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ENGL-112B Sec 01

27 November 2022

Healing Through Literature and Addressing Mental Illness

 Mental illness is a topic that has gained a lot of media coverage fairly recently and is one that is more than worthy of attention. It can be a silent killer that drains its victim over the course of years and can possibly ruin or end a person’s life. That is why I would want to address it as a topic once I become a professor or teacher, as certain mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and others are more prevalent in teens and young adults. Thus as a professor or teacher, I believe that it will be my duty to help my students in any way possible, whether it be educationally or through helping them deal with personal issues. How I have seen it is that when someone becomes a professor or teacher, whether they want to or not they are becoming a part in all of their students' lives and can even be the person that student looks up to. So if I ever become a professor or teacher, I would want to be the one that my students can count on, as I believe that even if it is my physical classroom, it is ultimately the students’ class. As a person that has been struggling with my anxiety and has had friends that deal with mental illness, I think that this is a topic that affects almost everyone in at least some form or another, whether it is dealing with it themselves or also having a loved one who is struggling. Mental health should be talked about more and addressed as I believe that even small issues should be taken note of and addressed before they can get any worse. Such as how a car gets taken in for check up and how people often get a physical from a doctor about once a year, mental health should be the same way also. Certain mental illnesses can also lead to an untimely death of the person so it is also crucial that they get the help that they deserve before it is too late, just like with serious medical issues. So the canonical piece of literature that I would use to try to address the issue of mental illness as a whole is *The* *Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger.

 *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger is a novel about a teenager named Holden Caulfield, as he recounts events that led to how he ended up in a mental hospital seeking treatment. The events that he recounts involve his expulsion from his school, his unwillingness of going home to face his parents and instead wandering New York City, and his relationship with his little sister, Phoebe. All of this was due to the sudden and untimely death of his young brother, Allie, and Holden’s inability to deal with the grief and his emotions.

**Introduction to topic:**

 How I would like to introduce the topic is I would first play “[Kitchen Sink](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ez7vi-kQdM)” by Twenty One Pilots and then discuss it with the class. I would point out that this song could be talking about any mental illness and then open up the floor for discussion. Then after we get the conversation going a bit, I will then say what I think this song is trying to say if no one brings it up. That everyone’s struggle and story is different and personal to them so they should try to get all the help that they can get, but ultimately, it is up to them to deal with their demons. Nobody can truly know what is going on inside your head or what you are going through and thus the only support people can give is to just be there for that person and listen to them if they want to talk about it.

Nobody thinks what I think

Nobody dreams when they blink

Think things on the brink of blasphemy

I'm my own shrink

Think things are after me, my catastrophe

I'm a kitchen sink, you don't know what that means

Because a kitchen sink to you

Is not a kitchen sink to me, ok friend?

Are you searching for purpose?

Then write something, yeah it might be worthless

Then paint something then, it might be wordless

Pointless curses, nonsense verses

You'll see purpose start to surface

No one else is dealing with your demons

Meaning maybe defeating them

Could be the beginning of your meaning, friend

Go away

Go away

Go away

Go away

Leave me alone

Leave me alone

Leave me alone

Leave me alone

Leave me alone

Leave me alone

Leave me alone

Nobody thinks what you think, no one

Empathy might be on the brink of extinction

They will play a game and say

They know what you're going through

And I try to come up with an artistic way to say

They don't know you, and neither do I

So here's a prime example of a stand up guy

Who hates what he believes and loves it at the same time

I would also have them tackle the poem “How Am I” by Emmy Marucci and then have them answer that poem for themselves. This poem is powerful because many times many people just push through life day after day, never actually answering this question but instead just focusing on one assignment after another. I know I do this all the time and one example I would give to my students that is sort of related is when I had sprained my ankle or damaged my leg. It was during track and field and I was trying to see if I could play a sport so I was new and did not really know what I was doing. So I ended up just pushing myself too hard without ever stopping to ask myself how I was doing and that led me to never running in track and field the rest of that year and ever again. So no matter what is going on or what you are trying to do, it is always important to ask yourself how are you or else we might end up pushing ourselves too far without realizing it.

