

Let's Talk

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Every year over 44,000 Americans suffering from mental illness commit suicide according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. This figure equates to roughly 121 suicide-related deaths a day. Whether you realize it or not, everyone in this room interacts with a human being living with some form of mental illness every single day. A handful of those living with a mental illness choose to speak out about their condition, in hopes that their experiences will take away the stigma of mental health conditions. Speaking openly about mental illness may also encourage others to speak up and get help for their disorders. However, for many people there is still a taboo around mental illness. Individuals may be embarrassed or afraid to speak out in order to receive the treatment they need. Some of these people may not even realize they need help in the first place. Illness can show up in the form of addiction, depression, anxiety, or eating disorders, just to name a few. These conditions can impact a person's life in a variety of ways. Homelessness, the inability to get out of bed, physical strain on the body, or, in the most extreme cases, self-harm and suicide are outcomes of untreated mental illness. With the side effects of mental illness being so serious, we must begin to incorporate information about mental illness in health class curriculums in high schools, so the stigma of mental illness is reduced and those affected are able to speak up and get help at the first sign of a mental disorder.

High school is already a difficult time in a teenager's life. On top of dealing with more responsibilities and pressures both socially and academically, adolescent bodies are undergoing a massive hormonal shift. With so many big life changes happening, it may make it harder for teens to determine whether the sad or anxious emotions they are feeling are just the result of puberty or something more serious. The National Association for Mental Illness states, "Half of individuals living with mental illness experience onset by the age of 14, and one in five youths live with a mental health condition. Yet less than half of these individuals receive needed treatment."

Unlike so many of these teens, I was able to get help. I have been living with depression and anxiety disorders for most of my life. I was placed in therapy in third grade and have been visiting therapists on and off for the last fourteen years. My depression began to hit its peak in 2011 when I was a junior in high school. Every morning I'd wake up achy and sore even though all I had done was sleep. Moving myself to an upright position and slowly putting my feet on the floor to get out of bed took almost all of my energy. It became more and more difficult for me to concentrate on—or even care about—my schoolwork, friendships, family and even myself. My anxiety let minor criticisms set off sharp stabbing feelings throughout my chest, where they began to bury themselves into my being,

chipping away at my confidence. Tears would flow freely and frequently for no apparent reason. Embarrassed and scared, I isolated myself in these emotions, and thought I was doomed to live a sad, hard, and anxiety-filled life. If you were to talk to my classmates at the time, however, no one would have believed I was going through this. I was too embarrassed to tell anyone how I was feeling. I thought I would be seen as weak or, even worse, crazy. I often wondered what was so wrong with me? Everyone else could get through school with ease, but I was struggling to even get myself inside the building. Finally, after a particularly bad week, my mom sat me down and asked me what was wrong. Months, and possibly even years, of depression and anxiety-induced self-doubt, criticisms and thoughts poured out of me. My mom and dad quickly made arrangements for me to visit therapists and psychiatrists so that I could get treatment.

Teenagers and young adults spend a majority of their time in a learning environment, and this is why the Teen Mental Health Organization states that “school is one of the best places for both educators and students to become increasingly aware of mental health, mental health problems and mental disorders.”

According to the World Health Organization, depression is the leading cause of illness and disability worldwide: 300 million people are affected around the globe. Yet only a fraction of these people receive treatment. One organization actively trying to get rid of the stigma attached to mental illness is The Young Minds Organization in the United Kingdom. Young Minds has started a campaign to make mental health education mandatory in all high schools and middle schools, stating: “Since beginning our campaign of providing mental health education in schools which normalizes and opens up a discussion about mental disorders...thousands of adolescents have come forward to receive help.”

It’s imperative for mental health disorders to be openly discussed, and for there to be no stigma associated with a mental health condition so that those affected feel comfortable reaching out to receive help instead of taking drastic measures like suicide. By incorporating information about mental illnesses into a school curriculum, adolescents will grow up knowing that having a mental health condition is nothing to be ashamed of and that there are many channels for help. I’d like to invite you all to sign a pledge with me that states you will support and not pass judgment on those with a mental health condition. NAMI’s pledge is a huge step in raising awareness and erasing the stigma of mental illness: <https://www.nami.org/stigmfree>.

Works Cited

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