

Lydia Payne

### Mental Health in the Modern Age: Desensitizing to the Sensitive

In today's society, the internet and social media are integrated to an unprecedented extent. Coupled with this is the recent undeniable increase in mental illness that leads to the conclusion that the two have a correlation. Constantly on social media platforms, one can observe the extensive use of terms and phrases surrounding mental health and illness in situations that do not appear to warrant it. A slight inconvenience occurs, and many people, particularly of the younger generation, are quick to proclaim that they are "going to kill themselves". However, in most instances, this is an empty threat that has been monetized in the social sphere. In exchange for the use of hyperbolic, insensitive phrases, people receive increased views, shares, and likes, but the issue does not end with the morality of this transaction. As the use of language surrounding grave mental health issues takes on an increasingly public stage and those who partake are rewarded with popularity for their choice of buzzwords, the general population becomes desensitized to these sensitive issues. The increased use of serious mental health language and phrases in casual situations makes it extremely difficult for victims of mental illness to attain proper care, so a change must occur through spreading awareness of this issue and changing regulations around the way that schools and other environments handle damaging language.

In recent years, there has been an observed drastic increase in the usage rates of social media. This has intensified with the arrival of social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as from 2005 to 2015, the percentage of Americans who use social media increased from 5 percent to 69 percent. Additionally, a survey revealed that 92 percent of American teens report using the internet daily, with 24 percent confirming "almost constant" usage (Tamburro). Moreover, a plethora of studies have proven again and again that social media can lead to or

intensify serious mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and negative self-image. While social media can be fun to use and a useful tool for interacting with friends, the intense over-connectivity that it creates allows users to participate in the harmful activity of comparing themselves and their lives to others. Sites such as Instagram, one of the most popular platforms among teens, are heavily image-focused and often “exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and negative self-image” (Tamburro). Not only does this mean that teens indulge in the image-centric ideals of social media, but that these types of sites seem to be their favorites, which makes for a paradoxical situation of teens who feel “left out” or “out of the loop” taking to social media to regain their sense of community, only to find themselves further ostracized as the images presented to them are only the finely-tuned pieces of life that social media users choose to publish. To further complicate the issue, overconsumption of social media can disrupt the sleep cycle of individuals, making them more susceptible to mental health disorders (Tamburro). This means that social media is perpetuating an inescapable loop of psychiatric disorder in the impressionable minds of teens today. Although the online experience allows teens to interact with each other in spite of physical barriers, the psychological damages it holds are largely irreparable.

One particularly devastating and illustrative example of the effects of increased social media use is demonstrated in the story of Chase Nasca, a 16-year-old who took his own life after TikTok presented him with “more than 1000 unsolicited videos of violence and suicide” (Barrabi et al.). His parents appeared in court against TikTok to defend their son and seek justice:

‘To maximize user engagement and increase profits, TikTok creates and co-creates such content and deliberately targets children in the United States with violent, dangerous, extreme, and psychologically disturbing content from which

they can't look away.' The lawsuit claims that Chase didn't seek out violent content but was targeted by TikTok and flooded with depressing and suicide-themed clips for 'several hours every day'. (Barrabi et al.)

This is just one of many instances of the disastrous effects of social media, as well as the violent nature of much of the content that circulates. The availability of disturbing content to young people has made for a hostile online environment that greatly contributes to the rise of mental illness.

Coupled with the increase of social media and internet usage are the inevitably increased rates of mental illness that complete the connection between the aforementioned two. From just 1999 to 2016, suicide rates in the US rose steadily, increasing by 25 percent nationally ("US Suicide Rates Reach Alarming Levels"). In the year 2021, the CDC has reported that 1 in 3 high school girls "seriously considered suicide" (qtd. in Woodsome). This startling statistic further proves the idea that rates of diseases such as anxiety and depression have only increased in the modern age. One high school student revealed their thoughts on the subject: "Life today is not the same as it was with our parents twenty years ago. Things are different, and every adult does not realize that. I hope that one day, mental health is taken seriously by all schools and people. It's okay not to be okay, but it's not okay to stay that way" (King). When paired with the sharp rise of social media and the harmful effects thereof, the issue culminates into its zenith: the widespread desensitization to mental health crises. As the reach of social media expands exponentially, its detrimental effects follow the same path, and social media broadcasts the psychological issues that it creates to the vulnerable masses at the illness' very place of origin. Next, the push to be visibly relatable sweeps in, pursuing those in search of connectivity in the virtual world, and because so much of the content that they receive is centered around themes of

depression and suicide, the perceived truth is that in order to be accepted, they must put out similar ideas using the language and buzzwords that they have observed. Thus, the never-ending plot thickens and more insensitive content is created, working its way into every corner of today's society without any qualm.

