



Organization Background

According to the CDC, 36.7% of high school students reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless in 2019. Then, the COVID pandemic increased mental-health related emergency visits among adolescents by 31%, creating a national mental health crisis. Most teens see anxiety and depression as major problems among their peers and three in ten wish almost daily that they had more good friends.

University studies conducted over the past 20 years support teens' impulse to have good friends, finding that positive peer relations are a "fundamental lifeline." Peer support improves social integration and self-confidence, protects against peer victimization and helps teens deal with life events. Failure to develop adequate peer relationships is associated with severe psychological distress that can lead to suicide.

So, how can we give all teens the fundamental lifeline of good friends?

Give Us the Floor (GUTF) is a San Francisco-based non-profit helping teens deal with distress through unique, peer support groups that use a dedicated smartphone app to provide constant contact in a safe teen-only, online community. Trained peers facilitate the confidential, supportive group chats and members help each other with common mental health and social issues such as depression, isolation, anxiety, body image, bullying and relationships.

GUTF is based on the latest science related to teen well-being, but founder Valerie Grison-Alsop's decision to embrace screen time was a true stroke of genius. Researchers at San Diego State and Florida State Universities, among others, have validated widespread concerns about screen time, finding that adolescents who spend more time on "new media" such as social media and smartphones are more likely to report mental health issues.

GUTF's innovative format leverages teen devotion to their devices to create a safe, online community where teens can learn how to share and listen both to each other and to their own emerging voices and identities. The program has proven to be particularly valuable to the LGBTQIA+ community, as 86% of GUTF participants indicate they identify as LGBTQIA+.

Participants communicate as often as they wish (usually at least daily) via closed group chats. In late 2021, GUTF moved its chats from social media platform Snapchat to a new, dedicated app available for iOS and Android. The constant connection of the app gives GUTF members across America a 24/7 sense of belonging balanced by increased safety and anonymity, all of which encourages sharing.

In every GUTF supportive group chat, teens help teens in distress without fear of stigma, taboo, or shame. Groups are organized by age and primary discussion topic to keep the chats relevant and relatable. Most importantly, GUTF members feel that they are not alone. Perceived crises or inappropriate content or behavior are easily reported by participants and automatically escalated through the app to the adult team who can determine appropriate action and connect teens with additional resources.

GUTF helps teens to develop social skills and tools they need to meaningfully connect with others in real life and online. Trained teen facilitators encourage chat members to share concerns and experiences, which promotes emotional healing and helps to relieve stress. The teens help each other, which builds their relationship skills and sense of belonging. The GUTF format also effectively leverages the “sharing effect” documented by university researchers in Berlin who found that knowing a friend is experiencing the same emotion makes humans feel better than they would if they experienced the situation alone.

GUTF members who actively participate in a supportive group chat report an increased sense of connection and belonging. In 2021, 85% of GUTF participants said they felt less lonely after one month and 89% said the program had helped them with their struggles after three months of participation. To date, GUTF has helped more than 6,000 teens and is currently expanding with the goal of helping 10,000 additional youth in distress by the end of 2023.