

# Therapists and Social Workers: Lessons You Can Use With Teens

Most of the stories in this issue deal with teens accepting mental illness—their own or a family member's. The writers often have little information about the disease and initially show a strong desire to deny it. These activities are designed to help teens increase their understanding of mental illness and show them ways to play a stronger role in its management and treatment.

## Activity 1: Knowledge Is Power

- Write the phrase "Knowledge is power" on the board. Explain that mental illness is a medical condition, just like diabetes or heart disease. Ask teens how learning about mental illness can be helpful in coping and having more control over it.
- Break teens into pairs or small groups. Assign each group to read one of the following stories: "I'm Not Crazy" (p. 4); "My Many Faces" (p. 10); "Facing My Feelings" (p. 13); "Ruptured Lives" (p. 31).
- Tell each group to briefly summarize its assigned story to the rest of the class and share how the writers informed themselves about the illness they/their loved ones have. Encourage them to explain how learning about the condition helped the writers cope and make good decisions.
- *Extension activity:* Have teens research specific illnesses, using one of the websites listed on p. 12.

## Activity 2: Therapy and Healthy Relationships

Another theme that emerges from this issue is the important role that trusting relationships play in healing from mental illness.

- "Your Brain on Pain" (pp.8-9), by psychiatrist John DiLallo, explains how nurturing relationships support brain development, and how trauma, neglect, and abuse disrupt brain function. Ask volunteers to read small sections of the article aloud. After the reading, ask each group to discuss the following:

1. What does the article tell us about how caretakers affect a child's brain?
2. How does therapy help people work through trauma?
3. How can positive relationships help us handle painful feelings and past experiences?

- Point out to the class that many stories in this issue show how healthy relationships help writers manage their mental illnesses. Assign each group to read one of the following: "I'm Not Crazy," "My Many Faces," "Facing My Feelings," "A Healthy Mom" (p. 21), and "Suicide/Redemption" (p. 25) (No group should read the same story that they read in the last activity.)

- Groups should discuss and then share out how the writers overcame their reluctance to talk to a therapist. How did therapy help them cope and make discoveries about themselves? (Encourage them to be specific.) Can they find examples of therapy leading the writers to other trusting, healthy relationships? ("Mentors and Mental Health"; "A Healthy Mom"; and "Suicide/Redemption" all discuss writers growing closer to others with a therapist's help). Note: "Talking Things Out" (p. 23) explains how therapy works.

- Finally, ask teens to journal about relationships in their lives that make them feel healthy, safe, and confident.