

2017

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Recommended Citation

Lile, Annika (2017) "Neurodiversity," *Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research*: Vol. 5, Article 21.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/pjcr/vol5/iss1/21>

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Neurodiversity

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Assigned in COM 180: Public Speaking and Rhetorical Analysis (Professor Gregory Daum)

On December 14, 2012, in Newtown Connecticut, Adam Lanza fired 154 bullets in the span of five minutes, tearing through 20 beautiful children; ultimately tearing families apart. Charlotte, Daniel, Olivia, Josephine, Noah: these kids did not have the opportunity to go to high school, get married, or follow their dreams. On December 16, 2012, Noah Pozner's uncle, Alexis Haller, celebrated his nephew's life through a touching eulogy when he stated, "he would have become a great man. He would have been a wonderful husband and a loving father. He would have been a backbone of our family for years to come. His loss, and our loss, are deep indeed. It is unspeakably tragic that none of us can bring Noah back. We would go to the ends of the earth to do so, but none of us can," (Haller). The horrific event detailed above is the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting.

After thorough investigation of the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting, authorities released a report saying that Adam Lanza, the shooter, had struggled with many obsessive compulsive behaviors. More specifically, Adam Lanza was obsessed with mass shootings and refused his medications and therapies. In response to this tragic event, Barack Obama emphasized in his commemorative speech at the Sandy Hook Interfaith Vigil on December 16th, 2012, "We can't tolerate this anymore... These tragedies must end... Surely we can do better than this," (Obama). Thankfully, the attainment of a more efficient and effective system to dealing with individuals with mental health struggles is within reach.

The horrific events of the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting spurred the creation "The Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act of 2016," also known as the H.R. 2646, to facilitate the availability of materials and the efficiency of funds to aid individuals with mental health struggles. It is imperative to pass the H.R. 2646 in order to increase availability of aid for individuals with mental health struggles and moreover, to reduce the negative stigma surrounding these individuals.

Firstly, it is crucial to recognize the problem currently plaguing society. Some people consider mental health struggles a distant problem, something they will never encounter. However, mental health struggles are very prevalent in society. In fact, Dr. Joseph Brown highlights in his pamphlet entitled "Help is on the Way: Anxiety," revised in 2014, "More than 1 out of 10 adults have anxiety problems at some time in their lives," (Brown). Severe anxiety is a more common mental health struggle, yet many people dismiss it due to its frequency. According to Brown's statistic, 10 percent of the population deals with anxiety alone; mental health struggles affect a large portion of the population and legislation must be enacted to assist these individuals.

Furthermore, mental health struggles are prevalent just a few miles from Pepperdine University, on the streets and in Los Angeles communities. On October 18, 2016, a personal interview with Dr. Connie Horton, Pepperdine's Senior Director of Counseling, Health and Wellness, highlighted that, "If you walk down Skid Row and start talking to people, you can see how many of them are mentally ill. They're out of touch with reality, confused about where they are, and they don't know what's real" (Horton). A trip to Skid Row can confirm Horton's statement. Many of the individuals that are left homeless deal with mental health struggles and unfortunately, are unable to obtain appropriate treatment.

Mental health struggles are also prevalent in our social justice issues. Christina Exoo states in her article, "The Media Missed the Story," that "the National Crime Victimization Survey reports that persons with severe mental illness are 16 times more likely to be raped, and 10 times more likely to be violently victimized than the general population" (Exoo). Unfortunately, some individuals with mental health struggles face difficulties taking care of themselves and can be rendered helpless in many situations. This makes them an ideal prey for wicked predators who are highly interested in exploiting their vulnerability. The nation should feel a moral obligation to help citizens in need, starting with individuals with mental health struggles.

Moreover, mental health struggles affect jails and prisons. Sy Mukherjee revealed in their article written on July 12, 2013, "in fact, by some accounts, Chicago's Cook County jail is the largest mental health care provider in America," (Mukherjee). Individuals with mental health struggles often beg to stay in jail because they know that while in jail, they will be safe and will not hurt themselves or anyone else. In jail, they receive the appropriate medication and therapies that they may not have the opportunity to obtain out of jail. The problem is blatant and blaring. There is no way to deny that there is a need in society that is not being met.

