

Pause. Breathe. Be Proactive

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*'Pointless. That's how I see it.
If you want to be here, that's fine,
breathe all you want.
But honestly, what is the point?
What is the point, if you don't want to?
Can you?
Nope. Now you see why I find it
pointless.
Because it's like an infection
Taking over your body against your will.'*

These words were written by a secondary school student from Kildare in November 2013 when asked to express the word 'Breathe'. The frustration, the sense of hopelessness – these are emotions that have appeared in a majority of young people's lives today. These emotions, among others, are also connected with mental health and wellbeing. And while much is being done in regards to breaking down the stigma of mental health illness, a recent report from the World Health Organisation (WHO) in January 2014 stated that 20 million people worldwide attempt suicide annually and it predicts that by 2020, approximately 1.5 million people will have died from suicide. Closer to home, a recent report by the *Irish Examiner* titled 'Health & Ireland' found that Cork City has the highest suicide rate in Ireland at 17.6% (the national average is 11.5%).

While these figures are no doubt extremely troubling, it is vital now to find protective aspects and elements in order to help prevent younger generations from falling down this treacherous path. Many young people feel that life is not fair or that things 'never go their way'. They feel stressed

out and confused. And to make matters worse, young people are bombarded by conflicting messages from parents/guardians, friends and society. Today's younger generation see more of what life has to offer – both the good and the bad – on television, in school, in magazines or on the Internet. When a young person's mood disrupts their ability to function on a day-to-day basis, it may indicate a serious emotional disorder. According to the WHO report, a factor that can help protect students from this is Emotional Intelligence (EI) – an ability to monitor one's and other's emotions, to distinguish or identify among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions. It states that people with high EI have better mental wellbeing because they know when and how to express their feelings and moods.

Breathe deals with and teaches students how to cope with their feelings. Our student workshops assist and help develop a sense of acceptance and belonging that is so important in developing EI. Some of the areas where EI can be enforced are featured in the Breathe workshops by helping students:

MAKE NEW FRIENDS

Healthy relationships with peers are central to young people's self-esteem and provide an important social outlet. Feedback from students who have participated in Breathe workshops shows that they appear to have developed or understood the importance of empathy and respect as they had the opportunity to hear stories

from others in their group that they may not have had any communication with prior to their workshop. They found that they all had more in common than previously thought and got the chance to speak to new people.

PARTICIPATE IN SCHOOL ACTIVITIES / HOBBIES

Staying busy helps young people focus on positive ways to help deal with stress rather than concentrating on negative feelings and behaviours. During their Breathe workshops, students are given a huge array of art supplies, writing material and technology equipment to help them express their ideas and feelings through whatever means. As one student stated in their feedback form:

'The opportunity to open up and express yourself was a good change. We had huge freedom of choice.'

They also recognised the importance of having activities / hobbies outside of the school environment in order to give them a healthy work/life balance. On a number of forms, students stated that in their workshop they learned not to take themselves 'too seriously', to solve a problem one step at a time and the importance of relaxation.

'Today I learned that sometimes I need to just take a step back and just breathe. You can't solve all your problems at once.'

ASK SOMEONE FOR HELP

Another key topic that is covered in the Breathe student workshops is the need

and importance of communication. The previous areas mentioned were only successful due to the increased levels of communication within the groups.

'I learned that you need to trust others and talk to people about your feelings. My favourite part was the group games because we learned how to work as a team.'

But sometimes, hard as you may try, depression can just take over due to factors that are out of our control. Studies show that some depressed people have too much or too little of certain brain chemicals. A family history of depression may increase the risk for developing depression later in life and difficult life events (such as death or divorce), or side-effects of medication can contribute to depression also. This is why Breathe involves parents/guardians and teachers as we are all responsible for the emotional wellbeing of each and every student. It is important to involve teachers as much as parents/guardians as teachers may see a young person more during the day than a parent/guardian. The findings and recommendations provided by *"Teenage Mental Health: What helps and What Hurts?"* (June 2009) found that some of the key suggestions from teenagers were:

- School class per week on Mental Health
- Less homework and more time to relax at weekends

During their Breathe Workshop, teachers are provided with the tools and a hand-out to help deliver and address these 'key helps'. They are encouraged to integrate the acquired knowledge from their Breathe workshop into the classroom through subjects like CSPE, Religion, History, English etc. Many teachers found their workshops informative and that they reinforced the need to be aware of their students' emotional needs as well as their intellectual. But these workshops aim to not only help teachers with their

students but as a whole staff unit. One of the many benefits of these workshops has been the team building and bonding among staff. Some noted that teaching can be quite isolating so it was very welcoming to be able to come together and do something positive. One teacher even stated:

'I have worked in this school for 12 years and this is the first time I've taken part in a workshop like Breathe. Fantastic work!'

This energetic response from both students and school staff has even resulted in two schools that participated in the Breathe programme, Maria Immaculata Community College, Cork and Clonasslee College, Laois being awarded with an Amber Flag. The Amber Flag is an initiative by Suicide Aware Ireland and recognises positive mental health awareness in schools.

But the parents/guardians are just as important in ensuring that the lessons learnt are not left at the classroom door. As found in the *"Teenage Mental Health: What helps and What Hurts?"* (June 2009) report, young people recognise the importance in speaking to their family in addition to their friends. Parents/guardians that participated in their own Breathe workshop found it comforting to listen to other parents/guardians talk about their experiences and know that they're not a bad person or parent. They found it reassuring to know that their child's behaviour was normal and it let them discover some aspects of their child's personality they may not have seen before.

'Very uplifting to hear other parents speak openly and truthfully about their relationships with their children. Sometimes we think we are the only ones going through hard times. This programme has huge potential. Thank you.'

In order to create a strong awareness of positive mental health, we must ensure that the school community is

unified and supportive. The Breathe Programme has so many outreaching benefits to students, their teachers and their families. The sense of community strengthens, there is better communication and knowledge that making mistakes is a natural part of learning and that stress and frustrations can be dealt with in a positive way. There are benefits for students and benefits for teachers and parents/guardians. There are increased links between schools and their local communities and an entire school centre can, over time, become a more creative, more spontaneous place where it is more enjoyable and more satisfying to work and study.

It is important to remember that the Breathe programme does not stop once our tutors leave the school grounds. Through the skills and techniques learnt, schools and families can continue raising awareness around mental health and removing the attached stigmas. There are also follow-on workshops available to those that have already participated as we recognise that these issues cannot be solved in one day. Breathe has the potential to make a very positive contribution to the lives of young people and we would love to see it reaching schools in even more parts of the country and eliminating that 'infection taking over your body against your will'.

Irish Public Bodies Insurance has kindly sponsored 77 schools to take part in Breathe from September to December 2014. So far, they have sponsored 53 schools to take part, with many continuing to sign up for follow-on workshops for the upcoming academic year. For schools that are interested in availing of the Irish Public Bodies Insurance sponsorship, early booking is advisable.

For more information on Breathe, please visit justbreathe.ie or email

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