First Place

Kristen Azarra

Pittsford Mendon High School

What constitutes a “better” world? Is it state-of-the-art technology, efficient communication and transportation, advancements in the medical field, and eradication of diseases? Could it be lessening the climate crisis, making lifestyle changes to reduce our carbon footprints, and encouraging big businesses to do the same? Or is it positive social change? Certainly, a “better” world is the result of improvements in many areas, but while technology and medicine advance humanity, how we interact with one another is the core of... everything. Human interaction is the most valuable tool we can use to build ourselves a better future, and due to a recent and consistent push for awareness on a range of topics, specifically mental health, I am optimistic about the world in 50 years.

Social change is in the air. The rise of social media has led to important discussions about race, gender, sexuality, government, and mental and physical health that might not have been prompted by education or parental guidance alone. I have seen this movement blossom myself, and in the last year, I have been able to educate myself and others about many things. In the grand scheme of things, mental health is a new topic to widely discuss. Mental illness has always existed, but for most of history, it has been a bit of a taboo to speak about—especially in the 20th century. In the 1930s, people who were struggling with mental illness were institutionalized at once. The psychiatric institutions were much different than they are today, looking more like prisons than hospitals, and performing horrifying treatment like shock therapy to get rid of the illness, instilling terror in the patients. Perhaps this can be attributed to an obsession with external appearance and resistance to change, but nevertheless, people suffering with mental illnesses were categorized as insane. By the 1950s, there were 560,000 people suffering in institutions for a range of illnesses generalized under the name ‘hysteria.’ Although this dropped to 130,000 in the 1980s, institutionalization was still the main form of treatment (“History of Mental Health Treatment”). But that was decades ago, and a lot has changed. Institutionalization still exists, but it is much less commonly utilized, and a big mark of change is that we know mental health is not something to push aside.

Still, a stigma surrounds mental illness and, specifically, suicide. Stigmatization usually arises from a lack of understanding or education. Mental illness is usually invisible to the public eye, so it makes sense that people unused to social evolution are still uneasy with this attempt to spread awareness; Like ripping off a bandage, talking about suicide forces us to be uncomfortable. This stigma is incredibly harmful to everyone, whether we struggle with mental illness or not, because it allows people to feel shameful about speaking up. No matter how many resources are provided, this stigma prevents people from seeking help. There is an even stronger stigma surrounding men and mental health because the patriarchy instills into young boys the idea that a strong man is emotionless. The United Health Foundation finds that the likelihood of death by suicide is 3.7 times higher in men than it is in women (*Explore Suicide in the US)*. Parents, too, sometimes inhibit their child’s ability to recover. Many people feel like they cannot come forward because they would be ridiculed by their older family members who grew up in a society that did not discuss emotional communication. This judgement teaches teenagers to draw back into themselves, and to keep silent about problems that need to be addressed.

However, awareness will eventually reduce this mark of shame that society still places on mental illness. The Stop the Stigma movement is a great example of how we are moving forward and working to remove the negative connotations of mental health. The goal of Stop the Stigma is to eradicate the tainted perception of suicide. Hopefully, an increasing number of parents and family members will become a part of someone’s support system and be willing to change, to allow for change in society. The more we learn, the more compassionate society becomes. This is the reason for my optimism about the future. I think that in 50 years, we will have long evolved past our current state of pushing against the norm and talking openly about mental health will *be* the norm.

Based on how far we have come, from the days in which struggling with anxiety would send you to psychiatric hospitals without another word, to now, the days where we are trying to improve, I can confidently say that in 50 years, we will be living in a more compassionate world. Today’s youth will grow up to raise their children with a little more awareness, and through each generation, the world will be better. To live in a better future, we must be willing to grow. To live in a better future, we must be willing to listen, and to live in a better future, we must be better today.

Works Cited

*Explore Suicide in the United States | 2020 Annual Report ...* www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/Suicide/state/ALL.

“History of Mental Health Treatment.” *Dual Diagnosis*, dualdiagnosis.org/mental-health-and-addiction/history/.