

Pocket full of bricks

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We live in a world in which people only seem to notice mental illness a moment too late. The suffering becomes evident on the day of the memorial, when candles and people clutter a sidewalk, honouring a soul they had no concern for a week before. Pictures of the forgotten youth get plastered to a piece of paper, and every person who lays eyes upon them makes the same remark: " But they looked so happy." Anyone can smile for a camera.

Smiles aren't always real. Millions of teenagers paint a happy expression onto their faces every day. These smiles keep tears from burning down their cheeks like acid. They tell the world, " I'm okay", when, in reality, they're not. This lie seems to be the only thing that comes from the mouth of a teenager that adults actually believe.

According to the Surgeon General, four million adolescents suffer from debilitating mental illnesses. As told by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the National Association for Mental Health (NAMI), suicide is the third leading cause of death in teenagers, preceded only by unintentional injury and homicide. These statistics alone leave a sense of hopelessness for any teenager who stumbles across them on the internet. Where are we supposed to turn? If numbers don't lie, how can anyone so young and in so much pain from a mental illness survive long enough to see the supposed " light" of adulthood? A person can spend over fourteen years in school, and high school is considered one of the many " joyrides" in life. Sitting on the floor every night fighting a never ending battle with yourself is definitely a ride, but not one of much joy.

Sometimes, parents can fail to notice that something is wrong with their children, and other times, parents can be the cause of their children's problems. As hundreds of teenagers have been told before, school is supposed to be an escape. It's supposed to be a place dedicated to learning; however, learning can be difficult when issues weigh students down like bricks in their pockets. Unfortunately, a teen's problems don't disappear when they walk through the doors of their school building. School staff can easily disregard the idea that students have other things taking place in their lives besides an algebra test, and then the blame is placed on the student.

Many have the preconceived notion that all teenagers of this generation are lazy and slow because of the internet, television, or drugs. Though this may be true for some teens, others are waging constant war with demons inside of them. Stress, depression, eating disorders, and anxiety are just a few items on the list of what plagues the minds of today's youth. When a teen is told by teachers, guidance counselors, or administrators that they simply must "try harder", yet their hardest isn't being noted, it just adds to the hopelessness of the whole dreadful situation. The escape isn't so blissful anymore, but now a Hell on Earth.

School can be the last factor before the students with bricks in their pockets plunge into an icy stream. The amount of stress teenagers experience is no help to the school either. Mental illnesses can consume a student's life, making learning and academics unimportant to them, thus causing their grades to drop. With this being known, schools should be taking more initiative in promoting healthier minds of students. When asked if their

school seems concerned about the mental health of its students, only a mere four percent responded with “ yes”.

Though the issue mightn't surface to the eyes of the adults who run schools, the problem is obvious to the students who aren't receiving the attention they need. In many schools, the primary focus is university, not the feelings of the student applying. Graduation rates mean more than attempted suicide rates. Self-harming isn't a problem unless the student's grades are dropping. The suicidal thoughts will go away if the kids would just study more.

Countless adults seem to have this ideology, and that can keep them from understanding some of the horrors teenagers face today. The age gap between generations causes a lack awareness, and a lack of awareness can lead to a lack of empathy, which makes adults, such as those in guidance offices at schools, unable to properly help a child who is suffering. This contributes to the burdens on students' backs, because many end up doing the job of guidance counselors for not only themselves, but their friends as well. Resolving this matter needs to begin with the generations before ours. Though it has been said that “ you can't teach an old dog new tricks”, fixing this issue is possible. Learning about mental illnesses from health classes or government mandated seminars that teachers and school staff attend can be helpful, but shouldn't replace actually empathizing with someone suffering.

Textbooks can teach all of the signs and symptoms, but not how to comfort someone who wants nothing but to end their own life. Some adults need to open their eyes and realise that a student isn't their mental illness. They are

human beings, and should be treated as such. Exposure to more true stories might just be taking a huge step in the right direction when it comes to understanding this. Telling an adult to “ just empathize” is almost as asinine as telling a student to “ just get over it”.

Both are next to impossible to accomplish. Empathy, however, begins with a simple understanding. Your children are dying of diseases you can't see, and hopefully you will never know first-hand how much pain a person has to be in to take a blade to their own skin, or skip every meal for three days. Although, if more people could simply understand that these issues are real, serious, and frequently invisible, we might be able to make school an escape again. We might be able to give students hope and foster a genuine desire to learn.

Actually helping the students who need help, and not just writing them off as insane, can save lives. We have to keep in mind that, sometimes, teenagers don't need a textbook response, a hospital visit, or medication. Sometimes, all we need is a hug.