Cry Wolf

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(trigger warning: self harm, suicide, eating disorders)

Last fall I was working on a project in the library when the conversation of two students walking by caught my ear. One was expressing to the other how stressed out and overloaded with work she was and joked that, when she got back to her dorm room, she was going to physically harm herself because she was so overwhelmed. After she made this statement, she and her friend continued on, laughing. As someone who's struggled with self harm, I was surprised and upset that someone within the school community could make light of such a serious issue, simply for the purpose of emphasis, but I've realized this kind of language is all to prevalent at Deerfield.

Talking about mental health might be a taboo subject at boarding school, but that doesn't mean the vocabulary of mental health isn't used. From noting that a girl looks "anorexic" to explaining how "depressed" or "anxious" or even "suicidal" we are because of our busy week, the terms used to describe real health issues permeate our daily language. Light hearted comments about serious issues litter our halls, classrooms, and fields, and like it or not, these words impact the community, and the ways that mental health manifests itself within it.

While I can't begin to try and speak for all the teens coping with mental health, I know that, personally, it's a hell of a lot easier not to talk about what I'm dealing with than to say something. Pile on top of that the voices of my friends and classmates making light of all the baggage that's weighing me down, and I'm even less inclined to talk. Some days, certain topics or even specific words make my skin crawl, and I need to walk out of class, count to myself as I breathe, do jumping jacks in the bathroom, only to pass by the group of boys who were "so triggered by that bro."

This kind of language doesn't just make things worse for those of us going through our problems, it makes it worse for everyone. It teaches students that anxiety and eating disorders are helpful descriptors, not silent monsters that students on your team or your sit-down tables are fighting. Furthermore, it normalizes deprecating language. When a friend starts criticizing themselves more and more, do you notice? Or are you numb to what might be a cry for help because of this society that has allowed the misuse of this kind of language?

So how do we change it? How do we extract these serious words from jokes and jabs? I don't know, and my goal isn't to provide a solution, it's more to pose this question: is it worth it? Is it worth joking around about killing yourself and making the kid across the bus from you feel like his real struggles are nothing more than something to laugh at? And what about the freshman behind you who will keep your language in mind as she grows into tomorrow's leader? Is it worth it to normalize that kind of talk? Because, eventually, if we keep crying wolf at every turn, we will make ourselves deaf to the kids who really are struggling.