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Opinion - 3<sup>rd</sup> Place

## Surrendering to the Stigma

'How are you?' A question so regularly asked yet very occasionally answered honestly. I know *my* automated reply is 'I'm grand thanks and you?', but I don't always speak the truth. And I think that's the case with many. I understand it's not always the right time or place to drop what might seem like a bombshell by simply saying 'actually I'm not great'. However, I don't believe this is why the majority of answers are not upfront and honest.

The stigma around mental health and illness has surrounded us for generations and generations, dating all the way back to 5000 BC when ancient cultures believed demonic possession was the cause of mental illness. As treatment, a hole was drilled into the patient's skull, a technique called trephining. This supposedly 'released the demons', however many ended up dying as the wound became infected or the loss of blood was too great.

This idea of how the mentally ill are deemed to be possessed or almost animalistic can be seen throughout history. During most periods of history torturous treatments such as shock therapy and lobotomies have been carried out in an attempt to cure these people.

Obviously society's outlook on mental health has altered over the years, and people are beginning to take the initiative and do something about their own mental health. However, I still feel that the stigma is present.

I have attended several counselling sessions, which involved having to leave school occasionally. If anyone asked, I was going to the dentist or had a medical appointment. The psychologist made me aware on my first day, of an exit in the building allowing me to leave looking like I had just been in a bar/restaurant, disguising where I was actually coming out of. If that doesn't scream conceal and hide, I don't know what does!

According to research carried out by the Royal College of Surgeons, 1 in 5 young people aged 19-24 are having problems with their mental health in Ireland. And St. Patrick's Mental Health Services estimate 1 in 9 Irish individuals suffer from a primary anxiety disorder in their lifetime. Sorrowfully, Ireland has the fifth highest suicide rate in Europe, as reported by DCU's research project PISA. I guarantee that there is someone with in your family or friends who are struggling mentally.

So if mental health problems are fairly common, why is it that I feel way more could be done about it? Being a teenager (aged 16) in secondary school, an environment where I learn and grow as a person, I am yet to be educated properly on mental illness and what I should do about it or how to deal with it. Of course, Social Personal and Health Education has given me a basic definition of depression and stress, but it has not come close to reaching the depths needed to inform teenagers. It's arguable that this is not the role of a teacher, to act as a counsellor or psychologist but nevertheless, education that will improve student's well-being is critical.



What people need and are hopefully beginning to understand is that being mentally ill is the same as an 'injury' or 'sickness', it's just not always visible. And hopefully, as people become more educated, especially teenagers, they will realise that it is vital to talk about what's going on inside. Otherwise it'll take its toll eventually.

**Judges Citation:**

Everyone is entitled to their opinion. However, what differentiates an opinion piece between a rant and a well thought out article is backing it up with facts and concrete figures. The piece that wins second place is well researched, presenting some shocking statistics around mental health, both in how it affects people today, and from a historical perspective. She then fuses these figures with her own experience, speaking about attending a counsellor and how that is perceived in her secondary school.

Although, this writer was clearly emotional about the topic, she was controlled in her writing, which is crucial in putting your point across efficiently. Well done to Ciara Tomlinson from Jesus and Mary College, Goatstown for her piece on Surrendering to Stigma.