

Depression and Self-Care: A Unit of Study

In 2014, according to the *American Association of Suicidology*, 17.6% of 5,079 young people (between 15-24 years old) had successfully gone through with taking their own lives.

In 2014, the day before my 18th birthday, I came incredibly close to becoming apart of that statistic.

Up until recently, I had gone undiagnosed with Inattentive ADHD: a form of ADHD more commonly found (and often left untreated) in young girls and women. Because of this, and the fact that ADHD and Depression go hand in hand, my mental health began to steadily decline right as I began high school. I didn't know what was wrong with me, why I was feeling the way I was feeling: so low, so anxious, so unhappy. The only resource I had was school, and when I had gone to ask questions, to find some answers, the majority of the faculty brushed me off, telling me that how I was feeling wasn't "concerning", it was all just normal teenage angst!

I felt so miserable, so anxious. I can honest-to-God say that, back then, I wanted to die.

But that didn't matter, because that's just "normal teenage angst". A teenager wanting to die because they're feeling so low is "normal".

A teenager wanting to die should never be considered "normal". It should be treated seriously and anyone crying for help like this should be given the support and resources they need to help them through their issues.

This foundation of this Unit of Study is built upon my experience in high school: suffering with depression, almost going through with ending my life, and wanting to rectify the failings of my school. I want to help kids within the high school level (9th-12th grade) not only understand depression and its signs and symptoms better, but I also want to help those kids who

have this illness understand it better, and to help them find resources and support, and ways of dealing with it. My main focus for this Unit of Study will be Laurie Halse Anderson's novel, *Speak*. Although the novel centers on the tragic aftermath of Melinda Sordino's sexual assault, Melinda's traumatic experience leaves her with depression and depression-like symptoms, such as: her desire to sleep all the time, and her self-mutilation. In addition, the majority of my assignments will involve "self-care" tips and self-reflection: this is an incredibly heavy topic so I will make sure my students can take breaks and apply some of the resources to themselves.

Additionally, My Unit of Study will not only focus on literature and texts regarding mental illness and depression, I will also be including two video games that also deal with those two themes: the first two episodes of *Life is Strange* and *Elude*. Video games have evolved over the last few years into a means of "visual storytelling". Like novels, a good video game can tell a story of epic proportions and create memorable characters and settings. *Life is Strange* is a game that most resembles a YA novel: Max Caulfield, a high school senior, discovers she has the ability to turn back time, and, with the help of her childhood friend, Chloe Price, proceeds to use those powers to try to solve the mysteries surrounding her hometown of Arcadia Bay. While the game is rated "M" for its violent themes, drug and alcohol content, and strong language, these can all be found in many YA novels (like *Speak*) and there's nothing too explicitly graphic that shows on screen. *Life is Strange* is a 5 episode game series, however, I'll be focusing on the first two because of the character Kate Marsh, one of Max's friends who, like Melinda, had a traumatic experience at a party and becomes depressed from it, and is the primary focus for this Unit of Study. The second game, *Elude*, is used more as a teaching tool to help my students

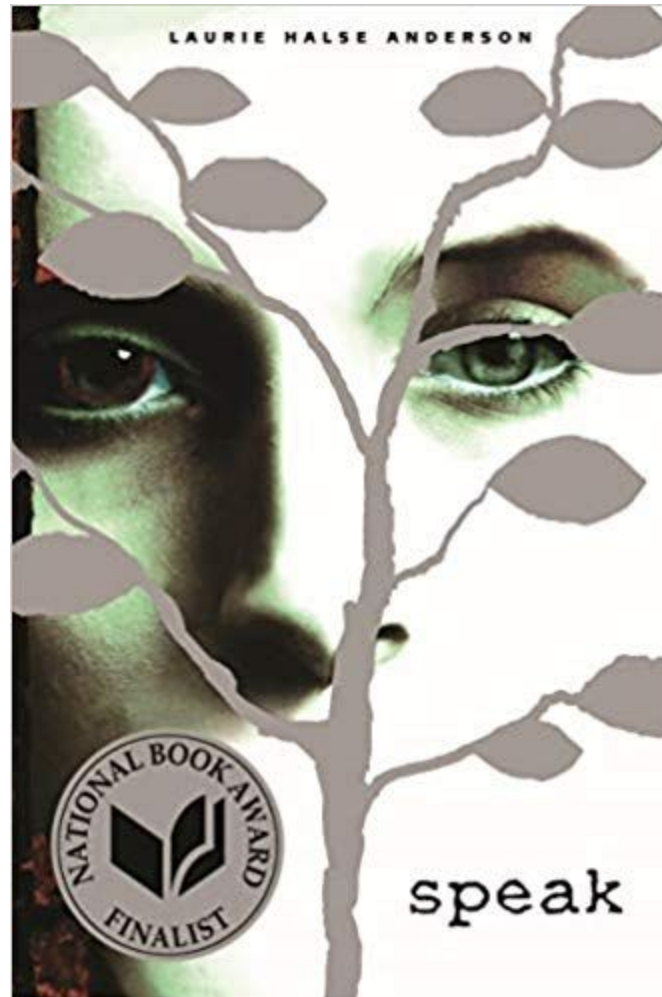
understand the feeling of depression, as the game itself was created to be just that: a metaphor for what the struggle of depression feels like.