**Activities:**

 While reading the text I will also incorporate some activities that I think would go well with the topic as a whole and would try to make the class more interactive.

1. The students will discuss one or two things that they are currently dealing with and just have a discussion in groups of three. They do not have to share anything personal or anything they are not comfortable sharing, as this activity is a simple way to practice communication and opening up to someone about your issues. I will also try to state that this will also be practicing active listening so they must be making some eye contact and have posture that is open and welcoming. I think this is a necessary activity as many people, myself included, struggle with just talking about ourselves and what we are going through, whether it be major issues or minor ones.
2. The students will have to pretend that they are going to be talking to someone who is currently dealing with mental illness, in this case, severe depression and anxiety. I will stress that this is not a test or that there is a definitive answer, as this is just for them to see how they would try to help someone dealing with this. In the real world, oftentimes nothing is completely simple and has a clear answer, so this is for them to try to get them to at least think about how they would approach this situation. I will also make it clear that if this or anypoint of the topic triggers a person, then they are free to step out for that section or I will figure out something else for them to do. I will also play them “Friend Please” by Twenty One Pilots as an example of how they might want to go about this and to give them inspiration.
3. Students will secretly write something personal that has been looming over their lives or that they have trauma from or something that has been holding onto them. Then once everyone is done with that I will have a paper shredder ready and they will each take a look at what they have written one last time in their head and then shred it, hopefully as a pretend ritual to feel the power of finally letting go.

**Additional YA Literature:**

**Into the text:**

1. *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson: A story of Melinda, a high school freshman, as she tries to navigate through her first year of high school while still dealing with the trauma of her sexual assault at a college party she had attended just prior to the school year. *Speak* is a beautiful story and shows the power of communication, as Melinda starts to heal the more she talks to others.

**Through the text:**

1. *Underwater* by Marisa Reichardt: A story of a girl learning how to forgive herself and the shooter after a school shooting. This book fits with *The Catcher in the Rye*, as trauma is a common way for mental illness to start manifesting and shows how damaging it can be when all that trauma and guilt is holding on to someone.
2. *We Were Here* by Matt de la Peña: The story of Miguel as he tries to serve his time in a rehabilitation facility only to escape to go on a long journey of self discovery. This book helps to understand how no matter how much people want to avoid trauma and what is bothering them, the solution is that what happened has happened and they must learn to move on from that issue and learn how to live with it.

**Beyond the Text:**

1. *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson: A story of two friends who suffer from anorexia until one of them dies and the other has to deal with the grief and guilt that she feels. This book shows dealing with grief over the loss of a friend and showcases the struggle people have with anorexia, which is not as talked about as depression or anxiety.
2. *A Breath Too Late* by Rocky Callen: The story of a teenage girl who commits suicide and ends up in an out of body experience as she tries to piece together the events leading up to her death and witnessing what happens after. This book depicts suicide and shows a unique perspective on it, which can help expand peoples’ understanding of what brings someone to that point and how none of them would have wanted to if circumstances had been different.

Final Assignments (Do one of them):

1. Write a short research paper on different methods for dealing with mental illnesses and address three characters from any of the books read during class. This is sort of pretending to be a therapist and trying to give the best advice and methods that appear during their research. Make sure to find credible sources and include at least five total sources, but feel free to include more.
2. Write a short story from the point of view of someone dealing with mental illness. Include how they go about their day, what kind of issues do they have to deal with and anything else that comes to mind. Make sure to do research on any mental illnesses that the character is dealing with and include at least three credible sources.

**Additional Resources:**

I am aware that this topic can be a very dark and stressful one for people who are dealing with or have loved ones who are dealing with mental illness so I would ask that anyone who feel like they need help to please seek it and try to give them as many resources as I can, such as:

* Telling them that the counselors are always available if they would like to talk
* That therapy should not be stigmatized and is not a scam and to please seek it if they need to
* And I would try to help them in anyway I could whether it be by just listening to them or by showing them resources I think are helpful such as therapy videos by Mended Light ([Finding Meaning During Depression. Why is it SO Hard? | Mended Light](https://youtu.be/tr21wNcnemk)). And I would remind them that I am not a qualified expert and am just trying to help them the best that I could if they only wanted to talk to me about their issues.

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