

Two Cultures

*Written by Kaela Dunne and June Seong
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This thoughtpiece is formatted in two parts: first a Pen Pal letter from a South Korean student to an American student on the subject of mental health, followed by a response letter. Considering that international students make up a significant portion of boarding school communities, the St. Mark's Panel decided to use this opportunity to open up the dialogue about mental health both at home and overseas.

Dear Kaela,

I want to vent, but I can't find the space, so I'm writing to you. I want to talk about mental health. As you know, I'm from South Korea, and like most of my friends here I've been afflicted by mental illness. That in itself is a burden to carry, but it makes me even more upset that, from what I've seen and what I've known, it seems that South Korea largely lacks recognition and awareness surrounding mental illness.

Within my three years of living in South Korea during my adolescence, I was heavily plagued by a series of eating disorders, symptomatic of females at that age range, which I mostly attribute to the negative rhetoric around female identity. This is the fetishization of young female bodies and thus the strive for a smaller frame; to be small and frail was the ideal. Thus when I resorted to such an image, rather than it being a matter of concern, my erratic mood, lack of energy, and faltering performance became attributed to my inherent character. Even in my western school environment, I was cast aside as an oddity among other students due to my eating disorder.

In South Korea, not only did I find it incredibly difficult to access adequate support and treatment for mental health afflictions, but also that it was unnecessarily complicated and too laden with stigma to talk about with others. Not only was I subject to stigma by my own family, but I was mistreated and misunderstood by school counselors, teachers, and other supposed support systems. I am not alone in my experiences. The dialogue surrounding mental health in South Korea seems to root back to the negative image that formed around shamanistic religions, the rationale that seems to be used to justify the lack of attention to mental health.

This inability to address mental health afflictions in South Korea has led to very apparent consequences, from having the highest suicide rate in the world to widespread intergenerational depression. Though I have been able to find support systems through extensive search and pursuit, the truth is that doing so shouldn't have been so difficult. As long as mental health remains a taboo topic in Korean society, suicide rates will certainly rise, and depression will become more common spread.

Sincerely,
June Seong
South Korea

Dear June,

I know where you're coming from. I too find that mental health is often a complicated and frustrating topic. I never know what to say, how much to say, or how my words will be received. Mental illness is definitely something that never really came to my attention much until I began my freshman year at St. Mark's. My public school never resembled the lack of support system that yours had, June, but St. Mark's has provided me, and the whole community, with an abundance of support in regards to mental illness.

In my freshman English class, I wrote an essay on how introverts aren't necessarily shy or socially anxious people. One month later, I was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder and social anxiety disorder. This didn't necessarily prove my point wrong, but I was wrong about myself, and I honestly wasn't sure what to do with this new information. On the one hand, I knew my illness was making my life more difficult and that it was a concrete, legitimate condition that other people have. At the same time, that was the problem: it was a real thing. I was feeling anxious because I had anxiety—long-term anxiety at tha—and I wouldn't just wake up the next day feeling completely worry-free.

I have to say that I don't think I would have been able to work on recovering and learning to succeed without the support that St. Mark's provides. I was able to talk to my advisor about anxiety, and either of the school counselors, if I needed to, in order to best manage my anxiety and mental health. In fact, since the very beginning of the school year, faculty and older students always spoke out to the community about reaching out for help when you need it and looking out for friends who seem like they're struggling. Now, as a Peer Discussion Leader, I know that we, as well as our fellow student leaders, make sure to look out for our peers, and that is something that St. Mark's emphasizes amongst the student body. Our counselors are the nicest people on Earth, and I find that's there's very little shame or stigma in going to meet with one of them. I've found that if you even mention, "oh I had a meeting with Ms. Taylor/Ms. Barila", somebody is bound to reply with something similar to, "Oh my god, I love Ms. Taylor/Ms. Barila, they're so helpful!" It's not taboo to reach out for help here, and the St. Mark's administration embraces students with mental illnesses, rather than shying away from them.

The St. Mark's community has a much higher level of mental health awareness than most communities in America, I believe, and I have been so privileged to have our system of support backing me up. After spending three years at St. Mark's and living actively with anxiety for the same three years, I can say that it gets easier with this strong support system. However, even

with the support, mental illness makes it difficult to initially reach out for help. During my first few months at St. Mark's, I struggled quite a bit because I was worried that I would be judged by students and faculty for my anxiety. I knew that the St. Mark's community was acclaimed to be a place where you can reach out for help, but I wasn't sure if that applied to me because of my anxiety. But, I promise 100% that it does. That opportunity for help applies to every St. Marker, whether or not they have a mental, and I could not be more thankful for that support.

Best Wishes,
Kaela Dunne
USA