



NEW PLYMOUTH BOYS' HIGH SCHOOL
TE KURA TAMATĀNE O NGĀMOTU

Headmaster's Assembly Speech : Caring

July 2017

I have been thinking about this topic for some time boys, and, to be really honest with you, I haven't been sure how to tackle it - I am still not. I am not at all funny like Mike King, I am certainly not famous, and I am probably not considered a very emotional person (to those who don't know me), so it's a tough topic for me.

But there is something concerning me. It concerns all teachers and all parents. There is something concerning all New Zealanders at present.....a concern about a word that every day appears in the news: print, online, and video media.....

Suicide

Some say that we shouldn't talk about it; talking about it gives it attention - gives it focus. Well, I say it already has focus; it already has profile. It has profile for all the wrong reasons.

Every boy here will undoubtedly know someone who is struggling, or has struggled so much, they just don't know what to do.

Not many things scare me boys. I don't lie awake at night worrying about that many things. I sleep very well, other than on this one topic. This one word deeply concerns me. It makes me feel sad, helpless, and guilty that we should have done more. What did we do wrong to not help that young person get back on track? That word. That terrible word. That word that shouldn't even exist as a concept - shouldn't be even required in our vocabulary.

Suicide

This word upsets me because I see potential in every life. I see possibilities. I see opportunity and I see hope and aspiration. No situation, no circumstance can ever, in my opinion, ever be stronger than the ability for anyone to recover from adversity, pain, or despair. There is always hope and always something to live for.

The health and well-being of youth in this country is very concerning. I am not sure we are actually addressing it appropriately, as a country or as communities. I say this because every day I hear of a young person who is struggling in some way. Struggling so much they feel helpless. They feel alone.

It seems unbelievable to me that New Zealand is leading the world in negative statistics around the health and wellbeing of young people. We live in paradise. We enjoy some of the best living conditions in the world, the healthiest living conditions, and yet, for some of us, we are so troubled.

Struggling is normal. Having a bad day is normal. Being unhappy sometimes is normal. Not feeling like you can face it is something we all need to own and do something about.

I am so encouraged by the willingness of young men and women to talk more openly about their feelings and I want to remind each and every one of you that there are people you can talk to who are safe, confidential, and ready to support you. Please ask. Please talk about the things that are concerning you. Our guidance team is just one of the many safe places you can go to.

If your best friend is struggling, you don't have to fix it on your own. We are all in this together. Everyone working together, focussing on small changes and improvements, means a happier, safer school.

Rather than talk about the negatives further, I am going to talk about the positives and another word we rarely mention. We are quick to mention suicide or depression in conversations, but there is a word less heard and more frightening in our vocabulary, especially in a traditional boys school context

Love

Yes, it's thrown around, but it's a word we joke or snigger about sometimes. Often used incorrectly, the word 'love' is misunderstood and not used correctly nearly enough. It's not used with sincerity and, more importantly, not backed up with action that demonstrates love.

I was struggling with a way to explain the concept of love, and although I am not personally religious, a religious saying sums up best what I am trying to say:

"Love thy neighbour". It's a simple, yet effective statement. It sums up love in a way that we should use it, but don't.

Love the people around you. Show love, give love. We don't love enough. Nor is it talked about enough.

The kiwi way, the kiwi *male* way especially, is conditioned to not say *"I love you"*. Blokes need to 'harden up', to 'toughen up'. You don't want to show what is perceived as weakness or, to use highly offensive phrases, like being a 'sissy' or '*being a girl*' about it. If you have a good mate you make fun of him, you have banter. It's what we do; most of us are guilty of that - me included.

You may feel uncomfortable about this speech and the common reaction when you are uncomfortable is to joke about it, tease, elbow your mate - *"The headmaster just said 'love'... weirdo!"* Or you might run around in the playground saying *"I love you"* with no sincerity. You are simply doing this because society has trained you to be uncomfortable around the word 'love'. Society has conditioned you to reject it. It's not your fault. But don't be scared of love. Be brave, and shake the stigma and immaturity we have as a country. Be more adult than the adults who also struggle with this more than you may realise.

Love is a word you need to understand. You need to get comfortable with it. If we have any chance of reversing the trend of young people feeling helpless, we have a greater chance of overcoming it by caring for each other.

Love your parents. Love your friends. Love thy neighbour. Equally importantly, accept the love from others. Don't reject it or push it away. Soak it in like the warming rays of sun on your back on a summer's day.

Now I am not expecting you to run around the playground saying *"I love you"* to your mates. I expect your teachers won't say *"Thanks for your homework and by the way, I love you"*. But love is the only word I can find, the only word I can use, to get through to you how much we actually care for you.

Don't mistake love for getting your own way, or for everything being fair and kind. Life is hard sometimes. People who love you may make decisions you don't like.

Those decisions could be not allowing you to go somewhere, or not allowing you to act in a certain way. If you love someone, you want to keep them safe and you want to teach them to be a good person. If you love someone, you might need to give them some feedback they don't want to hear, but need to hear.

We are tough at this school because we care about you. How do I know you are cared for? You only need to see the care and compassion for our students when something goes horribly wrong: a parent very sick, a traumatic injury.

Love is not soft. Love is not easy. It's hard, as it requires both strength and vulnerability at the same time, and doing the right thing, not the easy thing, for those you love and those that love you.

Everyone here is cared for. Everyone has people who love them. Your teachers care for you. This school loves you, as I know many of you love this school and, if you don't at the moment, it is likely that you will look back and realise that, actually, you did - you just didn't realise it at the time.

Boys, if you are struggling, it's OK. I want each and every one of you to know that you have friends, family, and a school community that deeply cares for you, even if we don't show it - even if we don't openly express it. We simply don't do this enough, and as adults we need to step up. We need to do better if we are to expect you follow our lead. Also, remember time is a tremendous healer - how you feel today, I can assure you, will be different to how you feel next month and next year.

Accept love, and, if you are in the position to give love, to love thy neighbour, then do it. Too many of us only show love when it is too late - at a funeral, or after a life-changing event.

Life is precious boys.

Please know that each and every one of you are special. Please support each other and those around you.

How can you do this?

1. Give your family a hug when you get home - just because!
2. Say '*thanks*' to those you care about. Show your appreciation - just because!
3. If you're worried about a mate or a family member, open the door - ask are they doing OK - just because!

You are precious.

You are worth it.

You can work through any of life's challenges.

You are cared for.

Paul Verić
Headmaster