After recognizing the problem exists in society, it is important to inspect why it is occurring. It is easy to debate the dominant cause for this problem. It could be argued that there is a nationwide shortage of resources and services. It could be argued that there is a general lack of education on this topic. It could also be argued that the negative stigma surrounding these individuals prevents action within the nation. Instead, let the facts speak on their own. Geoff Williams highlights in his article entitled "Shortage of Child Psychiatrists Plagues the US" written June 25, 2015, "The average waiting time in major U.S. metropolitan areas to see a child psychiatrist was 25 days for a first visit," (Williams). Williams further comments on the lack of doctors available stating that, "After two calls, despite having insurance or saying they would be willing to pay out of pocket, appointments were nailed down with only about 25 percent of the doctors," (Williams). Later on in his article, Williams also emphasizes, "There are approximately 8,300 practicing child and adolescent psychiatrists in the United States — and over 15 million youths in need of one," (Williams). This means that there are 1,807 children for every one child psychiatrist. Essentially, there are not enough people working to fix the problem. There needs to be an increase in the number of psychiatrists.

While the causes of this prevalent problem in society are arguable, the solution is undeniable. The Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act of 2016 will mend these breaks and cracks within the system. This act will provide more resources and materials, such as hospital beds, so that outpatients will have more opportunities to be treated. Furthermore, this act will reallocate funds for federal distribution. It is apparent that the current systems of individually regulated clinics are inefficient and ineffective. Therefore, if the government were to take responsibility of the situation, they would be able to set standards nationwide that must be upheld. Lastly, this act grants family members access to files of their loved ones so that they can make sure that they are taking their medication and going to their appointments. This is especially important when referring back to the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting. What if Adam Lanza's parents were able to understand what he was going through, and realize that he wasn't taking his medications or going to his therapies? They could have been able to give him support, and prevented him from taking the lives of 20 innocent children.

Imagine a world that truly fights towards equality, not only for genders and races, but also for individuals with mental health struggles. Individuals with mental health struggles are an

underrepresented, yet overwhelming group in this nation. Mental health struggles are present in many aspects of social justice, such as homelessness, incarceration, and even domestic violence. If the H.R. 2646 were enacted into legislation, it would be possible to fight towards a more just and equal society where individuals are able to receive appropriate and effective aid. With a brighter future in mind, hearts must be compelled to act in order to make a difference.

The solution is entirely possible through action, in three simple ways. As a nation, citizens and activists can help by informing their state senators about the importance of the act. Within the Pepperdine community, students and faculty can encourage empathy by educating each other about different mental health struggles present in society. The Mental Health America website provides wonderful information about different mental health struggles to facilitate education. As individuals, it is important to make some habitual changes, including adjusting vocabulary and perspectives. It is important to recognize that the word “retarded” is outdated and only promotes the negative stigma surrounding individuals with mental health struggles. However, some also choose to supplement the phrase, “mental illness” with the phrase “mental health struggle” in order to promote a more empathetic viewpoint towards individuals. The word, “mental illness” can create a schism between two groups, forcing the idea of an “us” versus “the” mentality. It can be argued that all people experience mental health struggles, including times of anxiety or depression, but some may have more severe cases. This type of perspective promotes empathy and understanding for one another. Moreover, it is essential to view the entire movement as embracing diversity. In this case, it is important to embrace neurodiversity.

All in all it is important to recognize that these solutions can be achieved through effective communication. The nation must communicate the issue to state senators. The Pepperdine community must effectively communicate the problem to educate others and spread awareness. Individuals must appropriately communicate with others using a more accepting vocabulary on a daily basis. The pertinence of communication skills in society is increasing more and more each day. Through studying communication, it is possible to educate others on important injustices that are occurring in society, and more importantly, it is possible to *communicate* the solution. In this case, it is possible to more effectively communicate the importance of the H.R. 2646.

It is important to think back to the 20 beautiful children that lost their lives on December 14, 2012. Unfortunately, the past cannot be altered, but adjustments must be made for the future. These children’s lives will have been taken in vain if the H.R. 2646 is not accepted into legislation. For the sake of those that have passed, and those that are yet to come, embrace neurodiversity by promoting the H.R.2646 through effective and inclusive communication. In this situation, it is also important to recognize that there were more victims than just these 20 children. While Charlotte, Daniel, Olivia, Josephine, Noah, and many more were the victims of a crime, Adam Lanza, who took his own life, was the victim of a broken system. Adam Lanza fell through the cracks in this broken system, ultimately costing him his life. The H.R. 2646 will fill these cracks, and save more people from the tragic fate that both Adam Lanza and these children faced.

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