss anxiety, depression, or eating disorders.

For example, on the TeenzTalk site, a teen from my high school opens up about her experiences with mental health and even shares about a time she was hospitalized for her eating disorder. In her video clip on TeenzTalk, her final message to all teens is: “You’re not alone in this. I realized that I’m not unusual to have anxiety. I’m not unusual to have an eating disorder. I’m not unusual to have depression... Every single teenager is going through something right now, and once you realize that, you’re problem doesn’t become smaller; it just becomes relative. Just keep going. Your story is valuable and you’re worth it.” Another teen, a boy from China, discusses a particularly important difficulty in his life. For years he knew he was gay, yet he couldn’t bring himself to tell his family or friends. Because of various social pressures and cultural expectations, he felt confined by barriers too great to overcome. So he stayed silent and isolated until a few months ago, when, with the help of a friend, he came out on social media and also shared a video on our site. A 17-year-old girl from Macedonia talks about her battle with social anxiety. She describes enduring years of isolation before realizing her fear of social situations and conversations were symptoms of a real, treatable mental illness known as ‘social anxiety.’ She found relief in knowing she was not alone with this condition.

These are just three examples of the many stories that are regularly shared on TeenzTalk.org – through our “Share Your Story” form page. (Note: All submissions are carefully reviewed by our team to avoid publishing any inappropriate content. This is highlighted in more detail in our site’s “Terms of Use”.)

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Since I started TeenzTalk.org, I’ve had the opportunity to meet with many teenagers and hear their stories. Clearly, **we’ve all had experiences with vulnerability and discouragement**, and it’s important that we grow from these experiences and strive to create a community of mental health activists. A few weeks ago, I received an email from a girl in the San Francisco Bay Area who had been through a stressful week at school and was experiencing feelings of anxiety. She went on to write that she came across the TeenzTalk website and browsed the video section on “How to relieve stress?” This section contains videos from teenagers around the world who share their strategies and methods of relieving stress. The girl wrote that her **“mind felt clear” afterwards and her “body was calmed”**. She also wrote that she was “excited to try out new stress-relieving strategies” that she’d learned from the videos of her peers on the site. It was incredibly empowering to know that the videos helped her break out of her anxious thoughts and raise her spirits.

When I first **introduced TeenzTalk to my best friend**, she was blown away. She told me that she wished she had something like TeenzTalk – a global peer support website – in her darkest hour, around the time of her suicide attempt. She also told me her favorite parts of the site were being able to hear stories of teens from all backgrounds that she could relate to, and being able to access a huge variety of resources for her depression on TeenzTalk’s “Resources” page, which also includes an option to ask questions from mental health professionals. She emphasized that **she loved how TeenzTalk is video-based**, and she felt the video-format allows for teens’ experiences and wellness strategies to be shared more personally, since site visitors are able to visually **“see the face behind the story”**. My friend is a regular visitor to the site, and I’m so glad that TeenzTalk.org has been able to help her maintain her well-being.

Adolescent mental health and wellness is a global matter, and we at TeenzTalk are here to shatter mental health stigmas, build resiliency, embrace life’s challenges and help each other thrive, through stories of growth, hope, and inspiration from our peers – teens around the world. **My vision** is a world where teens join together, prioritize mental health and wellness, and unite to tackle new challenges, while embracing the contagion of happiness and compassion. As the TeenzTalk motto says: *together we inspire growth*. **[More about TeenzTalk.org in the Additional Materials PDF.]**