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### Ms. Alvarado's Experience with Mental Health

Ms. Alvarado greets her students with a warm smile every cold morning as they enter her History class at Los Altos High School. Positivity envelopes her classroom, and she is always more than happy to help with anything, whether it be school-related or not. She has a deeper understanding and more meaningful connection with her students than other teachers, always available to chat it up with her students.

Although it may seem that she has always been this happy and positive, her life has led through a rough and rocky road to the place she is now. And despite her hardships, she still perseveres. Every challenge has made her stronger, especially her experiences with breast cancer and her treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This journey molded her view on mental health, teaching her a deeper and more complex understanding of depression, anxiety, and other psychological problems. Lessons learned from her experience aids her ability to help her students, as well as be able to help herself during hard times in the future.

When Ms. Alvarado found out she had breast cancer in January 2021, it seriously deteriorated her mental health, especially because of the COVID lockdowns that soon followed. Lack of human interaction as well as the physical complications, such as changes in her hormone levels from her treatment, left her feeling depressed. It was becoming harder to interact not only with her students in a meaningful way, but also with friends and family, due to the limitations of social distancing and the lockdown. Other than the physical pain she had to persevere through

because of chemotherapy and radiation, her emotional stability was being negatively affected by changes in her hormone levels. Her emotions would get the better of her, as her natural biology was being altered to save her. Ms Alvarado had professional therapists she could talk to, but avoided bringing her personal matters to her friends or family, thinking that she could persevere through cancer on her own. The decision to not open up to close ones was her biggest regret from cancer treatment, and it ended up only adding to her mental health problems and depression.

When Ms. Alvarado was younger, she knew she wanted to become a history teacher. She had many history teachers throughout her middle and high school years, being inspired by them to pursue a career in teaching. Throughout her younger years, she had gone through many bad experiences with mental health, such as experiencing her parents' divorce, seeing substance abuse within her own family, as well dealing with the loss of loved ones. Her mother helped her a lot through her traumatic experiences, but Ms. Alvarado did not truly know the importance of opening up to others. Her aunt and mother had therapists to help them through dark times in their life, which significantly improved their mental health.

During her experience with breast cancer treatment, her lack of knowledge to know how to deal with mental health problems lead to her sense of hopelessness and loneliness. She had the mindset of dealing with it herself and getting along with it. Since she had already been teaching for a number of years before her cancer treatment, she sought to act like a role model and deal with her problems on her own. Ms Alvarado had therapists who helped her throughout the treatment, but refused to open up to those closer to her.

After treatment had ended, Ms. Alvarado realized how important it is to open up and talk during difficult times. She regrets not opening up to those close to her, not wanting to put a

burden on them. She also realized how important teachers can be with helping a student with mental health problems, remembering how she looked up to her old history teachers throughout her years of school and how influential they were for her. Ms. Alvarado now has the experience and insight to know how to help students with whatever they need, always available to talk with students with any problems they have.

Regarding a potential source of mental health problems for students today, Ms. Alvarado thinks the main culprit is social media. Throughout her many years of teaching, she had been paying close attention to the students around her and what they talked about. Curiously, she thinks that stress from schoolwork is a small contributing factor, while social media is by far the much more influential factor. “Studies have certainly shown that social media use triggers feelings of jealousy” (Walton). Hundreds of studies have concluded that social media is not good for mental health, because of how people often compare themselves to others they see on social media such as Facebook or Instagram. She thinks that social media platforms such as Instagram show only a small part of someone’s life where they are always happy and everything is perfect. But in reality, nobody is constantly happy and living a perfect life, no matter what their photos on social media show. “Ms Alvarado further elaborated on how because of everyone looking so happy all the time on social media, people expect their own lives to look just as happy and cheery all the time. And when their lives don’t seem to be as perfect as what they see online with their friends, they start to develop mental health issues questioning their own happiness. Throughout the teenage years is a time in life where people learn the most, and it is important to learn how to take care of yourself mentally. Teenagers go through many new experiences, both positive and negative. And on top of that, higher hormone levels make teenagers more emotional. Teens face many physical and mental changes throughout adolescence that can

seriously negatively affect their mental health. Coupled with bad environmental factors that lead to stress, as well as the lack of experience to deal with mental health problems, teens can be led down a dark path. “Environmental causes of mental illness in adolescents are typically, at their core, a result of stress. Common sources of stress in adolescence are social stress, isolation, substance abuse...” (“What Causes Mental Illness in Adolescence”)

At the moment, Ms Alvarado is in a good mental upturn after she was successfully treated from breast cancer. But mental health and emotions can vary from one day to another. When she does go through another negative experience, she knows how to deal with it in a healthy way. By opening up and talking to friends and family. She is no longer afraid of how people closer to her might change their perception of her anymore if she were to tell them how she really feels. Now because of how she opens up, she has created even closer bonds with those she loves and cares for.

Opening up to others during hard times is the most important thing for Ms Alvarado. She knows from experience that cutting yourself off from others will only make your situation worse. Ms Alvarado will always be there for anyone in need of assistance, including her students, friends, and family. Problems with mental health throughout life are inevitable, but having someone to talk to can be the make or break factor of persevering and overcoming those problems.

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