

By Maggie Hazelrigg

“We Matter”

“I matter, You matter, We matter” has been a phrase I have heard in school since middle school. The phrase has followed me around the school with posters and t-shirts and speeches, and created a safe space in my school, in my friend group, and will continue to for years to come.

“I matter, You matter, We matter” has been a phrase I have heard in school since middle school. The slogan creates a plane of equality to each student with an emphasis on themselves, their peers, and the student body as a whole. This is vital to discussing mental health and is the first step in approaching the conversation in an appropriate manner. No one wants to be received as something different than the norm, but by creating this space of unity and acceptance among the people closest to you, it opens doors to healthy discussions. To relate to someone that you thought you had nothing in common with on a topic as intimate as mental health brings people closer together and creates a safe space. Once this environment is established, it fosters the ability to prevent suicide. It allows for conversations before suicidal thoughts have arisen, it allows an outlet of communication if suicidal thoughts have taken place, and it allows a community to lean on. Beyond the climate the phrase constructs, “We Matter” emphasizes every life. It, again, highlights the importance of having everyone on an equal footing when discussing mental health, especially regarding suicide. Each life matters, and “We Matter” brings this to light in its ability to create equal and healthy conversations to fruition. This environment helps to reduce the stigma around mental illness

The “We Matter” phrase has always inspired inclusivity in the world of mental health, but it has especially to me. In my experience as a teenager, we all want to fit in, we want to follow the status quo, and do everything in our power to keep our lives as picture-perfect as possible. Growing up in the golden age of social media, it only augments these negative feelings around being different. It almost seems required to have your life together when you don’t even know who you are yet. Through social media platforms, school activities, and your social sphere you almost have to create a facade of organization and happiness. The truth behind any social media post, any perfect grade, or any ideal friendship lies a farce of some kind. Nothing is what it seems. Through the “We Matter” organization I have been able to see these cracks in these perfect images that the world has created for me. It has presented to me that people who seemingly have their life together, struggle in their own sense. The program has alleviated many of my concerns that I am not enough and that I am not doing enough in my own life by showing me imperfections. It has created a safe space for me to have conversations with my peers about these feelings, and in turn, they share theirs as well. Through this, mental health has been destigmatized in my life through the “We Matter” program. It has championed the equality placed on everyone’s life by starting conversations regarding hard times and how we can come together as one to support everyone. My friends and I do exactly that in our small group of

people. I know that I can come to any of my friends for help when I feel those pressures of society again, and I know they will come to me for anything.

The most memorable suicide prevention week I have experienced in my time in high school was my sophomore year. That year, students at my school shared their testimonials about their mental health. It included stories of triggers that created the state of their mental health or their accounts of attempted suicides. Hearing these personal narratives from my peers affected me in ways that hadn't before. It made suicide prevention feel much more real because it had affected my little community and I wasn't aware. But that is the point of suicide prevention week: to make the community aware. The best way to promote suicide prevention is to allow students with experiences in the realm of mental health to share their brave experiences. By students sharing, it creates the core values of the "We Matter" program. It is to create equality among the students, that every life is as valuable as the next. Hearing peers share their vulnerable stories creates an intimacy among the student body that allows a safe environment for others to come forward about their mental health. While it may take a strong individual to share their story, it would make the greatest impact on those that aren't strong enough yet. It would make the greatest impact on those that don't realize the extent of their battle with mental health. It would make the greatest impact on those who are struggling the most.