

Flightless birds

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The scene is common – a student sitting at his desk, his fist nestled gently into his cheek, his elbow rested on his tabletop, and his eyes locked into a pensive gaze. To most, he may appear to be planning for his future; after all, this fiery youth so full of ambition and potential must have great plans for himself. But, in reality, he is merely staring blankly into his computer screen, afraid to even begin the essay that is due first thing tomorrow morning.



This dimension of the student experience, while often unseen, is one of the defining factors of my generation – a generation of flightless birds afraid to take the first step and leap towards their destinies. But why is this the case? With humanity’s collective effort towards a more progressive future, educational institutions and academic programs are becoming increasingly rigorous. Lately, school has been getting harder, and students are losing motivation. You might think that this is simply due to laziness or the prevalence of procrastination as a means of escape. That may sometimes be the case, but remember when we feel like escaping, it is because our intrinsic survival instincts are telling us to run away from danger. For students such as myself, this danger comes in the form of stress – a form of oppression that oftentimes seems inescapable (especially for overachievers and the grade-conscious). This is why in order to break free of academic stress, some students opt to take their lives.

In 2017 alone, six students from the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom committed suicide. While none of the suicides were linked, it is widely speculated that academic stress was involved. These students were at one point at their peak, enjoying a world-class education in one of the world’s best universities. But they never graduated – they were never able to reach their full potential and soar towards excellence; they were the birds who never had the chance to fly.

With cases of student suicides becoming more prevalent, I am beginning to fear for the safety of my own peers. The halls of my school echo with cries of “It’s hopeless,” “I’m not motivated,” “I’m tired,” “I just want to die.”

What surprised me, however, was that comments such as these were often accompanied by sardonic remarks and chuckles – they joked about their pain instead of seeking help for it.

It often occurred to me that despite the emotional and mental toll stress was taking on me and my peers, we were still afraid to admit our vulnerability to each other.

The social stigma around the perceived “weakness” of mental illness prevented us from seeking the help we needed to cope with the detrimental effects of stress on our mental health.

Yes, we were flightless birds, but it was only because we were weighed down by the belief that our vulnerability was not worth the conversation.

But that does not mean that there is no hope for the future. Mental health awareness is becoming more popular in the main-steam, and the fight against the destigmatization of mental illness is just beginning. Together, we can set the generation of flightless birds free to fly above their limits, exceed their boundaries, and overcome the challenges of student life with triumphant vigor.

So, what are you waiting for? Let's start the conversation.

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