We are all responsible for improving mental health

By Emma Royal [http://www.cw.ua.edu/staff/emma-royal] | 04/23/2017 11:37pm

We are all responsible for improving mental health
Recently, "mental health" has become quite the buzzword in both medicine and society. Anti-bullying and suicide prevention media are on the rise, most notably the critically acclaimed 2012 film "Bully" and Netflix's debut 2017 adaptation, "13 Reasons Why." Modern science has taught us more than we've ever known about the brain and its chemistry, and we've begun to think of mental health disorders like depression and anxiety as diseases that have physical cures instead of states of mind that can be fixed with bi-weekly yoga and some deep breathing. We've come to learn that about 80 percent of cases can be effectively treated with short stints of medicine and psychotherapy. However, about 80 percent of adults who have depression never seek medical treatment. For Americans ages 15-24, suicide is the third leading cause of death.

Even though depression is becoming more abundant each year, it is also becoming more treatable. We must realize that the only way to ensure that more mentally ill Americans get the help they so desperately need is to start having candid conversations about mental health. Depression is never easy to talk about, whether it’s from personal experience or a story about a close friend or family member. It is not a mentally healthy person’s job to fix someone who is mentally ill, but mentally healthy people have the essential power to direct depressed people to the resources they need. Simply recognizing the signs of mental illness and being a gentle guiding hand can save a life. General kindness and human decency, of course, do not hurt either.

While we are not entirely sure what causes depression, we have learned that it is largely independent of life events. While bad things happen to everyone regardless of mental health status, those living with depression may live thoroughly productive lives without any outward sign of struggle. Adversity certainly does not help the situation, but not everyone who is depressed is living a life that seems worthy of internal struggle to the outsider.

During the 2017 SGA elections at the University, the student body was presented with a slate of candidates, all eager to get to work for the well-being of our community. A platform point shared by all candidates and discussed at length in both debates and smaller presentations to campus organizations was changing the mental health culture and stigma at The University of Alabama and the world at large. Though the candidates had the same general goals for mental health advocacy, a major rift in the campaign trail was a lack of specifics for action.

What the University needs is a set of programs centered around community and healing for those who may be in a mental health crisis. These programs may come in the form of SOURCE-registered organizations, University-sponsored initiatives, or a mixture of both. As a public institution, The University of Alabama has an obligation to help students monitor their own health and safety. Large amounts of money and resources are spent on police officers and other means of physical safety for students, so it only makes sense to proportionally devote time and energy to mental health awareness and care.

It is important that we as a student body possess a larger degree of self-awareness. We cannot be satisfied with tweeting about how heartbreaking Hannah Baker’s story is and going about our daily lives unchanged. Being sensitive and intentional with our words creates a happier, safer community for all on campus. Having accountability partners, checking in on your friends on a regular basis, and just generally caring for one another are small steps, but they may make big leaps in someone’s invisible battle against the aches and pains of daily life. It is so important that we treat our mental states as something to be shared, not a reason to feel ashamed or broken. We only have each other, after all.

Emma Royal is a freshman majoring in aerospace engineering. Her column runs biweekly.
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