

Bellingham Bulletin

Suicide Prevention Workshop Draws Small but Engaged Audience

story & photos by STEVE CHISHOLM, Contributing Writer



Workshop Presenter Jon Mattleman

On Monday, Sept. 28, the Bellingham Board of Health, in cooperation with the Bellingham School Department, hosted Jon Mattleman as he delivered his renowned suicide awareness presentation, "The

Secret Life of a Massachusetts Teen." Parents were welcomed to the BHS auditorium to learn about strategies and techniques necessary to better protect their children from depression and suicide.

Prior to Mattleman's presentation, BHS Principal Lucas Giguere conveyed the importance of suicide awareness: "We need to really think about ways we can continue to educate ourselves and the school community regarding depression and suicide as it relates to teens."

Mattleman's presentation, "The Secret Life of a Massachusetts Teen," covered the many reasons a student may contemplate suicide. The first issue he addressed was a teen's need to

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keep secrets. "They mostly keep secrets because they don't want to disappoint [their parents]," he said. He explained that a child's shame and guilt are often conveyed in anger. To counteract this response, he suggested, "If we better understand their secrets, we can better communicate with our kids, and the better we communicate, the better we can keep them safe from at-risk behaviors. Teens want parents to listen; [they] want to share their fears, their joys, and what's going on with them. And the reason they don't is because of us. We're always giving judgement." Mattleman explained that it's essential to regard a child's admittance of fault and ensuing guilt with a sense of compassion.

He offered a technique he referred to as "conversations in the dark" as a method to persuade a child to open up to a parent. He said that speaking from behind a veil, through a door, or in a dark room allows a child to open up without having to worry about reading his or her parent's responding expressions. "It's much more important [to listen to] what they say than what you say," said Mattleman. He said that it's important for parents to ignore their mind's desire to formulate a counter argument and to solely focus on what their child is saying.

He also covered another key factor of teen depression: peer pressure. He said that a misconception of teens is that they are poor decision-makers. He disagreed with this notion, saying, "[Teens] are good decision-makers, but when you add in the peer pressure, it makes decision-making really tough." He clarified that the pressure to maintain relationships within their social circle causes them to make decisions that are detrimental to their well-being. He recognized that although parents



Shown above (L-R) are BHS Principal Lucas Giguere, Health Agent Mike Catalano, Jon Mattleman, Board of Health Chairwoman Kelly McGivern, Board of Health member Tricia LeClair and BHS Guidance Director Dr. Jan Chiappone.

may construe teens' poor decisions as purely negative, parents have to learn to respect that teens are choosing these decisions for an important reason: to engage socially with their peers. He explained that children are aware of the risks present in certain actions; however, the reward of the action is often far more appealing. "You don't always have to agree with [your children], but you always have to respect them," he said.

Furthermore, Mattleman stressed that parents expect far too much out of their children. "When your kids aren't achieving, in any realm, you have to ask yourself this question: Is it that they can't or they won't?" he said. He explained that once you realize that most children simply don't have the capacity to do certain things, it's harder to be angry with them. "If you think your kid is going to be on your timeline, you're probably wrong; think of the pressure they're under," he said.

Mattleman said that children of this generation also have to live with a technological element that their predecessors never encountered. He explained that children are looking at the social network profiles of their classmates and interpreting their lives as better than their own. However, as Mattleman noted, these kids are viewing a filtered version of their classmates' lives. Also, he said, "Teens and preteens don't understand object permanence as it relates to the internet." A child's reckless act of passion on the internet may well be

immortalized. Therefore, he said, it's important for parents to familiarize themselves with the world of social media and have conversations about the internet with their children.

Mattleman referenced a survey that found that in the past year 15% of 7th- and 8th- graders admitted to being depressed. He said the survey also reported that 9% self-injured and 3% had attempted suicide. Summarizing another survey that polled high schoolers, he disclosed that 22% had been depressed, 15% had self-injured, and 13% had considered suicide. In response to the provided statistics, he explained, "Middle school and high school really challenge your sense of self-worth."

Mattleman said that Massachusetts has approximately 550 completed suicides a year and that number is at a steady incline. He places a lot of responsibility on the parents of depressed teens: "Your job as a parent is not to be cool or to be their friend; it's to keep them safe. Sometimes that puts us at odds with our kids, and that's okay; we have to rise above it." He provided his personal experience with the difficulties of parenting; however, he said that it's important to have stamina to meet their needs, to be a part of their world, and to immerse themselves in current trends. Finally, he said that reaching out to other parents for help isn't a sign of weakness but a sign of love.

Jon Mattleman graduated with a BA from Clark University and went on to achieve an MS in Counseling from the University of Hartford. With over 30 years as a mental health counselor, he has given life-saving advice to countless children and parents. Being a certified trainer in QPR Suicide Prevention, he has worked with schools and statewide organizations to address the growing crisis throughout the country. Mattleman's engaging, respectful, affable, and, at times, humorous presentation is geared toward increasing awareness and offering strategic countermeasures in battling teen depression and suicide.

He encourages parents to visit his website, jonmattleman.com, and reach out to him involving any concerns as they relate to depression or suicide.