

*By Zoe Delap*

Almost everyone will be affected by suicide at some point in their life. I have struggled with my mental health for several years. A little over two years ago, I almost took my own life. I was lucky enough to get the psychiatric treatment that I needed, but so many others do not get the help that they need in time. I am an advocate for suicide prevention because of my experiences, but I do not think anyone should wait until suicide affects them to raise awareness about prevention strategies. The ideas expressed by the “I Matter, You Matter, We Matter” campaign can save lives because it can impact people on a personal level and unite the community against a common struggle.

Having struggled with my mental health for many years, the “We Matter” movement is abundantly significant to me. I used to think that I was a burden. I, like so many others, thought that I *didn't* matter. “We Matter” means that nobody should feel like a burden for needing help. By speaking about everyone, it helps us not feel alone or isolated when we need support. The “We Matter” movement also unites the community. The community is often the first to notice when someone may be at risk, and that was the case in my situation. One of my friends told our school counselors, and they were the first professionals I talked to afterwards. The next year during suicide prevention week, our counselors personally gave me one of the “We Matter” shirts—the one with the elements of the periodic table on it. Now, I wear it when I need extra support. To me, it represents my survival and everyone who helped me when I needed it most. In addition to impacting individuals like myself, the “We Matter” campaign is an integral part of suicide prevention in the Owasso and Collinsville communities.

“We Matter” is important to suicide prevention because it offers hope to people when they need it most. When I was at my worst, I would make lists of reasons to stay alive. They usually consisted of things other people needed from me: my sister needs a role model, my dogs would never know what happened, my coding team would not be able to compete without me, etc. I acknowledged that other people needed my contributions, but I did not believe I mattered for any other reason. “We Matter” is a reminder that everyone deserves a fulfilling life, not because they offer something to other people, but because they are a person with inherent value. Students are some of the most vulnerable to suicidal thoughts, so promoting prevention strategies in schools is an important part of reducing suicide rates.

Suicide prevention and the “We Matter” movement can be promoted in schools by giving students practical steps to take. No amount of statistics can truly quantify how widespread mental illness is. It did not hit me until I was sitting in a psychiatric hospital waiting room for hours while they tried to find me a bed because they were full. Nobody ever expects it to be someone close to them, but with so many people struggling every day, we must be prepared to notice the warning signs. Students should know that anyone can be affected, and the “We Matter” campaign teaches this by not being specific to any singular type of person. Students should also be educated about what steps they should take if they know someone is struggling. When students identify that someone close to them needs help, they are already on a roller coaster of emotions, so already knowing how to proceed would make them more likely to tell the appropriate figures. Asking for help on someone else’s behalf should also be normalized. Most people will not go directly to a counselor, but they might vent to a friend. As hard as school counselors try to help everyone, other students are always going to be the first to know when

something is awry. Educating students about how to handle difficult situations equips them to connect fellow students to the appropriate resources and lead enjoyable lives.

The “We Matter” movement brings the community together to help people when they need it most. We should not wait until we are affected by a suicide to advocate for awareness. By then it is too late. If the people around me had not known what to do to help me recover, I have no doubt that I would not be here today. Life is still difficult sometimes, but I know that I can always ask for help without feeling like a burden. Thanks to the support of those around me, I will be able to go to college, pursue a career, and start a family. I believe the same is possible for everyone who struggles with a mental illness or suicidal thoughts, provided they have the resources to get treatment.