



It's About Relationships with All of Existence

by Sue Yockey, Elementary School Counselor

In the spring of 2014, I wrote an article entitled "It's About Relationships." The final paragraph reminds us that God is present in our connections with others. Relationships are about sharing the presence of God with one another. They are about blessing one another with a smile, a gift, a handshake, a kind word, or a prayer. These interactions with God's children can happen in the silence of a moment or the garble of an argument. If the motivation behind the interaction is love, then there is no room for failure – only forgiveness. It's not about rules. It's about relationships. Create valuable, positive relationships that will last forever.

Recently, after listening to a homily I had another thought. Relationships are not only with people but with everything that exists. This idea, I believe was a whisper from God to call me to an awareness that if something exists God is present in that thought, feeling, or concrete person, place or thing. In that moment I was present to the pew I was sitting on, the liturgical book I was holding, the humanity within the Church, the altar, and the Tabernacle - the place where the remaining Blessed Sacrament is placed after Communion.

What would happen if I was in relationship with the things around me? I thought I would begin by taking something simple like the pen I was using. As I grasped the slightly thicker than thin tool I was using I started laughing. Can't have a conversation with it. Maybe I could carry it along with me all day. Would this writing utensil have more meaning to me if I used it solely for one week? As I set it down I saw the words, Paper Mate, written. I thought about the multiple people who made it possible for me to have this product to write with: the company that produced it and the workers who packaged it, mailed it out, and delivered it to a store. The store at some point employed contractors to build it, furnish it, get it up and running, pay its bills, and provide the labor to make it a profitable business.

As I write this article I am filled with gratitude for all the blessings God has bestowed on each of us. At one of our school Masses we were encouraged when asked, "How are you?" to respond, "I am blessed." Relationships are not about doing but about receiving the unspoken blessing of all that was before that moment of interaction, all that is in the instant of contact, and all that will flower in the future with the object, the living being, the thought, or the feeling. It is being thankful and finding the smile of hope in the moment of relationship.

At VCES we strive to educate the whole child with the support of their families to prepare them for lifelong learning, leadership, and service in the community, country, and world. Creating positive relationships is stressed throughout our curriculum. Social-emotional skills are taught. In light of the recent MS/HS communication of content concerns for the Netflix Series "13 Reasons Why" let the principal, counselor, vice principal or teacher know if your child struggles with relationships. Together we can do great things.

Perceptions of Mental Health Symptoms: Then and Now

by Sr. Colleen Schmitt, Middle School Counselor

Many of us have heard and may have even viewed the Netflix series, *Thirteen Reasons Why*. The concerns from the National Association of School Psychologists and several other organizations was not only the sensationalism that suicide was the *only* solution—but that multiple mental health issues were being ignored by adults and teens. While aimed at young adults it still depicts parents, teachers, and mental health professionals in an unflattering light. In truth, it depicts teenagers in an unflattering light, too. There are no examples of teens seeking help after a serious trauma nor navigating through mental health issues with the help of an adult.

This series reminds me of how influential TV and movies can be even if they paint a skewed picture of “real life.” I doubt I would have liked *Ferris Bueller* or *The Breakfast Club* if the adults in it were aware and responsive to the needs of the students. I mean, Ferris would have been caught, probably grounded and expelled from school. Seeing a fictional character get away with making poor choices...wasn't that what attracted us to those movies? Didn't we romanticize the characters and even copy their behavior (think *Dirty Dancing*, *Sixteen Candles*)? The underlying theme of distrust to adults and distorted judgement are still being depicted—just in more easily accessible graphic detail.

Regardless of perceptions, danger of suicidal tendencies and other mental health issues are the same today as they were back then. Adults are still tasked with observing and acting on student behaviors that present emotional and physical risk. What I hope is that we don't wait for symptoms to be at the level of ‘graphic detail’ and therefore miss the much more subtle symptoms of mental health risk.

