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Depiction of Depression and Suicide in Young Adult Literature

“... something crucial about depression. The smarter you were, the worse it was. The sharper your brain, the more it cut you up.” -Jefferey Euginedes.

Suicide is a rarely discussed topic because of a stigma that surrounds it. People who go to therapy rarely ever want to talk about it if they ever do. Some of them do not even want other to know that they receive professional council. There are some people who do not understand that depression is a serious medical condition thus not taking serious actions to help. Some people even go so far as to make fun of depressed people taking it too lightly. Today’s youth can be even more affected by this because of the current generation. The available social media platforms provide such a diverse and accessible way of demoralizing teens, depression has gained another way to reach the teens of today. Facebook and Instagram provide a place where people can show how great their lives are and showing how beautiful and perfect their bodies are. While doing so, they can either intentionally or not make others feel inadequate and imperfect. Some people go out of their way and cyber-bully others which has lead to some teens committing suicide.According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in America and that is just an estimate because they believe that many cases go unreported. Suicide is also the second leading cause of death among persons age 12-18. According to National Public Radio, the rates for suicide has been rising -- especially among adolescent girls between the ages 10-14, tripling within the last 15 years.

Because depression and suicide are rarely ever talked about, especially by the people afflicted by it, it is rarely ever prevented. Depressed people struggle finding the confidence to talk to anyone about their illness. The stigma and fear that they might be judged and misunderstood adds even more to the anxiety that they are going through, which is almost ironic because it is crucial for depressed people to be able to talk and express their feelings without being judged and be able to get the help they need. It is crucial that depressed people not to feel alone in their struggle for it is when they need to be understood the most. But it is hard to be there for someone who does not want to admit they are suffering or show signs of depression because they might be ashamed. There are a few subtle signs of depression that are visible and should not be ignored. Some of those signs are sudden changes in their personality, lack in interests they once liked, isolation from society, their families, and friends. Sometimes, depressed people even push people away which makes suicide prevention even tougher but there are other ways to comfort depressed people. Depressed people tend to isolate themselves thinking that no one else knows and understands their struggles which is not true. That is why encouraging teens to read novels and stories about depression and suicide could be very helpful to them. It is pragmatic that depressed people not feel alone and misunderstood. Showing teens that they are not all alone might be helpful for them and addressing the problem instead of ignoring it is a whole lot better.

By introducing novels that address suicide and depression to teens, it can give them the courage to see how others, fictional or not, how face their problems and gain the courage to move on. Suicide and depression should not be pushed aside and ignored like how it currently is. Teaching novels and stories about suicide and depression to teens in schools making the topic a bit more mainstream might help alleviate some of the negative stigma. One canonical novel that shows depression is *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger which would be center piece for the unit of study . One cliche idea about depression is that people who suffer from it are completely sad and down all the time but that is not the truth. An example of this is the protagonist in  the previously mentioned novel, Holden Caulfield. It can be argued that his depression is caused by his insecurities, which is common among teens. He seems incapable to establish any relationship because of his fear of abandonment that seems stem out from the death of his brother Allie. Being incapable of maintaining a stable relationship seems to lessen his self value which causes him to be depressed. Furthermore, Holden chooses to separate himself from the rest of society, alienating himself, seemingly wanting to remain living in the past with his brother. Throughout the novel, he tries to talk to others trying to get them to listen to him but they never seem to. This could be interpreted as a sign that Holden’s depression is starting to run deeper. He is looking for a way to express his anxieties and emotions, to find someone he can communicate and talk to. Someone who might be able to understand him. *The Catcher in the Rye* is a wonderful and powerful book about depression and feeling of being alone. Other books that talk about these issues as well are *We Were Here* by Matt Dela Peña, *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, but perhaps the novel that would be most logical to pair it with especially if it is to be taught in a high school classroom is the novel *It’s Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini.

