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Teens talk suicide, mental health and pressures of growing up in social media age

By [Adrienne Francis](#)

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PHOTO: The ABC spoke with St Clare's College Year 12 students about their thoughts on mental health and suicide.(ABC News: Adrienne Francis)

Judy McDonald almost gave up teaching after one of her students took their own life three years ago.



PHOTO: Judy McDonald has been a teacher at St Clare's College in Canberra since 1992. (ABC News: Adrienne Francis)

Ms McDonald said the loss deeply affected her, because she felt she wasn't there to help her student.

After some time she sought professional help to deal with the natural legacy of guilt.

"I still struggle with it," Ms McDonald said, choking back tears.

"The big factor there was social media and we are trying to address that here at our college."

Ms McDonald studied psychology before becoming a teacher, and runs a Year 12 psychology class at St Clare's College in Canberra's south.

She is now more determined than ever to reach out to students in need.

Ms McDonald said she genuinely believed all young people had a positive contribution to make to society.

"And I want to help them get there," she said.

In an effort to do this, Ms McDonald and staff at St Clare's College partnered with the Mental Illness Education ACT (MIEACT), to help better inform their students about where they can find support when struggling through hard times, and to help break down stereotypes around mental illness.



PHOTO: Ce Ce Edwards is a volunteer with Mental Illness Education ACT, who spoke recently to Year 12 psychology students at St Clare's College in Griffith. (ABC News: Adrienne Francis)

MIEACT is a peer-led organisation run by volunteers, who share their lived experiences recovering from mental illness, as part of a school-based education program.

Last month, Year 12 psychology students from St Clare's spent time with MIEACT volunteer Ce Ce Edwards, who told the girls about her own personal experience with mental illness.

Ms Edwards, who is now a young mother, talked to the girls about dealing with panic attacks, severe anxiety, and her phobia of choking to death as a youth.

She said her brief now was to go into schools and try to de-stigmatise mental illness.

"To try to make it easier to understand [and] encourage help-seeking behaviours, so that people actually do get assistance when they need it," she said.

"But also so people are less afraid and nervous about being honest and open about their experiences with mental illness or mental health problems."

Following their visit from Ms Edwards, Year 12 girls chose to share some of their thoughts about suicide and mental illness with the ABC.

'They try and talk to parents and their parents don't understand'

Kira Joyce-Piper, 17, has known other young people who have taken their lives.

"People that I used to go to school with have committed suicide," she said.

Ms Joyce-Piper said she herself was currently seeing a psychologist and was being treated with medication for depression and anxiety, and she could understand how young people arrived at a point where suicide felt like an option.



PHOTO: MIEACT volunteers aim to emphasise that the first step is reaching out and that students might have to knock on a number of doors to get help. (ABC News: Adrienne Francis)

"They get to this place where they don't think anything is going to work for them anymore," she said,

"They try and talk to parents and their parents don't understand ... they go 'well if my parents don't love me enough, then what's the point in my being here?'

"'Nobody else is going to accept me if my parents don't.'"

In addition to her studies Ms Joyce-Piper is a swimming instructor, and one day she would like to become a midwife.

She said she believed preventing suicide required genuine conversations and ongoing care.

"The people around you need to either be in it wholeheartedly or not at all, because you can't give half care to someone," she said.

"You are either there for them completely, or you are not."

Health professionals are not always helpful

Ruby Sykes, also 17, said she had been to hospital several times for mental health related issues and had been negatively impacted by the stigma of others including Canberra health professionals.

"When I went to hospital for the first time I felt very intimidated and I didn't feel like I was being listened to," she said.

"The first question that the doctor asked was, he goes: 'Are you going to hurt yourself or anyone else?'

"It wasn't: 'Oh, hi how are you doing today?' It wasn't calm and accepting.



PHOTO: Year 12 students Kira Joyce-Piper and Ruby Sykes with teacher Judy McDonald at St Clare's College in Canberra. (ABC News: Adrienne Francis)

"It was like: 'Are you going to hurt anyone else?'"

Ms Sykes said she believed upfront questions by health professionals about thoughts of self-harm and suicide were unhelpful.

"It makes you feel like maybe you are over reacting ... they are not asking me questions about what I am feeling," she said.

[People shouldn't be dying from depression and anxiety and mental illness.](#)

Ruby Sykes

Ms Sykes said she had also deliberately modified her responses to health professionals in order to be released from hospital, when she had not felt a connection or understanding from doctors and psychologists.

She would like to see better training about depression for teachers, hospital staff and others working with young people.

"You can't really understand [mental illness] unless you have been in that position," Ms Sykes said.

The teenager said she would like to see mental illness normalised in the community to help prevent suffering and further loss of life from suicide.

"People shouldn't be dying from depression and anxiety and mental illness," she said.

Ms Sykes is now involved in organising the school's annual 'R U OK? day' events on September 11, to further draw attention to the issue.

'Everything is manageable ... you can do it'

Chloe Hannaford, 17, agreed that suicidal thinking was common among her peers.

She said she believed this was in a large part due to pressures created by social media.

"Suicide is ... a very prominent thing in my age group," she said.

"School is very stressful especially going into Years 11 and 12, it is such a big transition.

On the suicide prevention front line



[Step inside Lifeline's telephone crisis support support call centre, in this special report by the ABC.](#)

"Everyone is so connected ... there's a lot of pressure."

Ms Hannaford said young people did not really think about the support that was available, and tended to get caught up in moments of negative thinking.

"You just think of what's happening to you and you are not really thinking: 'Oh maybe I can go and find support'," she said.

"You are just thinking 'this is happening and it is hard'.

"It is not what people [like authorities] aren't doing, it is what the individual can't see or what the individual isn't doing or they are not comfortable doing."

She said if she could influence someone who was thinking about suicide, she would tell them there is help available .

"There are people who have gone through that before and who have gotten through it," she said.

"While it [might] be a big problem now, if you can just wait it out and get help, it gets better.

"It doesn't last forever, everything is manageable and you can do it."

'There is hope and there is recovery'

Australia-wide in 2013, 370 young people under the age of 24 died by suicide.

A total of 148 of them were aged between 15 and 19.

MIEACT executive officer Samantha Davidson-Fuller said not everyone who contemplated suicide had a mental illness, but it was often a contributing factor.

"There needs to be a number of factors, which include stress and environment and the individual's own mental health and wellbeing to put someone in that frame of mind," she said.

Ms Davidson-Fuller said her organisation, which also works with other school and groups outside of the education system, aimed to emphasise that the first step was reaching out and that you might have to knock on a number of doors to get help.

"Our message is that there is hope and there is recovery and mental illness is manageable and you can go onto achieve, while living with a mental illness," she said.

Ms McDonald said she would like to see more of a focus in schools on assisting young people to cope with emotions from early childhood onwards.

"We are taught from a very young age that we need to hide those emotions in certain situations, to show people that we can actually cope with things when we are not coping," she said.

The teacher said she believed the negative impacts of social media would not be felt as greatly by young people, if they were taught to feel more positively about themselves.

"And they were able to develop resilience ... to feel good and not take all of the things that they see and hear to heart."

She said students also needed to be shown that not achieving a top score in Year 11 or 12 was not the end of the world.

"They also need to not be judged if they do seek out help," she said.

This story is part of a series, exploring issues around suicide.