Introducing the Unit

To begin this unit, I'll start with having a serious discussion and presentation on depression. I'll ask my students what they think depression is and what they know about it so far. After the presentation, I'll then implement my first "self-care" resource: journaling. My students will keep a journal specifically for this class that is used for answering some writing prompts (a list of which I have found from *uncustomary.org*), or whatever feelings or thoughts they want to express. The first 10 minutes of every class will be dedicated to writing in their journal to relieve stress. My students will even be encouraged to doodle or just scribble in their journal -- whatever works for them, as long as they can at least write one-two sentences to explain what they drew/why they drew it. At the end of every week, I'll do a "journal check-in" where I'll check to make sure that they are actively participating in the journal experience. However, if any of my students have something that would be too personal for my eyes, then I would ask them to, before or after class, flip through their journal. This journal will eventually tie into Melinda's tree art project from *Speak*. Melinda's tree was a way for her to help express herself during her struggle with her sexual assault and depression, so I would want my student's journals to be their way of expressing themselves.

One thing I want to make clear: I will never make my students to share what they have in their journal with the class. I will ask if they want to share anything they wrote, but if they don't than that is absolutely fine; I will respect my students privacy and decision.

The Main Text



Speak, although the chapters aren't numbered, is about 90 chapters long. Therefore, I would assign my students to read 5 chapters every day, with a quick 5 question comprehension quiz the next day to check to see if they have done the reading. Once finished with the quiz, my students can then start on their "self-care" journals. After that, I will then divide my students into 5 groups -- 1 for each chapter -- and have them discuss their groups chapter, answering the following questions:

1. What is going on in this chapter? What is the setting and who are the other characters mentioned?

2. How is Melinda feeling in this chapter? (Once we're past the first few chapters, this question will then become: How has Melinda's mood changed from the previous chapter?)
3. How do the other characters react towards Melinda? How do they treat her?
4. How does Melinda's depression affect her actions/choices in this chapter?

After about 10-15 of group discussion, the class will then share what they've found out loud with the rest of the groups.

Outside Sources (Video Games)

Alongside *Speak*, I'll introduce the game *Elude* to the class. As a homework assignment, my students will play *Elude* and write down, not in their journals, their experience while playing it. They'll be asked to answer the following questions:

1. What did you feel while playing *Elude*?
2. How does *Elude* represent depression?
3. How can you relate Melinda's depression to the representation of it in *Elude*?

After *Elude*, we'll switch to the first two episodes of *Life is Strange*. We'll watch the gameplay of it in class and during the video, my students will take notes and focus on the character Kate Marsh, where my students will answer the following:

1. What signs/symptoms of depression is Kate showing?
2. How are Kate and Melinda alike? How are they different?
3. How would you support Kate during her crisis?

Outside Sources (YA Literature)

Damage by A.M. Jenkins and *Freewill* by Chris Lynch are second person narratives about high schoolers dealing with depression. Although I haven't read either, both of these books would be a good opportunity to teach my students about using second person to write about depression -- as a way to create a sense of "othering"; that depression is another part of you. I will have my students compare the protagonists from *Damage* and *Freewill* to Melinda and have them discuss what *Speak* would be like in second person.

Final Project

As a final project, my students will write a 3-5 page reflection on what they have learned about depression and depression representation through media. I'll have them apply the self-care skills that they've learned throughout the unit to the characters we've been focusing on, and write how it would help them.

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