

Essay by Emma Thomas

The We Matter Suicide Awareness Car, Truck, and Bike Show opened my eyes to the issue of suicide. I have volunteered for the past two years, and those experiences hold memories I keep close to my heart. I had the opportunity to speak with amazing people, hear their stories and struggles with suicide, and learn more about really cool cars. It was a wonderful opportunity to understand people and see them in an environment they love, and I want to bring that love into my own environment. My goal is to become a veterinarian and to use the unconditional love of a pet to help care for the hearts of people.

Undoubtedly, there is a strong bond between pets and their owners, and I believe this connection can save lives. The study “The Influence of Interactions With Pet Dogs on Psychological Distress” discovered that individuals who played “with their dogs, following exposure to a stressful task, showed... reductions in anxiety...” along with other positive effects on their mental health and stress levels (Matijczak 9). This shows how pets have the ability to positively affect a person’s mental health during interactions. Keeping a pet also has a positive impact on a person’s recovery process. A pet gives a person companionship and routine, which are vital factors in the healing process. I saw the power of this bond first hand when best friend’s mental health was at risk, a horse became her recovery animal, and training him brought much joy and accomplishment back into her life. She found a purpose to keep living through their connection, and now she plans to attend college to become an equestrian. Witnessing her recovery and watching their bond grow has shown me how important animals are to human lives.

As I think about “We Matter Week,” I believe it is important to introduce students to new ideas and therapies to support mental health through themed days. The main activity day I would put into effect is Bring a Pet to School Day. Every teenager and teacher would have the opportunity to bring a pet to school for the entire day full of games, fun, and even a pet parade! Moods will be elevated for both students and teachers, and all pets will have a great time being the center of attention. Certified mental health and therapy animals would be brought in for those who do not have pets, so everyone has an animal buddy for the day. We can also incorporate shelter animals, which could potentially lead to pets finding forever homes.

I would also implement a Remembrance Day which would include suicide prevention and response training workshops. My biggest struggle understanding suicide was my unfamiliarity and unpreparedness when someone close to me tried to end their life. I want to help others understand that it is okay to talk about it and give a safe space to be heard. Suicide should not be a taboo topic, but instead teenagers should feel like they have someone to talk to. I would implement a remembrance assembly to honor those who are no longer with us. The assembly would provide education on suicide such as prevention and statistics on teen suicide rates. Resource booths will be available to talk about getting help, calling hotlines, and other resources. Then, a moment of silence would be held in remembrance. The assembly would end with the opportunity to light a candle for someone who has passed, followed by counselors available to talk with students one-on-one if so desired.

In addition to Pet and Remembrance Days, I would implement Expression Day. The entire school day will be reserved for creative expression activities. Whether it be through painting, drawing, singing, writing, short films, or speaking, the students will have the whole day to explore art therapies and learn new ways to express their feelings and mental health. To

showcase the original works, an art display exhibit will remain open for students to add to throughout the week. The performing arts center will also be available for performances of short plays, songs, and poetry or to observe others.

There will also be Physical Health Day. According to the article “Exercise for Mental Health,” exercising has been found to improve “...mental health by reducing anxiety, depression, and negative mood... by improving self-esteem and cognitive function” (Sharma 2). Students will be encouraged and taught the importance of incorporating physical activity in their daily lives. The goal will be to expose students to new and fun physical activities and different exercises, so that everyone can find their favorite workouts.

I would also like to invite the local community to be involved in ways such as providing posters to local businesses with “I Matter, You Matter, We Matter” to increase awareness. Suicide prevention and awareness should not stop once students graduate from school as mental health challenges can follow them into their adult lives. We can promote healthier work environments to help reduce the stress and anxiety of daily life. If we start now, we can make suicide awareness and prevention a characteristic of the upcoming generation and the generations to come, making it easier for individuals to seek help.

To expand suicide prevention efforts year-round, I would implement wearing purple and teal in remembrance one day a month to remind students that they are seen and heard. On these designated purple and teal days, additional counseling can be available and student leadership can lead round table discussions. This would give a frequent opportunity to invite openness and discussion to those who may feel disconnected and unheard. We can remove stigmas and change the outcomes around mental health, together.

Work Cited

Matijczak, A., Yates, M. S., Ruiz, M. C., Santos, L. R., Kazdin, A. E., & Raila, H. (2023). The influence of interactions with pet dogs on psychological distress. *Emotion*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0001256> Accessed 3 Jan. 2024.

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