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Opinion

Support For Others

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John B. Edwards was an amiable, intelligent sophomore, which is why his suicide struck us so severely. Those that knew John best have attested to his scholastic aptitude and demonstrated potential to achieve great things. He was one of the most well rounded people we have ever met. He excelled in athletics, academics, music, research, and making friends. He was training to run the Boston Marathon while managing an impressive course load, conducting stem cell research, and learning to play the guitar. Based upon such stellar performance and his friendly demeanor, who would have ever guessed that something was terribly wrong?

While we cannot presume to know the factors that led to the ending of John's life, we are all worse off for this tremendous loss to our community. Even if you were not fortunate enough to have crossed paths with John, spend a few minutes thinking about what his absence among us really means. It could just as easily have been anyone of us.

We, as a community, have a responsibility to look out for one another as best we can. Harvard students are, and should be, praised for their focus on achievement; however, this focus often comes at the expense of our solidarity and ability to support one another. We would do well to remember Plato's advice, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a harder battle." The strength and competence that we sometimes project can mask feelings of inadequacy, depression, and even suicidal thoughts.

The loss of John's life to suicide has shaken us to our cores. Now, more than ever, we should not overlook the fact that morbidity from depression and related problems, such as eating disorders, silently pervades our community. Indeed, according to my recent conversations with University Health Services and Bureau of Study Counsel counselors and Dr. Paul Barreira, Director of Behavioral Health & Academic Counseling, depression on campus is far more common than one would expect. The stigma of mental illness, though unfounded, remains a major obstacle for many who could benefit from the ample mental health services on campus. According to a 2006 senior thesis studying the state of mental health at Harvard, 56 percent of Harvard undergraduates surveyed reported needing, but not seeking, mental health help. Of those students, 20 percent identified shame or stigma as the reason for not seeking help. A startling eight percent of us have considered or attempted suicide.

While admission to Harvard is seen as the pinnacle of academic strength and achievement, membership in this selective community is a double-edged sword. The same qualities that brought us here—excellence, competitiveness, and ambition, to name a few, become liabilities when they burden us with high levels of stress, which 62 percent of Harvard students reportedly experience. Accustomed to success, we place unjustifiably high expectations on ourselves. Many of us have been told that at Harvard, no one will "hold your hand" and we have consented to this idea. Though regarded as some of the best students in the world, even the most independent and self-confident among us need encouragement and support when faced with new challenges. To call this a sign of weakness is not only a gross injustice; in fact, the premium we place on self-reliance becomes destructive when it forces us to hide our problems for fear of showing weakness.

As science concentrators, we can only speak to the particular brand of competition found within the mammoth walls of the Science Center. All too often a lightning-quick mind, paired with diligent effort does not measure up to Harvard's exacting standards. Even more difficult than those thorny organic synthesis problems is the challenge of maintaining your self-confidence when you just fell short of the midterm mean, despite an honest effort. This sort of experience can be devastating to even the most grounded of Harvard's science talents. It is not uncommon for a sophomore pre-med or biology concentrator to have 20 to 25 hours of class and labs per week, leaving little time for self-reflection, let alone mental health therapy. Pressure escalates and feelings of hopelessness abound, yet relief seems to be nowhere in sight. Honest recognition of this problem is the first step to its resolution.

John's torch certainly shone brightly while he was with us, and today it illuminates broader questions about our role here at Harvard and the nature of our community. Harvard's goal should be not just to attract brightest stars, but to keep them burning brightly while they are here, and in their various pursuits afterwards.

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