

The sound of distant cowbells ringing across Swiss meadows feels far removed from the steady blare of cars and hurried footsteps of South Korea. Having attended high school in both countries, I've experienced how different environments shape students' lives. While life in Switzerland felt like a break from the pressures that constantly overshadowed daily routine, it is my junior year in South Korea that brought me back to the intense pressure for success.

Now more than ever, I've come to realise just how much societal expectations define my life. The pressure for academic excellence, coupled with an image of perfection, is a well perpetuated ideal, and while success is celebrated, struggles are buried or hidden in embarrassment and shame. Discussions about mental health are rare, stigmatized as a sign of failure and weakness.

Prepping for tests, assignments, and future university admissions, I've already experienced this overwhelming pressure. Rewriting and revisiting my chemistry lab for the hundredth time at 2 a.m. on a Wednesday, terrified of submitting anything less than a perfect score, it was at these moments where I felt as if I'd reached a breaking point. As I began to find the same in classmates, it startled me to see how we all had to carry the burden of such unrealistic expectations as some sort of given.

This pressure had widespread harmful consequences on both physical and mental health in my community. I started hearing about classmates who were so overwhelmed by stress that they had to go to the hospital or take medication. In fact, it became so common that it almost felt normal. Unfortunately, such struggles have always been extremely common among Korean teenagers. In 2006, the Korean Ministry of Health & Welfare reported that more than 40% of Korean adolescents struggled with severe stress, with nearly a third having had thoughts of suicide (Hong).

This issue persists not only in Korea, but in many countries around the world, reflecting a broader global crisis among teenagers. In many places, high school students face academic pressure and the need to present an idealized, perfect version of themselves, creating mental health struggles while also compelling students to hide such challenges. For instance, in the United States, 7 in 10 students aged 13 to 17 considered anxiety and depression to be major issues among their peers (Bouchrika). An alarming common thread is thus highlighted: thousands of adolescents are struggling with the weight of societal expectations and the stigma surrounding mental health.

I slowly realised that these damaging and potentially life threatening societal norms had to be challenged, and that thousands of students were struggling just as I was. This realisation motivated me to take action and work toward changing such perceptions, starting with my immediate environment: school.

This year, I founded "MedVenture Club", a student-led club that aims to bring students interested in medicine, health, and advocacy together. Over the course of this semester, we planned and organized a variety of activities with weekly meetings, teaching and spreading awareness within not just our school community, but locally and globally with the Daejeon council and missionary kids in Indonesia. The project most significant to me however, was

our most recent “Anti Stigma Campaign” inspired by the WHO, where we sought to break the silence around mental health, encourage compassion, and create a safer environment for students to seek help and support each other.

Our campaign took place during the school’s annual public Christmas event, where we combined different festivities with mental health advocacy. We created the motto: “Save Lives: Talk, Listen, Heal”, and with this guiding principle, our goal was to destigmatize mental health issues and foster an environment where such issues may be shared and openly discussed. Alongside selling treats, we designed informational posters and distributed free hot packs to every customer. Each hot pack included printed posters with crucial information: mental health statistics in Korea, a national helpline number, and a ‘text counseling’ service for those in need of someone to talk to.

There were, of course, initial challenges. For instance, many people were not so receptive or open to such conversations at first, highlighting how challenging it can be to break through stigmas and embrace the unfamiliar. To overcome this, we placed our campaign at a fun, light-hearted event, aiming to reach local students and families in a casual, approachable setting while also encouraging participation from teenagers at other schools in the area. This allowed us to emphasize our campaign and the importance of seeking help and showing compassion. Additionally, we encouraged students to openly talk with their friends, listen actively, and support one another in times of difficulty. Our hope was to create an environment where conversations about mental health were normalized, and empathy became key to our school community, breaking through social stigmas.

The funds raised during our campaign were donated to our school’s counseling office to support mental health initiatives such as ‘Wellness Week,’ and to help expand their efforts in creating a more welcoming and supportive environment for all students. Our campaign also sparked greater interest in our club, with some students expressing a desire to join our advocacy efforts. Through these types of campaigns and initiatives, I believe that we not only raise funds but also raise awareness.

Moving forward, our club aims to continue building on this momentum, organizing similar campaigns and efforts in the future. By sustaining these initiatives, we can create lasting change within our community, and foster an environment where mental health is openly discussed.

Looking back at my time in Switzerland, I’m filled with a sense of empowerment to bring similar positive changes to my own school and environment. I’m committed to upholding and spreading compassion, empathy and understanding within my community, especially through mental health discussions.

Together, we can “Save Lives: Talk, Listen, Heal”

**Works Cited:**

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