

Final Proposal

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Team Name: Sting The Stigma

PROBLEM STATEMENT

PROBLEM:

Mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety, are extremely prevalent in high schools. In fact, 20% of high school age students have a diagnosable mental illness ¹. Though we would ideally like to see this number drop, that is not our immediate goal. Our goal is simply to encourage students to take advantage of the resources that are already offered to them. We want to connect students to resources so that they do not feel that they have to go out of their way to deal with a mental illness. We want to make the first step to overcoming their mental illness as easy and barrier free as possible.

SIGNIFICANCE:

There are many consequences in terms of society in general if this problem is not solved or at the very least addressed. The issue is that students' untreated mental health disorders contribute to academic underachievement, poor behavior in the classroom, self-destructive and/or aggressive behaviors, poor graduation rates, and costly special education interventions that often have poor outcomes (School Shootings and Student Mental Health - What Lies Beneath the Tip of the Iceberg). Suicide is the third leading cause of death for 10-24 year olds (Cooper, Clements & Holt, 2012). 90% of these suicides are related to untreated mental illness ¹. An even more concerning fact is that, students who have been responsible for school shootings, often have a history of untreated mental illness. These are the costs to society if high school students are not given easier access to mental health resources. Many students' lives can be lost before they have even obtain a chance out in the world.

Notice our problem is not to "provide mental health resources" to high school students in order to help them cope. Our group has decided that since none of us are medically trained, it is not feasible for us to determine a solution that would "work" to help treat mental illness itself. In addition there are countless resources already available to students, but they are simply not taking advantage of them. However, we feel that we can make a considerable difference in making existing mental health resources more accessible, and making students feel more comfortable using them.

So our main problem to be solved is that high school students with diagnosable mental illness for some reason often do not take initiative and seek help, even though there is definitely help available. Why is this? The main reason for this is the stigma surrounding mental health. Stigma is a set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group of people has about something. Many students with a mental illness believe that admitting that they are having a problem will make them appear "crazy," or as if they are not as worthy of the respect of their peers. 'Self-Stigma,' specifically prejudice against oneself, is a main focus of ours. Students with a diagnosable mental illness even look down on themselves, and feel shame or guilt about having a mental illness. This is why students do not always acknowledge their own mental health problems; our goal is to get around this "stigma" by creating a tool to connect students to mental-health resources without specifically labeling as a "mental health resource," so that this stigma will not discourage students.

We want to address this problem within a school itself. We considered a solution that

involved an outside program or group, but decided that the best place to reach students would be in school itself. Specifically, we have visited a high school in Georgia, and could potentially look there first when it comes time for trials of our solution.

STAKEHOLDERS:

There are many stakeholders in the mental health of high school students, whether they realize it or not. Obviously, students with an untreated mental illness have much to gain from a solution that will make it easier and more comfortable for them to receive assistance. Also, other students who do not need help themselves have a stake in this problem. These peers may not understand that a friend may be suffering from a more serious illness, they are unable to be a positive resource to the suffering friend. Our ideal solution will involve students that need help as well as students who want to help. Peers are the first and easiest people to talk to, and can be an important stepping-stone towards getting help.

Also, in rare situations, high school students can be put in a life-threatening situation in the case of a school shooting, which, as stated above, often are instigated by people with untreated mental illnesses. This makes mental health treatment a priority for everyone. However, it should be noted that the vast majority of students suffering from mental illness are not violent, and that this fear of violent outbursts is actually part of the “stigma” surrounding mental health that we are trying to bypass. Nevertheless, these scenarios sadly do happen, and are an unfortunate consequence of the gap between students and professional help, that once again proves how important it is that someone finds a solution to this problem.

Parents are also strongly invested in their children’s access to mental health resources. No parent wants to hear that his or her child has a mental illness due to the stigma. Therefore, many parents do not take this problem, the lack of connection between high school students and mental health resources, as seriously as they could. However, parents need to be involved in our solution, especially considering that high school students are usually minors. Our goal is for parents to understand that having a child struggling with mental health is not shameful and that a lot of help actually already exists for these students, if they are willing to reach for it. That is our end goal.

Another stakeholder includes education administrators in general. It is proven that untreated mental illness affects academic performance, making it harder for students to learn successfully and slowing progress in general. Taking this a step further, society in general will not progress as far if our youth are not making as much intellectual progress as possible, due to factors that could be prevented.

