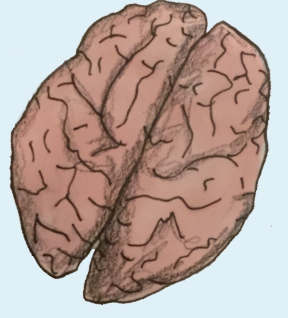




# Rethinking Mental Health

Trigger Warning: the contents of this section mention suicide and other potentially distressing mental health issues



## We need to change how we talk about mental health

by *Mattea Carberry*

Phrases like, “She’s like psycho or something” are commonplace among the student body. While these statements aren’t usually said with malicious intent, they are insensitive to those who struggle with mental health.

A student, who wishes to be anonymous, was diagnosed with depression three years ago and said that it is insensitivities like these that diminish their struggle.

This insensitivity often leads many to develop an incomplete understanding of what mental illness actually looks like for people.

The student acknowledged that even if people don’t mean the things they say, it shouldn’t be said at all because they downplay the seriousness of the topic for others who are absorbing this insensitivity.

With phrases like “go kill yourself,” which even has its own acronym, becoming so popular, many don’t consider the true implications.

“It’s so toxic because it desensitizes it and for one thing I’m like ‘okay maybe you’re trying to cope,’ but also it’s detrimental to yourself and others because it’s not cute being told to kill yourself,” they said. “It’s less about being mean, but it’s more like people joke about it so much that it makes me feel almost embarrassed,” the student said.

Sometimes the lack of sensitivity lies in the things that are left unsaid. The student noted that the lack of depth with which mental health is addressed plays a crucial role in the limited knowledge and care students have about the topic.

“We need to address the prob-

lems entirely because I feel like the discussions are very surface level and it’s kind of just tips and tricks. We don’t actually talk about what it really means,” they said. “In order to break past that boundary, you need to address it fully at a deeper level instead of just breathing exercises and being there for a friend.”

With the recent passing of another student, they felt the administration missed an opportunity to effectively initiate conversations around mental health in advisories so that students could be more educated and empathetic towards the topic.

“I know with the recent [death] there wasn’t a lot we could say, but I feel like discussions didn’t really [start] about any of it whatsoever. It was completely skipped over.”

Although the student acknowledged that there wasn’t much conversation that could have occurred around the student’s death, they were frustrated that more teachers and advisers didn’t acknowledge the topic head on.

“Because those discussions weren’t controlled at all, it wasn’t productive because it became the student’s job to process it on their own and so it just felt more gossipy and kind of insensitive,” said the student.

Sophomore Elizabeth Ross shared that she too has struggled with depression for most of her life. She feels that the school does a good job addressing mental health but emphasized that it’s a subject that should be talked about more consistently.

“It’s so important not only to address it after something horrible hap-

pens,” Ross said. “It’s most important to address mental health before something horrible happens.”

Counselor Nikkie Evans, who specializes in childhood and adolescent anxiety and depression, explained that due to the limited conversations around mental health in general, people are sometimes led to respond in ways that aren’t constructive or positive.

“I think sometimes it makes them uncomfortable if they don’t really know what to say because it is something that we don’t really address head on but we’ll kind of skirt around the topic,” said Evans. “It’s better to just be direct and head on and have those conversations.”

The lack of these direct conversations about mental health has not only some caused people to approach the topic with little sensitivity, but has ensured that many remain uninformed about the reality of mental illnesses, thus reinforcing the stigma.

Having open and honest conversations about mental health would help break some of the boundaries that currently exist between the reality of mental health and the stereotypes people assign to them.

Contrary to popular belief, the student said in their experience with depression, they aren’t just sad all the time.

“At the beginning I was sad all the time and I was angry,” they explained. “Currently it’s lack of motivation, just sluggishness and isolating. Emotion-wise it’s more numb than actively being sad.”

This lack of motivation affects them regularly in their everyday life

as they have received multiple detentions for being late since they often have a difficult time simply getting up in the morning. It also interferes with their class work.

“There was one particular test that I knew the material and instead of taking the test, I just sat there looking at the paper,” they said. “I didn’t pick up my pencil.”

The student participates in an athletic extracurricular and said they really enjoy the sport. But even partaking in activities they enjoy proves difficult.

“I signed up and got all changed and made it halfway to the field house where we were meeting and I just turned around and walked two miles home. I did that for three days after school,” the student shared. “It’s just so hard to show up [for things like that].”

The stereotypes most people have come to accept don’t encompass the truths that this student experiences daily.

Ross believes that the obstacle doesn’t necessarily lie in simply talking about mental health but actually getting people to care about it.

“I think New Trier is already pretty good about discussing mental health and making it a topic that matters,” Ross said. “The issue is usually that students and some teachers at the school will have no regard for this topic.”

In order to get people to express more empathy for the subject, Evans emphasized, people need to accept mental illness as normal, because it isn’t an uncommon struggle.

“People think of mental illness

as this thing but they don’t realize the amount of people who struggle. The people that are struggling are just like anyone else,” she said.

