

Pale and lifeless, she stared into the void: eyes probing the folds of existence which rippled around her. Weary, dark spots plagued under her eyes told the story of countless sleepless nights as her hands hovered over a paper.

I glanced down at the paper furtively, then back at her. The paper seemed to have writing scribbled out, hastily, which slowly faded into words foreign to the English language, then fading into a straight line.

“Are... you okay?”

Her eyes flicked up. “Oh... hi.” She stared back down at her paper, her eyes dull and bleary. “I’m just... studying for science.”

“Yeah, but you look totally drained. How many hours did you sleep yesterday?”

She scrubbed her eyes with the back of her hand and picked up her pen. “Maybe like two... two-and-a-half...”

My eyebrows jumped up. “Two hours? You know that you’ll get burnt out. I thought you didn’t like science.”

She sighed, her pen absently marking the side of the page. “My parents said that if you want to go to a good college, you need to take all Honors, so I’m taking Biology Honors right now.”

“What?” Something wasn’t adding up here. “Your parents know you hate biology, but they still put you in honors?”

“Well...” she pressed her lips together guiltily, “I didn’t tell them. They’d be really disappointed, you know. They want me to go for computer engineering, or something tech. Whenever I draw, they always tell me to stop wasting my time.”

I stared in shock. “Do you parents know how late you stay up?”

Her voice started to tremble. “I tried to tell them about how stressed I was... I tried to tell them how overwhelmed I felt, but they felt that level of stress is normal in high school.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like... like...” Her voice trembled. “They said I was exaggerating and if I just focused and tried harder, then it would work out. But I tried... I tried... but nothing works, everything is still so hard...”

She began to weep, her body convulsing with sobs. I stared helplessly, not knowing what to do but gently patted her on the back.

All I knew was that I *had* to help her.

Fingers trembling, I had clicked on the keyboard with my morbid finger typing skills: 'Depression'. As I delved into my reading, several crucial insights stuck out to me. Every single mental health crisis I had seen was headlined on TV, words lost behind the big blocky text; I thought of them as issues that were *beyond* me. I had *failed* to see instances right in front of me. I was entirely unaware that such situations were distressingly common in high school.

Whether it's dealing with issues like bullying, stress, or life's challenges, society frequently falls short in providing the necessary support, dropping their end of the rope in life's endless tug of war. For one, despite many mental health incidents in communities worldwide, the school never openly addresses these real issues of depression or self-harm. Furthermore, if we prompt an adult about depression, the reaction we get is "it's just a stage" or worse, "just smile more", their encouraging words being turned into a way to dismiss serious issues. Literature all over the internet is filled with ideas on "how to cheer up your moody teen" rather than actual methods to counter depression.

My mind flashed with ideas, and I considered all of them. We need to be able to counter for people struggling, right now. Suddenly, my eyes flashed. It was people like me, who just sat and thought and didn't take any action, who slowed society. I clicked open a google doc, quickly and started furiously typing.

I needed to make a *plan*.

We need an urgent mitigation strategy. This should include easy access to mental health professionals, which provides a crisis response system, ensuring immediate access to professional help and support. Additionally, schools should start stress therapy sessions free of cost for anyone who is struggling, to make sure that a healthy mental lifestyle is free to everyone.

The preventive element of the plan ensures ceasing future stigmatization by educating adults who might unintentionally exacerbate these mental health issues and establishing prevention for mental health issues that future members of society may face. In order to do this, we must increase public awareness and understanding of mental health. Me and my friends, as a group, must create a program that can be hosted in places where wider access to the public is available to learn about coping mechanisms. Programs could be regular, and include activities held at various public centers like libraries, schools and community centers. This could range from storytelling and comedy theater for elementary/middle schools and to clubs or electives focused on mental health issues through webinars, workshops and seminars in high school.

By doing so, we would sow the seeds of mental health awareness from a young age, enabling them to challenge society's rigid stereotypes and narrow definitions.

The next time I saw my friend again, her pen was still darting furiously across her stack of lined paper.

Words started to bubble up in my mouth. “How many people do you think are struggling, like you?”

She looked up at me, startled. “I... don’t know. Probably a lot.”

“Well, if they are struggling, we should help them.” I took a deep breath. “We can set up a space. A place where everyone can voice their discomforts.”

I could practically see the wheels turning in her head, “You’re right. That could work. But... Do you really think anyone cares enough to set up a space for us?”

I looked at her, smiling, “We’ve got to try, at least.”

She blew at a strand of her hair. I watched her, pervasively, shivers building up on my skin.

“Hmm... okay, fine,” she grinned, suddenly. “So when do we start?”

And, just like that, we were one step closer to changing society.

