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Breaking the Silence:
Why We Should be Educating Teenagers in School on Mental Illness

"...maybe I wanted someone to point a finger at me and say, 'Hannah, are you thinking about killing yourself? Please don't do that, Hannah. Please.' But deep down, the truth was that the only person saying that was me" (Asher 173) . A popular new television show, "Thirteen Reasons Why", based on the book by Jay Asher, is putting mental health in the spotlight of teenagers. The book, and new found television shows bring such an important issue to people's mind: **why aren't we educating teenagers in school on mental illness?** According to the Center for ease Control, more than 14 percent of high school students consider suicide, and 7 percent have attempted to kill themselves (Bullying and Suicide). In schools, by talking about how to prevent mental illness or how to see warning signs, those percentages can be lowered. By educating teens on the commonality and reasons behind mental illness, it could decrease stigma and more teens will be likely to reach out for help. In the show, Thirteen Reasons Why, some factors that made Hannah kill herself were rumors and pictures that spread- all with the help of technology. By talking about the dangers that technology can have on a person's mental health, it can make teens mentally healthier. For so many, mental illness starts in the teenage years, and it is important that we start teaching them about mental illness during that period of time. By not educating and talking to kids about mental illness, we are teaching them to be silent about their concerns or questions. It is so important to educate kids about mental illness in school, not just for themselves, but for their peers as well.

In "Thirteen Reasons Why", Hannah was depressed, and planning her suicide. She walked down the halls of school every day leading up to her death, yet no one said anything. Unfortunately, this is too common. By teaching kids about prevention, and warning signs of suicide and mental illness, we can stop more teens from hurting themselves, and get them the help they need. Environment has a lot to do with prevention of mental illness. Promoting inclusive environments, body-positive images, and general positivity in school, can help. But, the best way for prevention is to educate teenagers on symptoms of mental illness so they can recognize the symptoms in themselves, or their peers. For example, for a teen who may just be feeling down lately, he may not know that weight loss or gain, or having difficulty sleeping, is also a symptom of depression. These factors combined can make him realize than his issue may be bigger than just being sad (Teen Depression). Or maybe you see your friend not eating a lot at the lunch table, or going to the bathroom alone every day after lunch. These could be signs of an eating disorders, and teens need to be aware. Another way to prevent mental illness is to emphasize the resources that your school has to offer.

Schools should make sure that their resources are known about, and easily accessible. May do not know about programs or people that can help them in their school or community. But, no matter where you are, there are mental health support services that can help you, and the earlier that you go get help, the better (Teens and Young Adults). "In addition to the disorders themselves, there are add-on effects that may cause lifelong issues. With depression comes low energy and poor concentration, two factors that are likely to have a significant impact on social and academic functioning. Anxiety, and the withdrawal that may accompany it, is likewise a detriment to social and academic progress "(Steingard). These warning signs, and ways to

prevent mental illness, are things that we should be teaching in schools, and this can also help teach them how their actions can affect the mental health of others.

One task, negative or positive, can be completed at the touch of a button. As teenagers are growing up with this constant technology and new ways to communicate, this should be talked about in regard to mental illness. Ask.fm, a anonymous forum site where people can post things about you, has over 109 million users. Most text messages are read within 3 minutes of being received, and 78% of teens own smartphones (15 Facts… Social Media). Teenagers don't understand that even one text, can be taken the wrong way, and lead to someone thinking negatively of themselves. "Over thinking a situation, excessive worrying, misreading a person's feelings or taking something out of context can all be a result of this. Many people have been harassed or disrespected online which can lead to lower self-esteem and other insecurities. Social media websites can also negatively affect relationships through misunderstandings of things that were said or done online (Simpson). Teenagers do not understand the result of their actions, because they are hidden by a screen, making their actions depersonalized. In "Thirteen Reasons Why", a list of girls was sent around to the whole school, listing who had the best physical attributes in the grade. Though it was supposed to be a funny joke, Hannah's name was on the list, and she felt ridiculed by it. This was one of the reasons why she killed herself. Bullying, spreading rumors, or talking bad about people can be devastating to teenagers. With the access to do all of that quickly, and in mass, it is even worse. All these things negatively impact how we look at ourselves, others, and provoke mental illness (Ehmke). Instead of talking to kids about cyberbullying, and telling them not to do it, we should be showing them why, and explaining the effects that it could have on someone's mental health. But, along with making them aware of the

impact of their actions, we also need to make sure they understand the stigma surrounding

mental illness as well.

Mental illness affects 1 in 5 people and half of mental illnesses develop by age 14, yet,

teenagers can feel very lonely when dealing with mental illness of their own (Teens and Young

Adults). Stigma in teenagers, and in adults, prevents people from getting the help they need.

Mental health stigma is connected to knowledge about mental health, and their experiences with

mental health problems (Reducing Mental Health...). 57.3% of people think that others are not

sympathetic and caring towards people with mental health issues (Attitudes & Discrimination).

A new study sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) found that 90 percent

of adolescents with a mental illness are likely to cope with a stigma regarding their disorder

(Stigma Prevents…). By educating teens on why mental illnesses develop, or the commonality

on who has these disorders, we can let them know that they are not alone and decrease stigma.

For example, someone with Bipolar Personality Disorder may think, "Why am I like this? Why

am I different?" and not understand that Bipolar Personality Disorder is hereditary, and that it is

not their fault that they are the way they are. The person who may be thinking that they are

"weird", may be more understanding if they understood that they cannot control their actions

sometimes. A teenager could be struggling with depression, and think that no one else is like

them. What they don't know is that Smiling Depression, a depression where people are

depressed but do not seem so, effects 6.7% of the population over the age of 18 (Sunstrum). By

educating teenagers on disorders, it can teach them that it is not "weird" to have an illness, or

reach out for help. Teaching kids about who has these disorders and why, can make teenagers

feel comforted, and it can normalize the topic. The more talked about mental illness becomes, the

more teenagers will know they are not alone, and that their illness is not a label to them. If this happened, stigma would decrease and people would more likely reach out for help. Not only is it essential to teach kids who has these illnesses, but teach them or why they can develop as well. As teenagers grow older, the chances they will know someone with a mental illness will increase significantly. It only makes sense to teach kids about mental illnesses in school, so they can have useful knowledge about different disorders, for the rest of their lives.

Things like geometry, learning about a book, or learning how to make a moc-volcano, aren't skills that most of the population may use in their life. But, by the time you get to college, you are guaranteed to know people who have mental illnesses. If this is such a common topic in society, why are we not teaching teenagers how to handle it? If it is not talked about, it will become more stigmatized, more "taboo", and teenagers will not know that there is help possible for them or their peers. We should be teaching our teenagers about mental illness, and how they are not their label. We should be teaching teenagers the symptoms so that they can look out for themselves and their friends, and showing how technology can negatively impact someone's mental health. This knowledge about mental illness, and skills that could be learned, can save lives. In "Thirteen Reasons Why", if Hannah's friends knew the warning signs and knew about her illness, maybe they would've helped her. This could've prevented her from killing herself. Although "Thirteen Reasons Why" is a fictional story, it is one we all can familiarize with too well. With this story being spread with thousands of viewers, there is no better time than now, to start implementing these ideas in schools. Mental Illness should be talked about in school, to stop stories like this from happening. It is important that every teenager learns about mental illness in school, so together, we can save lives.

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