While getting everyone educated and more empathetic toward mental health is the most ideal goal, the school, and the larger culture, are far from realizing it. The student said that for all the good the school has done in accommodating her mental health needs, they feel as if they are being judged by their teachers due to the general preconceptions of mental illness that still exist.

“There was this weird kind of tense feeling. My teachers just kind of acted differently and I feel like that’s how a lot of people respond,” they said, “They either kind of ignore it, exclude it altogether, or they treat you differently like you’re fragile.”

These preconceptions stem from the lack of education regarding the varying degrees and types of depression and other mental illnesses, but education in all of these areas is important so that students can support each other in the most effective and constructive ways possible.

According to Evans, mental health looks different for everyone. Each person struggles, manages and uses support in different ways.

There is no easy answer as to how to achieve a truly informed and supportive environment in which students who struggle with mental illnesses can feel more comfortable and equal among their peers, but having honest conversations could help steer the school in the right direction.

Ross said, “For how important mental health is, it’s not talked about enough.”

## Schools struggle with handling the loss of a student

by *Hannah Sussman*

Similar to most hard questions, the question of how a school should handle the death of a student is one that is as important as it is complicated.

To Evelina Pereira-Webber, a child and adolescent psychotherapist, the response to this question is central to the identity of the institution, as well as the environment it creates in all aspects of learning.

“A school is about life, and the other side of life is death, so if you don’t deal with death you’re really not dealing well with life,” explained Pereira-Webber.

For New Trier, the way in which the death of a student is managed underscores the complexity of each loss and creates a plan based on the many variables that accompany a death.

Tiffany Myers, the social work department chair, emphasized the fact that the response to a tragedy is unique to that tragedy.

“We ask a lot of questions and try to determine what is the most thoughtful and respectful way to work with someone’s passing,” explained Myers.

Myers emphasized, “What it [the course of action] doesn’t depend on is how important that person was. Whether we hang something on the wall or not, they are going to be missed.”

She added that, “there is no uniformity to how the school has handled deaths in the past. I think we

try to think about each circumstance individually and be really mindful of all the parts.”

Similar to Myers, Sharon Rosman, the coordinator for school programs and the clinical site coordinator for Willow House, agreed that all losses differ in their variables.

“Every situation is different, every school is different, and every family is different-- that must always be taken into account,” Rosman said.

While each situation is unique, both Rosman and Pereira-Webber urged schools to maintain a level of consistency in their response to the loss of a student.

“In the suicide literature, as well as suicide organizations, it is recommended that all school-community deaths be treated the same in terms of how they are memorialized. In other words, however the person dies, whether it’s by suicide, whether it’s by cancer, or by a car accident, they are honored and memorialized in the same types of ways,” Rosman advised.

Pereira-Webber agreed that consistency is crucial, especially in the case of death by suicide, to ensure that some losses are not viewed as greater than others.

“It becomes a situation where if someone dies by suicide they are punished, and people won’t talk,” Pereira-Webber said, referencing the way in which many schools ignore suicide.

One such example of painful inconsistency, Pereira-Webber described, was growing up in a Catholic

### Where to find help:

In case of an emergency, call 9-1-1  
 National suicide hotline: 1-800-273-TALK  
 NT Social Work: 844-823-5323  
 Text-A-Tip: NSHELP912  
 Winnetka--Room 225  
 Northfield--Room B230

Resources for Counseling on the NT Social Work Website: provides information regarding local counseling services  
 NT Social Work Support Groups can help those struggling with stress and anxiety, body image, anger, recovery and many other issues

school where if a student died by suicide they would not be given a mass.

To Pereira-Webber a large part of the inconsistencies with regard to the response to death are based upon fears.

“I think that grown-ups get so scared of the death of a child, that they don’t talk about it, because it is everyone’s biggest fear, it is everyone’s nightmare,” Pereira-Webber said.

Beyond the fear of death itself, Rosman suggests that in part the reluctance to treat deaths equally comes from a fear of contagion.

“Schools may be fearful of romanticizing and glamorizing suicide in their efforts to memorialize someone, so they are often cautious in

what they do,” Rosman observed.

Rosman continued, adding that “suicide is very stigmatized in our society, and filled with so much blame and shame, that people often don’t want to talk about it, think about it, or acknowledge it.”

Aside from the way in which deaths are handled in comparison to one another, both Rosman and Pereira-Webber highlighted the importance of a school offering students the opportunity to talk through their feelings surrounding the death.

“It stays with you if you don’t talk about it, and work through it,” stressed Pereira-Webber.

One key aspect of these conversations which is often forgotten

is the way in which the teachers and the administration approach talking through the loss.

In an article titled “Confirming Life,” Pereira-Webber wrote “In the aftermath of a loss, a school’s leaders set a tone, and that tone exerts a strong influence on everyone.”

While each professional viewed the ideal response to a loss differently, they each agreed with Rosman in that no death, least of all death by suicide, has a simple answer.

Rosman said, “Suicide deaths are very complicated,” Rosman said. “And it’s often challenging for schools to know exactly how to deal with it.”