Alongside this complexity, the creation of more and more online content using hyperbolic mental health buzzwords has spread from a strictly virtual forum to an in-person convocation, and in turn, the world has become largely desensitized to real mental health crises and emergencies. In a 2023 survey of high school students, 87.6 percent reported that mental-illness related buzzwords or phrases strike them as a serious call for help only “sometimes” or “almost never, as it is usually used as a joke” (Payne). This is particularly relevant and an extremely prominent scenario in high schools, where a melting pot of angsty teenagers and raging hormones attempt to navigate life and prepare for adulthood, all while constantly being evaluated by those superior to them. In these conditions, young people are extremely susceptible to pressures placed on them to “fit in” and often take to social media to do just that, only to fall into the trap of online psychological warfare. While 92.3 percent of high school students admittedly feel that the common use of language surrounding mental health is at least partially harmful to those who suffer from mental illness, the boost in popularity that they receive in exchange for using these phrases as a commodity outweighs the previously outlined negative impacts, as they are rarely talked about or realized by many (Payne). One high school student shared their thoughts on this topic:

I think that people with mental illnesses have begun to believe that even if they came out with the information that they may be suffering from something like anxiety or depression, society will push them back and tell them that they do not

have the right to ‘claim’ to have these illnesses because they might not show all the typical symptoms or cope differently from what society has normalized.

Along with this, the glorification of suicide and self-harm has been making the people who have experienced those things feel like they ‘don't have it bad enough’ compared to others (A. Yang).

Additionally, society has latched so severely onto this concept to the extent that the use of mental illness terms as a ridicule has become prominently accepted. A prime example of this is found in the music video for the song “OMG” by the Korean girl group NewJeans. The video, located almost entirely in the psychiatric ward of an unspecified hospital, features each of the members, wearing hospital gowns, portraying and perpetuating harmful stereotypes of mental illness. In the final scene of the music video, group member Minji can be seen clapping back to critics of their group by approaching a woman typing critical comments online directed at the group and telling her, “Let’s go,” and therefore implying that their negative commentators are mentally ill and ought to be institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital (H. Yang). Not only does the group’s acting, which includes each member portraying symptoms of different mental illnesses, raise concerns, but their use of going to a mental hospital as a ridicule reinforces negative, dangerous ideas on an impressionable generation, and yet the producers of this music video still appear to have “thought of mental illness as a quirky theme that sets NewJeans apart from other singers” (H. Yang). This is an all-too-common practice that goes largely unnoticed, with NewJeans being one of the many instances that proves societal desensitization to mental illness, which is a direct result of a recent push for mental health awareness. The raising of public knowledge is a positive thing in and of itself, but it is through the over-normalization of these topics that harm finds its way. Historically, mental health has been regarded as a taboo topic, with families and victims

going out of their way to hide what is going on. However, the age of the internet has allowed for the widespread realization and acceptance of mental health as a real issue, but encouragement of self-diagnosis and other individual practices on the internet has instead paved the way for a sort of boy-who-cried-wolf environment. This leads most people to the conclusion that severe depression is not as common as it appears at first glance and is most frequently regarded as a joke. Although this is generally true, the assumption made by the masses that mental health can be treated as a joke makes it difficult for those who actually suffer from serious illnesses such as anxiety or depression to receive adequate care. To further entangle this issue, research has inexplicably shown that almost 80 percent of people who die by suicide “explicitly deny suicidal thoughts or intentions” (“US Suicide Rates Reach Alarming Levels”). This incongruity is because serious mental illnesses are not taken as such, and many victims harbor a very real fear that in the case that they actually came forth with their internal turmoils, no one would believe them or they would simply be brushed off and scoffed at. Because joking about mental illness is so prevalent in today’s culture, a large amount of people with mental illness are made to feel as though their concerns are invalid, and those exaggerated statements can emit the underlying assumption that suicide is inherently “cool”, which is harmful, disrespectful, and flat-out wrong.

In recognition of the severity of the effect that social media has on mental health, there has been a societal movement towards unplugging and logging off. In fact, the US government even cited mental health as a reason for concern in the 2023 hearing against TikTok in Congress (Barrabi et al.). However, this solution is not only unrealistic, as social media has become a pillar of society, but it fails to address the reality of the issue. One psychologist articulated as such, explaining that while social media is contributing to the decline of mental health, decreasing internet usage will not solve the issue because of individual, personal circumstances

(Woodsome). Since each person faces different daily situations, much of which occurs separate from the virtual world, simply decreasing the amount of screen time that one enjoys is not a valid fix to this issue. Instead, one proposed idea is the continued utilization of online forums and support groups for those who suffer from any kind of mental health disorder in which participants can remain anonymous if need be (Tamburro). Resources such as these can be a great way to improve the mental health literacy of teens and children as they navigate the internet. By educating young people about the harmful effects and encouraging them to be intentional and aware of their choices on social media, they can be provided with the tools, even in an online setting, to maintain good mental health.