CONTEXT AND EXISTING SOLUTIONS:

As we researched our problem space of high-school students with mental health issues, we uncovered a great deal of solutions which showed us the need for us to get more involved in this problem space. The reason mental health programs are provided through the high-school or in the high-school is due to the belief that these programs would remove the stigma behind mental health services. These programs would ideally be easily accessible in communities where services are scarce, and they would keep issues from affecting emotional, academic, or physical development. A successful program would provide relief from symptoms earlier rather than later,

which would lead to the prevention of long-term problems. (Mental Health and High School, 2013). One example of an attempt to encourage students to seek help through the high-school was implemented by the The New York City Department of Education. The NYC Department of Education created a “NYC TEEN Website”. The purpose of this teen friendly website was to engage teens dealing with depression, drugs and violence, and to ultimately encourage them to seek help. The NYC TEEN Website allowed students to learn about dealing with peer pressure, bullying and dating violence as well as depression, and anger. (City of New York, 2016). The website advertises the fact that they will tell students the facts so students can decide what to do. The NYC TEEN Website is an example of a flawed design, due to the fact that it entirely ignores the needs of the students. The creators of the website failed to recognize that simply providing information on mental health is not going to encourage students to seek help. Many students struggling with mental health feel a great amount of self-stigma, and just providing them with information about mental illnesses and resources that seem unconnected to them is not going to help them. Another very common solution is for high-schools to provide presentations and trainings on a “wide variety of emotional topics relevant to the youth”.

These presentations were specifically implemented in Cuyahoga County School District by the Mental Health Subcommittee and Prevention Initiative Committee of Cuyahoga County School District. This program was funded by The Board of Cuyahoga County Commissioners. (Harvey, 2015). In theory, this idea of outlined presentations seemed great to the county. However, even though this program was well-funded, it failed to take into account the typical mentality of a high-school student. Either a student uses school mandated presentations to relax during a busy day or they will use these presentations to have a chance to play around with their friends. In Cuyahoga, teachers noticed that barely any of the students gave their attention that the presentation desired. This idea of presenting students with a topic gave us a compelling case to get involved, because in every step the student has to be considered. The two examples mentioned for this problem space show the fact that many solutions ignore the fact that students are likely to not take advantage of the many resources available to them. A website that is attempted to be geared towards the student (NYC TEEN Website) or a presentation relevant to the youth fails to take into account that students take this information in one ear and out the other, and they rarely ever act on the knowledge provided to them about mental health.

WHY IT’S A PROBLEM:

This problem has not been solved yet due to high-school students being a very vulnerable population. High school students are at a period in their lives that is crucial for their mental health. The pressure of balancing the intensity of a high-school workload and life problems in general can be triggering for many students. Mental and cognitive development changes most during this age group, which makes this problem especially hard to solve. (Teen Depression, 2013). This problem has not been solved due to the fact that many solutions that exist focus on a broad audience rather than thinking of the needs of a specific audience. In terms of the example of Cuyahoga County, the County failed to recognize how the many different students in the school will interpret the presentation.

Additionally, a common way to think of a solution to fix the ultimate problem of encouraging high-school students to seek help is to create new resources. However, the reason

this problem has not been solved yet is due to the fact that “more resources” is not the solution. There needs to be a way to connect students to the many great resources available that does not involve creating another resource that will be ignored by students. Our solution will have one major obstacle which will come from the fact that it is extremely difficult to work in a school system with minors due to parental consent. On the other hand, when parents are heavily involved, many students are drawn away. There needs to be the perfect balance of parent involvement which would satisfy parents and students. Another obstacle we face is the fact that many high-schools have very different socioeconomic backgrounds. The stigma behind mental health may be worse in some high-schools, and some high-schools may have very limited resources available.

PROPOSED WORK:

GOAL:

Our goal is to find effective methods to bridge the gap between high school students and mental health resources in their vicinities, and encourage them to utilize those resources. We chose high school students because we feel as if they have the right balance of understanding their environment and having a malleable mindset. We want to work around the stigma that seeking help for mental health issues carries in society, so that high school students can seek help more easily. There are many initiatives that have been taken to help the mental health of high-school students: websites, mobile applications, and school programs based on availability of resources. Our goal is to connect students to the many initiatives available. We would like to incorporate technology into our solution that would be available to students of any socioeconomic status. Thus we hope to create a web/texting service where students text in for help, and from there they will get personalized advice and resources from a college student, fellow high-school peer (part of a trained task force), or a counselor. This would allow for students to anonymously communicate their needs and immediately achieve results for what steps to take next. This could be integrated well into the current counseling system. When we talked with high school counselors they seemed very excited about our idea and wanted to integrate it right away.

