



Published April 26th, 2023

Moving beyond labels & stigma during Mental Health Awareness Month

By Sharon K. Sobotta

Many Bay Area fans of the JV show on Wild 94.9 have been through a roller coaster ride of emotions this spring. Many became concerned when JV (Jeffrey Vandergrift) started talking about his physical and mental health challenges while coping with Lyme disease last year. Concerns grew when Vandergrift detailed his challenges on air on Feb. 23, and went missing that same day. On March 23, Vandergrift's body was discovered near Pier 39 in San Francisco, confirming what many suspected but didn't want to believe - that Vandergrift was in fact dead.

Reports confirmed that no foul play was involved, but stopped short of naming suicide as the cause of death. However, JV's public discussion about his struggles with depression and his online account of his suicide ideation and a 2021 attempt that resulted in him being placed on a 5150, involuntary hold, have raised speculation that suicide may be the cause of death.

Kelechi Ubozoh, a co-editor of "We've Been Too Patient: Voices from Radical Mental Health" and a survivor of suicide attempt(s) says one of the best ways to cope is to talk. "When we witness famous people dying by suicide, especially people we perceive to have it all, it can feel unsettling and shocking," Ubozoh says. "People think talking about suicide causes suicide which is a myth and one of the reasons the topic remains taboo."

Ubozoh recalls her own struggles with mental health which piqued after she lost her grandmother when she was 13 and resurfaced again a decade later when she was assaulted. "When I was struggling the most, I looked great on the outside. People don't ask people who are smiling what's wrong or check on them. (Let's) let (this latest loss) be an invitation to have a conversation with our loved ones."

If we can get beyond getting caught up on the technicalities of a particular diagnosis, Kelechi says it leaves room to focus on holistically caring for the impacted person. "What if we cared for mental health in much as we cared for physical health and showed up with dinner or a casserole to remind the person in crisis they're not alone? Ask open ended questions (affirming) that you won't try to fix or judge someone. (If you can, offer to) take one thing off (the person's) plate."

Ubozoh put on a happy face and pushed through her difficulties. She went to journalism school and did her best to keep smiling until she was sexually assaulted at the age of 23. "I started feeling like I wanted to die and I reached out for help," Ubozoh says. "The moment I said suicide, I was shut down. People think that if you're feeling suicidal, you can just go to a therapist because maybe you're too sick. A few days later (after unsuccessful attempts to get help), I tried (to take my life)."

Today, as a woman in her 30s Ubozoh is in a different place. She's clear that suicide ideation isn't something that she is forever cleared from or something that can be overcome. Rather, it's something that she's learned to cope with when or if those feelings arise.

"(I've given up on the slogan that it gets better and embraced this). Something is going to happen again as long as we're on the earth. (But I get to decide) how I'm going to deal with it. I'm going to include people. I'm going to have a community. I'm going to include people that help me. I've healed how I respond to life."

A version of the holistic care that Ubozoh describes is starting to show up in schools across the state. The Lafayette School District is an example of a place that pivoted from a model of having shared counselors that traveled between the multiple school campuses to a place of having a counselor at each school.

Rachel DeChristofaro is a counselor at Lafayette Elementary School, where she says she supports both students and parents. On a given day, DeChristofaro may drop into a classroom to demonstrate calm down and de-stressing techniques with children, hold a support group for students struggling to maintain friendships or cope with anxiety and have individual support in the form of play, coloring, making a navigation plan for a successful day and make rounds during recess. What does this have to do with education? A lot! The children DeChristofaro supports range in age from 4 to 12 and they're dealing with anxiety, worries and fears of not fitting in or feeling like they don't belong.

"If a student isn't able to regulate emotions, express how they are feeling or de-escalate (a tense situation), it can impact academics, the classroom and peer interactions," she says. "The better we feel mentally, the more opportunities this can create for students to have a positive learning environment."

Something that Ubozoh, DeChristofaro and possibly even Jeffrey Vandergrift, if he was still here to weigh in, would likely agree on is this: people of all ages and stages in life need support and a safe place to land. If you or someone you love needs to talk through a mental health crisis or is experiencing suicide ideation, you can call 988 for support.

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