

Essay by Gracie Gardner

Saving Lives Through “We Matter Week”

Suicide Awareness Week needs a focus on the prevention of the thoughts that evoke one to commit suicide. Typically, the focus of “We Matter Week” is to bring attention to those who experience suicidal thoughts and attempt to express to them why suicide is not a good way out during a dark time in life; instead, there needs to be an added influence on preventing and dealing with the negative thoughts that lead to suicidal ideation. Discussing the development of empathy and how to express it, teaching positive activity-based strategies for all students, and instructing students on how to use QPR in order to gently identify those who are experiencing suicidal thoughts are all ways that schools can become a safer environment for students experiencing thoughts of suicide and helping teenagers develop empathy for their peers who are having these harmful thoughts.

Most schools who are involved in “We Matter Week,” participate through putting up posters and trying to convince students that they need to talk to someone about their thoughts. There are many issues with the ways that mental health issues are dealt with in many schools. Many schools accidentally segregate students with suicidal ideation by asking them to come forward or “admit” their thoughts and feelings to someone. Even if the student has reached out to someone and the school attempts to address their issues, integrating the student back into the classroom environment with successful social interaction can be difficult; there tends to be judgment for other students when they hear one of their peers is suicidal. There is comfortability felt by many people because they do not know how to interact with people who experience suicidal thoughts and are often fearful of these people because they believe that they can be dangerous to be around. Breaking this stigma is an important concept to bring into “We Matter

Week” because decreasing judgment and increasing empathy for these students who already feel judged and uncared for is the best way to help both the suicidal and their peers.

According to the American *Psychological Association*, some of the best ways to cultivate empathy are “exposing yourself to differences, reading fiction, identifying common ground with others, and asking questions” (Abramson, 44). Exposing yourself to people who are not like you and putting yourself in environments you are not used to can help in developing stronger empathy; this allows one to see the world around them as it truly is and understand what life is like for other people. A professor of psychology at York University in Toronto named Raymond Mar, PhD, has studied how reading fiction and other stories with a focus on character development helps people better understand the world and the people in it. He says, “To understand stories, we have to understand characters, their motivations, interactions, reactions, and goals. It’s possible that while understanding stories, we can improve our ability to understand real people in the real world at the same time” (Abramson, 44). The willingness to identify common ground with all types of people is an important skill because “feeling a sense of social connection is an important part of triggering prosocial behaviors” (Abramson, 44). According to John Dovidio, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Yale University, “When you experience this empathy, it motivates you to help the other person, even at a personal cost to you” (Abramson, 44). Learning to emphasize putting others before oneself will further help people build deeper relationships and be more successful in treating others with respect, which is necessary when creating relationships with peers who have experienced suicidal thoughts. Alexandra Main, PhD, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of California, Merced, claims that expressing curiosity and interest can also be an influential component on how empathetic one appears. She says, “Mind reading isn’t always the way empathy works in

everyday life. It's more about actively trying to appreciate someone's point of view" (Abramson, 44). If someone feels they are experiencing a hard time showing empathy, it may not be that they do not care; they more likely are unable to understand another person's perspective. Through asking questions and showing a desire to learn more about someone else, empathy can be facilitated. Teaching students the impact of empathy and these easy ways to improve one's expression of empathy is extremely important to building relationships with their peers, especially those who are having a difficult time engaging due to their negative, self-harmful thoughts. Incorporating a school-wide service project during "We Matter Week" is a great way to facilitate empathy and help students engage in understanding other people's situations. Taking a break from the classroom and splitting students into groups to take throughout the community to serve provides an opportunity for students to engage with other students and people in their community they would not otherwise.

A study done by *Science Direct* concluded that "[their] findings suggest that distracting, activity-based coping strategies (i.e., keeping busy, socializing, positive thinking, and doing something good for self) effectively reduce suicidal ideation in everyday life" (Stanley, Martínez-Alés, et al.). With a decrease in suicidal ideation comes a less likely chance of having suicidal behavior. Implementing a day during "We Matter Week" where students are taught about activity-based coping strategies and the importance of finding hobbies and outlets to express their emotions would be beneficial to helping students who are already struggling with mental health and preventing students who are not from developing negative and isolating thoughts. This can be incorporated through an assembly discussing the impacts of these influential yet simple activities. Explaining to students how to have positive thoughts and

affirmations could also be a part of this discussion since students need to be mindful of the way they talk to not just others but themselves as well.

QPR training for staff and students in schools can be beneficial because it can teach people how to successfully identify those around them who are feeling suicidal and feel comfortable reporting this information. Discussing suicide is not something that is easy and finding ways to have conversations about emotions and thoughts with others while being respectful of their privacy can be hard to do, but using QPR can help peers feel more comfortable and confident in recognizing those around them who are battling suicidal thoughts or behaviors. QPR stands for Question, Persuade and Refer; it is a method used to identify and interrupt a suicidal crisis and point the person towards the proper care. There was a study published by *Sage Journals* where the goal was to “assess the effectiveness of Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) gatekeeper suicide prevention training on individuals’ ability to recognize the warning signs of suicide, intention to question someone they think is suicidal, persuade the suicidal person to stay alive, and know how and where to get help for the person. They also examined whether QPR training increased an individual’s intention to intervene with a suicidal individual” (Aldrich, Wilde, et al.). The way people felt about their own willingness to intervene was collected through a pretest–posttest online survey; it was prior to and after the one hour in-person QPR training. According to the article, “The subjects answered questions about attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control regarding suicide intervention, as well as their intention to intervene with someone who was suicidal” (Aldrich, Wilde, et al.). The results of the tests showed that QPR training “significantly improved attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control regarding suicide intervention, and intention to intervene” (Aldrich, Wilde, et al.). This reveals the need to implement QPR training into schools in order to increase students’

understanding of the warning signs of suicidal ideation, the comfortability to step in when they notice these, and the ability to correctly go about dealing with the situation in an effective and empathetic way. During one day of “We Matter Week,” schools should bring in certified trainers of QPR and give students training on how they can use QPR with their peers to create a safer environment for students.

There are many ways that schools can successfully help students decrease negative thoughts and make school a safe place for students experiencing thoughts of suicide and helping teenagers develop empathy for their peers who are having these thoughts- teaching positive activity-based strategies for all students, teaching students how to use QPR in order to gently identify those who are experiencing suicidal thoughts, and discussing the development of empathy and how to express it are some of the most engaging ways for students to understand the best way to help those around them dealing with suicidal ideation and behavior. Creating a “We Matter Week” that is centered around engaging activities and teaching tested methods for helping those with thoughts of self-harm, can truly make an impact in our schools by improving the way we are able to save the lives of our fellow students.

Works Cited

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