OBJECTIVES:

Objective 1:

Our first objective is to provide easy access to information about local, accessible resources that high school students can use to help them take the first step in getting help with their mental illness.

This objective is incredibly important because there are countless resources in existence for students to take advantage of. Within the schools there are guidance counselors and other

resources and outside of school there are many online and private support systems that exist. The problem is that students don't know that these resources exist and thus are unable to take the first steps to get help. Unless students are made aware of the resources available, how can they hope to take advantage of them to get help? The hardest part of the journey to fighting a mental illness is taking that first step to seek help. There are numerous barriers such as self and social stigma that come in the way of students taking that critical first step so it is imperative that there be a way for them to circumvent these barriers and find out about resources that can help them. The best way to get around the stigma is for there to be a direct, easy and painless access point to resources, one with no strings attached. This is necessary because without a connection point to the resources, existing as well as any new resources we create will be absolutely useless. We have seen this in the countless ineffective resources that exist. Fifteen percent of high school students suffer from anxiety or depression and this is not isolated to a single racial or socioeconomic group according to Dr. Craighead. This is a widespread problem that has not been solved by the creation of new resources. The bigger problem at play here is that even though students have resources available, they often don't know about them and thus are unable to take advantage of them.

First we will send a survey out to high school students and get feedback on the idea. Then we hope to find a messaging provider to help run this service. Once we have the messaging platform we hope to integrate it into a web app for schools to make an account where they can set up a text number for their students and where students can reach out for help. Our next task will be to talk with school officials, administrators, and counselors as well as psychologists to find a task force of students and faculty to run the resource line. The next step will be training the task force. Once all of these steps are complete we hope to pilot the program

The biggest measures of success for this objective will be the degree to which the text line is used. If it gets significant use by student populations we will deem that a success. Another measure of success will come from qualitative feedback from the task force. If those individuals feel that they are making a difference and that the students on the other end are benefiting, this is another good sign. Additionally, success would mean more students seeking help and taking advantage of the resources they now know about, but it falls more under our second objective. Our final measure of success come in the form of other schools wanting to adopt the program.

The largest problem we foresee is the legal limitations of this solutions. Working with minors is difficult because most things require parent signature and unfortunately, parents can be one of the barriers to seeking help. We will have to work with school county legal departments to ensure that there is no liability with the school or with the task force.

Objective 2:

Not only do we want students to have the resources available to them to seek help, but we also want to get students to actually utilize the resources provided to them. This objective is a bit

more challenging as we would have to find ways to persuade students to use the resources we provide to them. This objective is necessary as without finding ways to get students to use the resources, it will be just as ineffective as any other solution that has been tried. The first objective deals with just taking the first step that every past solution has taken, but this one is what differentiates us from solutions that have failed to thrive. If we fail to complete this objective in the long term, we would not be successful. Handing out resources to students is good, but getting them to *want* to use the resources is the key point.

In order to complete this objective, there are a few important steps we must take. First, we'll have to study the minds of students a bit more in order to find out what attracts them to using things implemented by the school. Many times, schools implement programs that end up falling flat when students lack any interest in them. If we could figure out why the students are not interested, we could use that information to ensure that our solution doesn't end up in the same situation. Secondly, once we figure out things *not* to do when "advertising" our solution to students, we will come up with a set of incentives to get students to use our resources. By giving incentives to students, they'll be more inclined to use our resources. Coming up with these incentives will be difficult, but they won't be unreasonable. Once we have created these incentives, they will be implemented into schools to be tested, seeing if they work or not. If they do, we can still to the incentive we end up choosing and implement it with our resources.

We can measure the success rate of the objective by possibly doing a survey after a bit of time has passed to see if students have used the service, and if not, why they haven't. In doing so, we can measure how often students are actually using it rather than forgetting about it. We could also implement the service first, keeping track of the amount of users, and then implement the incentives to check to see if there is an increase in user count. Taking this approach may be risky as students may already know about it and realize not many are using the service, therefore they would be uninclined to use the service. On the other hand, there would be no bias in data as we wouldn't be asking the students on their opinions but rather just putting the incentives out to watch for results.

The anticipated problems with this are similar to the ones for the other objective. We may run into issues with working with minors, which can be difficult to surpass. We need parental consent with anything we do involving the students therefore it can be difficult for students to receive help without their parents necessarily knowing. We also may have a difficult time coming up with incentives to get students to use the product as well. Motivating students to use resources provided to them is a very difficult task, which is why we're making this one of our objectives. Failure to thrive among students will be the downfall of the solution, therefore if we can find adequate ways to incentivize students, it could be successful in the long run.

