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Submission Piece: An Article

(Trigger warning: there is mention of the word 'suicide' in this article.)

A young Mental Health Campaigner has called for better Mental Health Education in Northern Ireland after a suicide attempt late last year.

“Mental illness is often characterised as an intense sadness, which cripples a person. For me, mental illness has always merely been an overwhelming, creeping emptiness.” explains Matthew

Matthew Taylor (21) who grew up in Lisburn has shared his story this month at TEDxStormont, while further highlighting the problematic and concerning relationship between Mental Health and Northern Ireland.

TEDxStormont which took place on Saturday 20th January 2024 with the explored theme of 'Restore'. This event aimed to share inspiring stories and innovative ideas, thought discussions that helped to 'rekindle hope for a sustainable and harmonious future.'

Matthew emphasises on how mental health can feel to different individuals. “You feel detached, from your loved ones, from society, from everything around you. Often-times, to me feeling 'bad' is so much better than feeling nothing.”

“In January 2023 I took a leave of absence (from University), and this was then extended for a further year, following my admission to hospital in late July 2023.”

This experience has allowed Matthew to feel a greater need to fight and speak about the importances of mental health education within the Northern Ireland school curriculum education system.

“I can't help but feel that if mental health was a key part of our curriculum, which didn't stigmatise mental illness or minimise student's feelings, but instead recognised, highlighted and sought support for the atypical nature of students' experiences of the world like mine, maybe I could have been reached earlier, before my condition grew more complex, and spared me a lot of pain in the process.”

“That's why I feel it is so important to educate young people, not just about emotional well-being and emotions, which most certainly have their place, but also around the clear signs of mental illness.”

Matthew adds

The subject of Mental Health often comes with stigmas, creating narratives such as 'someone has it worse than you.' This narrative is harmful as it can discourage other people from opening up about their emotional struggles if they feel their experience isn't that big. This narrative is damaging to individuals.

This narrative had impacted Matthew's experience “Even after being hospitalised, the stigma still makes me feel like I'm faking mental illness, that I didn't have it nearly as bad as someone else.”

The Lisburn Native, attended Wallace High School, where Matthew discovered an interest in both English and Philosophy. During his time at School he attended school counselling 'on and off' for the entirety of secondary school education.

His interest for the subject of Philosophy became an important factor when choosing his current University Degree. As Matthew currently attends Queen's University Belfast and studies a BA in Anthropology and Philosophy. He has opened up about how his academic career has been impacted.

Matthew enjoys Education and has always been fascinated by learning. He also speaks highly about his parents who supported his studies from 'an early age'.

"I want to know more about the world in every way I can. What appealed to me most about studying at University, was that my degree allowed me to spend time learning more about the world through a variety of fields, without having to be tied down to one strand."

He added "To me, being a young person living with special educational needs (SEN), university was my first chance to showcase my potential, provided with the additional support I needed to see what I could achieve."

He added "What I have noticed is the naivety of how we discuss recovery from mental illness as a society. When I was discharged, I found it strange how many people congratulated me on 'feeling better' or on 'successfully recovering'. Recovering from mental illness isn't like recovering from a physical disease."

In October 2023, Matthew told his story as a speaker at One Young Belfast in the venue of the SSE Arena with an audience of over 2,000 people. Matthew Explains "Now in my recovery, I do see some value in something. And that's in telling my story to whoever will listen.

Giving a speech to 2000+ people in Belfast (October 2023), seeing the emotional impact and sense of comradery it exposed in people, makes me feel like I do have something to say, and that I have value in something, to others who feel like I do. And maybe that's enough?"

Northern Ireland still has a problem with Mental Health. According to the Mental Health Foundation 1 in 5 Adults in Northern Ireland have a mental health condition. Northern Ireland also has a higher rate of depression than the rest of the United Kingdom. These figures are alarming.

Matthew concludes "My future plans for mental health advocacy is to try to create additional public speaking opportunities home and abroad, keeping telling my story to the public & policymakers, and try to create change on the ground by working with local politicians"