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This is my fourth year in Hope Squad, a student-led organization at my high school dedicated to destigmatizing teen mental health and preventing student suicides. One of the events I’ve helped establish is Hope Lunch, where we organize peer support groups around campus to ensure nobody eats lunch alone. The morning of one of these lunches, however, brought horrifying news: our school had lost a student to suicide.

Our Hope Lunch carried on as usual. While passing through the library, the librarian pulled me aside and asked me to check on two girls who were particularly subdued. I cautiously approached their table and sat at an empty stool. After a beat of awkward silence, the girl I sat across from looked up blankly and jerked her chin at my seat: “She used to sit right there.”

I’ll likely never learn what convinced my fellow student that suicide was her best alternative, but I wonder what might be different today had somebody talked to her before, reminding her that she was valued or offering help. I spent the rest of Hope Lunch with those two girls. Their biggest regret was that they hadn’t said anything to their friend beforehand, anything at all.

As a society, we shy away from these conversations and amongst high schoolers, the problem is particularly concerning. The transition from middle school to high school is already jarring, and at my high school with over 3,300 students, it’s easy to feel dwarfed or insignificant. Conversations with friends and my own experiences made me realize the mental and emotional challenges high schoolers face, from the anxiety of college applications and AP classes to desperately seeking an accepting friend group. But the scariest part is that we believe we’re alone in our struggles and won’t find people who are understanding of our individual mental health journeys.

My strongest impression from that fateful Hope Lunch was that students my age need a network of people they can rely on for help and increased awareness that mental health struggles are not something to endure solitarily. As a daughter of Korean immigrants, I’m familiar with negative cultural perceptions around the topic of mental health. My own family refuses to acknowledge the realness of mental health, often leaving me feeling bereft of a proper support network at home when I most needed one. When I decided to become a Hope Squad officer, I wanted to ensure that any of my peers could feel comfortable sharing their struggles with their peers, if not at home.

As a Hope Squad, we vowed that our school wouldn’t lose another student to suicide again. I helped introduce more resource-based outreach into our Hope Lunches, like distributing laptop stickers with the suicide hotline number and a link to SafeVoice, a 24/7 mental health crisis

network. I also helped design red shirts sporting our Hope Squad logo, beginning a policy that our members would wear these shirts on certain days so they could be memorably identified as friendly peers to approach for mental health-related help.

In 2023, I was a main organizer of our first Rainbow Run, an outdoor mental health event complete with a color run, guest speakers from local mental health nonprofits, booths disseminating resources, and games that coordinated with our theme of teen mental health. I spent months planning the event after school, reaching out to community organizations and possible attendees, hoping the run would connect our school’s students and families to the mental health community in our city and spread awareness about the realities of mental health.

Our Rainbow Run was even more successful than we’d imagined, with over 200 attendees ranging from our students to community members across town, enjoying the color run and other activities. Nearly 20 nonprofits supported Rainbow Run by passing out mental health and suicide prevention resources and personal wellness items, and even the mayor of Henderson came to speak on teen mental health.

My strongest passion area of Rainbow Run was fundraising and student outreach. Some friends attending other high schools had mentioned the mental health crises at their own schools, with some seeing at least one student suicide each year. Having experienced that pain myself not so long ago, I felt incredible shock that student suicides could be a relatively normal occurrence somewhere closeby. As a result, I shared the Run with students from as many schools as possible, including local middle schools to encourage positive perceptions of mental health for soon-to-be peers. After Rainbow Run, I was rewarded with my friends telling me that the event had not only been fun but inspiring, providing them resources for their schools and hopes that future efforts will make a difference. When I wasn’t conducting outreach, I was contacting businesses and organizations, gathering donations to help fund Rainbow Run and even organizing a vibrant silent auction. That first year, I raised over $3,000, which my Hope Squad used to foster chapters at two neighboring middle schools.

Since that first Rainbow Run, I’ve served in further Hope Squad leadership positions, including as the incumbent President, and grew our presence at school, along with guiding middle school emotional wellness lessons and leading mental health seminars for incoming freshmen at school. I’ve also continuously developed new connections with local businesses, who help us by spreading our resources and the main message behind our organization: mental health matters.

Throughout the past four years, I’ve learned that the collective efforts of even a small group of students can lead to immense impact. Mental health is an issue that can truly be addressed when faced together. As an incoming freshman at Yale University, I’m excited to continue my involvement in mental health initiatives with organizations like the Yale Student Mental Health Association, whether that manifests as organizing personal wellness events during finals season or a “friendsgiving” for finding new friends. But most importantly, I’ll always be a supportive friend, hoping that just being somebody who cares will make an unseen difference for someone else.