

Essay by Izak Bulten

Planning activities for We Matter Week is a tremendous responsibility and not something to be taken lightly. If it were my responsibility, I would want We Matter Week to be a mix of light, relaxing activities that promote self-worth and mental wellbeing and serious activities that train students on how to recognize signs of suicidality in others and be able to sensitively intervene in a risky scenario. Students who have experienced depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts would not be pressured to speak up publicly about their experiences, but would be encouraged to talk to a counselor or someone they trust. I would want every student, regardless of where they are in life, to complete We Matter Week believing that they personally are important, and understanding better the ways in which others are important. If the purpose of We Matter Week is suicide prevention, then it should aim to set long-term ideas that continue to positively affect the way students think about themselves and others years down the road. It shouldn't be just another week, it should be an event that feels important and meaningful.

The hardest part about planning “fun” activities would be encouraging students to actually participate, especially those who are prone to be cynical and already unlikely to believe in or engage with the central message of We Matter Week. Icebreakers and other social games might cause more harm than good, especially if they cause some students to be ostracized or targeted. Less intense collaborative activities, like students coming up with unique compliments for each other and themselves, creating banners or posters promoting We Matter Week, or participating in a social media challenge together, are more likely to create a lasting positive impact. As the planner, I would also encourage each teacher to structure their lessons for the week around why, as people, we really do matter. This is an idea that can be explored in so many different

disciplines, from science to history, and might strike a chord with students who enjoy drawing personal or spiritual connections from what they learn about the world.

A suicide prevention training session would be just as important. One-third of Americans know someone who has died by suicide, and only about half say that they would be able to recognize the warning signs if someone around them was suicidal (Ballard, 2018). Suicide prevention training is more important in a high school environment, where brains are developing, hormones are raging, and emotions are fraught, than just about anywhere else. The skills learned in high school are meant to prepare students for independent, adult life. When suicide is, tragically, so present in adult life, shouldn't suicide prevention be one of those foundational skills?

One of the biggest things I'd want to accomplish is to disabuse students of the idea that speaking up when they think one of their friends may be at risk is a bad thing. Studies in schools have shown that "asking students about suicidal thoughts does not increase distress or cause harm such as increased suicidal ideation or behavior" (Ayer et al., 2022, 33). The most commonly-taught method of suicide prevention is QPR ("Question, Persuade, Refer"), and I would want every student to learn the basic principles of QPR and be able to effectively use it. It can absolutely save lives.

Another major goal of mine would be to get students who are struggling at this point in their life, regardless of whether they are currently experiencing suicidal thoughts, to talk to someone, and to that end, I'd want to invite a speaker, a college student or someone at a similar age, who has shared those experiences and can describe them in a way that feels genuine. I know that in my

own life, when I have struggled with depression and anxiety, the people who I learned how to cope from, and how to talk about it from, were people who had gone through the same things. Sometimes just the presence of a kindred spirit, able to speak openly and without fear, is enough to encourage someone that they are more valuable than what they have suffered.

The week will not be a success if the students don't feel like they're truly being engaged with, so I would encourage each member of the staff to put the same amount of excitement and belief into We Matter Week that they want their students to get from it. For those who are struggling, there is little comfort in an event that seems staged, performed more out of necessity than compassion. Again, the goal is to encourage all students that they matter, but for those weary souls who see "we matter" as a message they've heard a hundred times before, it is important that we really believe it is the truth and not simply a catchphrase. As a storyteller, I would want every activity to reflect this, making the medium less important than the emphasis placed on the message. We do matter. Every single one of us. I would constantly reinforce that as the truth, no matter how trite or cliché it sounds, because I believe it with full conviction.

It would do incomprehensible amounts of good if just a handful of students heard that message and really believed it. My ultimate goal for We Matter Week is to encourage and cultivate that belief.

References

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- Ballard, J. (2018, September 13). *Many Americans know someone who has died by suicide*. YouGov. <https://today.yougov.com/society/articles/21541-americans-depression-suicide-mental-health>