Schools and families should be aware of the following list of student behaviors which could indicate a mental health concern and need for intervention:

- Suicidal threats and/or plans; prior suicidal behavior; preoccupation with death
- Feeling very sad or withdrawn for more than two weeks; loses interest easily
- Negative self-talk: “I’m no good,” “I’m a failure,” “I can’t take this anymore.”
- Avoids spending time with friends; marked avoidance of talking about feelings
- Has trouble doing well in school, or grades decline
- Severe mood swings or behavior that cause problems in relationships
- Intense worries or fears, including academic and social stress, that get in the way of daily activities
- Severe out-of-control or risky behavior that can hurt oneself or others
- Extreme difficulty concentrating or staying still that puts the student in physical danger or causes problems in the classroom
- Harms herself/himself, such as cutting or burning her/his skin
- Not eating, induced vomiting, or using laxatives to make oneself lose weight
- Has frequent stomachaches or headaches with no physical explanation
- Has trouble sleeping, including frequent nightmares
- Thinks his or her mind is controlled or out of control, hears voices
- Repeated use of drugs or alcohol; addictive-type tendencies

If any of the concerns above relate to your child and you are unsure of next steps, contact any one of the school counselors or your pediatrician. It is important for schools and parents to take all symptoms and behavior seriously (unlike the counselor in *Thirteen Reasons Why* who ineffectively handled the student's pleas for help). The most valuable action we can take is to actively listen and engage in supportive conversation with our students and each other. This is beginning to sound like a *Family Ties* or *Full House* episode...

References

American School Counselor Association, <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/school-counselors-members/professional-development/learn-more/13-reasons-why-resources>

National Institute of Mental Health, “Child and Adolescent Mental Health”,
<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/child-and-adolescent-mental-health/index.shtml>

National Association of School Psychologists, <http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/preventing-youth-suicide/13-reasons-why-netflix-series-considerations-for-educators>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Talk about Mental Health for Educators”,
<https://www.mentalhealth.gov/talk/educators/index.html>

What Your Children Are Watching: 13 Reason’s Why

by Shelby Treick, High School Counselor

Netflix’s show *13 Reason’s Why*, was welcomed with mixed reviews from parents, counselors, and psychologists across the world. The show, followed the aftermath of a high school student’s suicide, details life in high school from bullying, thoughts of suicide, death, drunk driving, drinking, drugs, and relationships. Not every high school student suffers or experiences events like the show portrayed. Not every student will have thoughts of suicide or be bullied. However, we cannot shy away from talking about these topics.

Students in this generation have every opportunity to ask for help, especially with technology at their fingertips. However, this does not always happen.

I want to focus on how parents can be more available to their students. **Goals**

- Create a plan with your students that shows adults they trust, teachers they could reach out to, or peers that could help them. I invite you to practice asking for help. We cannot always read their mind, begin practicing with your students scenarios of how to ask for help. Review the resources available and who your student can call in an emergency.
- Talk about social media, positives and the negatives. Students today are more likely to feel like their social media account is their identity. Our student’s feelings of self-worth and self-esteem hang in the balance of a social media account. While not every student fits this mold, many do. Help your students who show high importance in their social media profile separate reality from fiction. It is important to be clear on what true self identity is and what it is not.
- Parents, be aware of what your student is sharing with the world. Be aware of their activity, some students share more with their friends than with their parents. Get acquainted with apps like Snapchat and Instagram. Remind your students every picture they take or comment they make can be found.
- Take time to put away all of the technology and have one-on-one conversations without distractions. We would like to think students are not struggling any more than we were when we were young, however technology and social media have added a whole new dimension to those struggles.
- Above all else, be present. You are their greatest advocate and supporter, show them that.

Resources

Crisis Text Line: 741741

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

<http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2016/08/31/464727159/mental-health-in-schools-a-hidden-crisis-affecting-millions-of-students>

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/preventing-youth-suicide/13-reasons-why-netflix-series-considerations-for-educators>

<https://www.schoolcounselor.org/school-counselors-members/professional-development/learn-more/13-reasons-why-resources>

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