Additionally, the current efforts, or lack thereof, attempted by many schools to combat mental health crises are also largely ineffective. Because the normalization of exaggerated psychological statements is now so intensely mainstream, mental health in schools is left largely untouched. It is simply no longer plausible to say that every instance of a student declaring suicidal intentions warrants a report or investigation, as research has repeatedly proven and it can simply be observed that most incidents are meant to be taken in a joking manner, but there is more that needs to and can be accomplished in schools. Instead of sitting idly by and further enabling this crisis, schools need to put stricter protocols in place and encourage teachers to re-sensitize conversations of mental health while ensuring that the topic does not withdraw fully back into a taboo. At the moment, 73.8 percent of high school students feel that public high schools are inadequately equipped to handle mental health crises, meaning that most students do not trust the school system and its protocols when it comes to psychiatric issues (Payne). To illustrate, if a teacher observes a student jokingly exclaiming that they are going to kill themselves, perhaps the teacher should further inquire about the student's well-being by asking if they need

someone to talk to. This practice provides a gentle opportunity for a student in need to arrange assistance while also discouraging further behavior in those unaffected. Furthermore, this also instills a sense in the student that their school is not only aware of mental health issues, but also cares deeply about the topic, a key aspect missing for many. The CDC recommends that schools incite a profound change by “increasing the sense among all students that they are cared for, supported, and belong at school” (qtd. in Woodsome). All that it takes is one courageous step in the right direction, and teachers and administrators all around will be empowered to follow suit. By reinstating the topic of mental illness as one to be taken seriously and handled with care, the mental health literacy of the young generation will rise, increasing their ability to manage boundaries and emotions as well as knowing when to ask for help.

Moreover, the most effective, and also most complex, way to tackle the issue of desensitization to mental illness is to alter mindsets and societal norms. One article speaks of the complexity of the true solution: “A person’s mental health is not an immaculate conception of just one brain, body or life. Teen suicide might drop and anxiety might improve as more school programs are funded and kids limit their screen time. But these will be temporary fixes for this generation and the next until we stop bullying ourselves and each other and find ways to show collective care” (Woodsome). This essentially sums up the fact of the matter, as it is through altered approaches in regards to mental health that long-term change can occur. There have been plenty of instances in which the masses have gravitated away from a word or phrase, but it is only after intense reinforcement and reiteration that people realize the power of their word choice. In regards to the recent movement away from use of the “R-word”, the sister of a girl with Downs syndrome wisely proclaimed that “the only way that people will stop saying it is if [we] make people aware that it’s hurtful” (qtd. in Hone-Mcmahan). This applies to mental health



buzzwords as well. If the public is made aware of the effects that this normalization has had, they will be quicker to drop the common phrases and adopt words that more adequately fit their own situations. The good news is that human beings are entirely able to adapt, and both children as well as adults have neuroplasticity, so the end is well within reach.

In all, the recent rise in casual usage of hyperbolic language surrounding mental illness greatly hinders the help process for those who actually suffer from psychological disorder. Therefore, a change must occur through increasing public knowledge and acceptance of this issue as well as altering ineffective regulations and protocols in schools. Once the casual employment of serious mental health issues is de-normalized, there will be more room and acceptance for actual victims to receive help, creating a society that is prepared and available to discuss mental illness in a healthy way as opposed to being conditioned to take it as a joke. With this mindset instilled, rates of mental illness and suicide will inevitably drop because care will become more accessible and those affected will no longer feel ridiculed for their suffering. Clearly, the instituting of a more sensitized approach to mental illness and psychological disorder will establish a world that is prepared and ready to grow, learn, and act cohesively together, painting a better tomorrow for future generations.

Works Cited

Barrabi, Thomas and Fitz-Gibbon, Jorge. "TikTok's Toll." *New York Post*, 24 Mar.

2006.

Hone-Mcmahan, Kim. "Hurtful 'R-word' target of campaign." *Montreal Gazette*, 25

June 2011.

King, Julee. Personal interview. 10 April 2023.

Payne, Lydia. Mental Health and Buzzwords at LHS. Lindale, TX, 10 Apr. 2023.

Tamburro, Cecelia. "Teens & Tech: REMAINING AWARE & RESPONSIBLE IN

THE SOCIAL MEDIA AGE." *The Exceptional Parent*, vol. 47, no. 9, Sept. 2017, pp.

23+. Gale OneFile: Psychology,

[link.gale.com/apps/doc/A510296382/PPPC?u=txshrp100100&sid=bookmark-PPPC&x](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A510296382/PPPC?u=txshrp100100&sid=bookmark-PPPC&x)

id=2c5c80fc. Accessed 30 Mar. 2023.

"US Suicide Rates Reach Alarming Levels." *The Journal of Employee Assistance*, vol.

48, no. 4, Oct. 2018, p. 17. *Gale OneFile: Psychology*,

[link.gale.com/apps/doc/A559687424/PPPC?u=txshrp100100&sid=bookmark-PPPC&x](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A559687424/PPPC?u=txshrp100100&sid=bookmark-PPPC&x)

id=1655a13d. Accessed 29 Mar. 2023.

Woodsome, Kate. "American teenagers are unwell because American society is

unwell." *The Bakersfield Californian*, 18 Feb. 2023.

Yang, Audrey. Personal interview. 11 April 2023.

Yang, Haley. "NewJeans' 'Mental Illness Aesthetic' Faces BackLash." *JoongAng*

*Daily*, 9 Jan. 2023.