PROJECT TEAM:

Our team will include seven people. Each person on the team is expected to work together and collaborate effectively and efficiently, and we hope to accomplish this by having set expectations for each student on our team.

One student will ideally be an overall manager. She will assign jobs to everyone on a weekly or monthly (for a more long-term effect) basis. She will also follow up with everyone and ensure that everyone gets their work done in an effective manner.

Another student will be our responder. She will be the person who contacts people outside of our group for references, such as counselors, psychiatrists, and more.

Another student will be our editor. She has a great deal of talent in writing and English in general, so she will ideally look over and edit all written correspondence, essays, and reports.

Another student will be our program developer. As a Computer Science major, she has a lot of experience in coding and formatting web-apps and other messaging systems, which is the route we are pursuing in our solution.

Another student will be our designer. She will design the aesthetic and format of our messaging systems, any posters that we must create for formal presentations, and PowerPoints as well.

Our last two students will be our overall idea developers. They will look at our ideas and progress in general, and they will ideally look at everything holistically and try to oversee and predict if we will run into any problems. Additionally, they will look for potential errors and issues that we can deal with in advance.

Three individuals who we have not contacted about being our official advisors but would provide useful advice include Corey Debrody (Johns Creek High School Counselor), Dr. Ed Craighead (Emory professor / psychiatrist), and Dr. Tiffany Hughes-Troutman (GT Counseling). We have talked to all three of them to ask for insight about our problem space, and they have been quite helpful.

TIMELINE:

- June/July 2016: Get certification to work with human subjects
- August 2016: First look of messaging system layout released
- November 2016: Further revisions of messaging layout
- January 2017: Teammates test idea of product locally, let others give input into efficacy of product
- August 2017: Find certified doctors/therapists/counselors to man the messaging system & create a task force of students, teachers, and certified counselors in a select high school & resources in that area
- November 2017: Release number for messaging system to the student body

- January 2018: Assess incoming messages for efficacy of the program
- May 2018: Thinking bigger: create a web page that can find resources in current location and provide online chat with someone in that high school's task force
- November 2018: Web page prototype released and tested for efficacy in a controlled environment

BUDGET

Our materials and supplies are not really tangible tools, but rather, a form of human capital. We would have to train a task force of mentors, peers, and counselors in conjunction with a psychiatrist. This would mainly have a cost of time. Our equipment is mainly dependent on the students utilizing their personal phones or there being public availability of computers so that the texting and web app can be accessed. Services would include what is provided by mental health care facilities, services that counselors personally have been trained to work with, having a personal psychiatrist, and the time and devotion of an older designated college mentor. At the time, we do not anticipate there being a travel expense due to our project solution being one that can be achieved remotely.

EXPECTED OUTCOME/ FUTURE PLANS:

We expect this project to mainly connect students in need of help/support with resources in their area may that be peer-led support groups, foundations, therapists etc. In chatting with students in a way that is easy and comfortable for them, we want to see the number of resources for mental health rise. Students will be able to pull their phones out at any time of the day and be reached by a member of the school's task force, a peer, teacher, or counselor, of the student's choosing of course. However, students do not know the names or information of who they are contacting just what type of person they are. Students will only be required to input a student identification number and their zip code and will be connected to a person that will first prompt the student to dial 911 if it is a serious emergency then start a conversation that will improve the short-term well-being of the student. Once the student has told the task force about their situation and calmed down, so to speak, the task force will persuade the student to a resource fit for their situation. Sometimes it will be as easy as referring them to speak to someone they trust or it can be referring them to the nearest adolescent therapist in the area or a specific hotline for expert information.

We want students to feel no burden if they need to pick up the phone and vent. That is why there will always be someone on the other line. The outcome of the task force is to be knowledgeable in the resources in their area and have an advanced understanding of what might be the write resource for the student. We expect the task force to be persistent in referencing

different types of resources in the area since the messaging system is not necessarily meant to be a resource itself.

In the future, we plan to make this messaging system available to all students in Fulton county by the end of 2016. After the messaging system is finalized, our plan is to move onto a web page where students can similarly input their student ID and zip code and they can message someone from the task force online, similar to groupme. The member of the task force will be required to do the same thing as required in the messaging system. The website can also provide links to all resources mentioned while messaging making it easy to find out more about it.

In terms of sustainability, we believe the text messaging system can be a long-term and feasible solution. When we spoke with the high school counselors, they mentioned that they would be incredibly interested in integrating the system into their current counseling system, which makes us hope that the plan would stay in place for years. Additionally, because cell phones are an ever growing industry, we do not foresee any issues in terms of texting services declining.

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