In the beginning of the unit, the students will be asked to sit together in groups of three. Then the three students will be asked to introduce each other as a for of an icebreaker between the three. Communication is important to people suffering from depression. This activity is not meant to find someone who is depressed, it is only meant to establish a communication between the students and hopefully form a bond, however small it may seem at first, and hopefully start some friendly banters between the students. They will be asked to interview each other with the following questions: what is their name, plans for college, where to go and what major, hobbies, and other things that the students are willing to share. After the interviews, the students then will introduce the other students to the whole class to see how well they know each other and test the extent of their communication. They might be able to make friendly jokes about the student they are introducing or find out if they have anything in common.

After the introduction to the students, the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* can be assigned and the groups can either stay in their groups or vote to have rotating groups for the duration of each assigned readings. Perhaps two or three chapters at a time. They can discuss among themselves any ideas they have and answer some questions corresponding to what they have just read. One constant question might be asked from the students is to compile their very own version of the brown bag items for the novel. They will be asked to pick an item or quotes they feel representative of the material they read, how the brown bag item that they relates to the chapter or chapters, and is there any possible connection to their real life since it is a realistic fiction novel. They do not have to answer the last question since being emotionally vulnerable is not an easy task but they can be encouraged to do so. If they choose to do so, they can also write their answers in a personal journal that they can either share or submit or not. Hearing their ideas and their brown bag items can reveal how well they understand the ideas being examined within the novel, and if they understand how depression works, they might be able to empathize with people suffering from it a whole lot more.

After reading *The Catcher in the Rye*, the paired reading *It’s Kind of a Funny Story* can be introduced. The novel should be a bit easier to read compared since the Lexile Measure is only 700L for *It’s Kind of a Funny Story* compared to 790L that *The Catcher in the Rye* got. The students might even be able to connect the main character Craig Gilner since the novel is much more recent. He is an overachieving high school student that is suffering from anxiety and fears of not living up to his father’s and his own expectations of what his life should be like. This story uses a little bit more humor as well, which could make it more accessible to younger readers. Using humor is a wonderful way of defusing heavy emotions which can sometimes be hard to talk about which could be another reason why suicide and depression are not popular topics. The activities introduced for the previous book can be used for the next one as well with one minor modification. The students will be asked to compare the brown bag items they picked for *The Catcher in the Rye* to the ones they choose for *It’s Kind of a Funny Story* and see if there are any connections, consistency in topics and ideas introduced, and are there any conflicting elements between the two novels. As the unit progresses, the students who have remained in their respective groups should have formed a more open way of communication with each other and be more comfortable talking to each other. Having a more open line of communication and having a better understanding between the students could encourage them to share their ideas more openly.

Since Holden Caulfield, much like J. D. salinger, is very much against movies, there was never a movie adaptation based on his novel, but the case is different for *It’s Kind of a Funny Story.* After reading the novel, so as not to spoil the story for the students, the movie could be shown and ask the students how the movie either improves or decreases the quality of the story. The students will then be given the complete list of brown bag items and see how the movie represents the items they have picked. They will then be asked if they think it was represented properly or poorly.

Beyond the classroom, the students can be encouraged to keep the connections and communications they have developed within their group and within the entire classroom. They can then develop for themselves a support system, a group of friends that they can talk to if they choose to do so. Furthermore, a one on one session with the teacher can be offered much like how a counseling session would be conducted but instead, the students are allowed to talk about more than just their academic troubles. Of course, the teacher would have to remain very neutral and keep the information private. The meetings would be voluntary and the students will be asked to contact the teacher beforehand to set an appointment. Being there for people and just the mere idea of putting in the effort of understanding them is an amazing thing to do. Suicide and depression, like most problems, should be addressed and not ignored that is why it can be beneficial for teens to talk about it in an open and unintimidating environment. Young adults should learn about depression and have an understanding towards it instead of ignorance which could lead to judgement and lack of sympathy.

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