

One year later ...

One year ago, *The ReMarker* told the story of three students' struggles with mental health. With several changes happening within the Counseling Department over the past year, we caught up with one old face and one new one on how they've kept moving forward.

Back on track

Finding techniques to combat his anxiety and depression over the last year, Jake* has found his own ways to make his turnaround a reality.

Growing up, Jake* never thought he had mental health problems. He never thought he would eventually be diagnosed with anxiety, moderate depression and OCD.

Even freshman year after two instances of self-harming and periods of feeling completely and totally overwhelmed, Jake moved on, never thinking much of his troubles.

It happened again the summer after sophomore year. But still no acknowledgement of a deeper issue.

And then junior year happened. Usually a perfectionist, Jake wasn't able to handle the extreme workload and the constant demands of school, athletics and extracurriculars. Unable to meet his own high expectations for himself, he began to regress. Social anxiety and self-loathing began to mount. It was getting harder and harder to hide the scars, the stress, the emotion ... until it all came to a head.

Jake's friend reported him to the Counseling Office.

At first, he was scared — scared of what his parents would think, what the counselors would think, but after he shared his struggles, he felt a massive weight lift off his chest. He started talking with the counselors more and more about balance and time management, attending weekly therapy sessions and eventually sharing his story with close friends and teachers.

As his support system grew, so did his resolve to grow as a human being, to consistently work on his mental well-being and help others going through the same thing.

In March of his junior year, one year ago, Jake shared his story with *The ReMarker*. Since then, he's made a lot of progress. He's not perfect, he'll tell you, but he's more mature, more conscious of his feelings and emotions.

One year later, Jake is still fighting.

One of the most significant contributors to Jake's turnaround has been his increased focus on building deep, meaningful relationships.

"I started trying to be more social, meet new people and make a lot of friends," Jake said. "I have met a lot of people at St. Mark's and Hockaday, and I think that's a great way for me to have balance. It's an outlet for leisure and a relief on weekends when I get to spend time with friends."

Jake has picked up the ability to compartmentalize different aspects of his life over the past year, separating his feelings from his responsibilities and obligations.

"It was very difficult, but I eventually learned that I have to separate my emotions from the things that I have to do," Jake said. "Regardless of how I feel on a given day, there are certain things that I have to do. And, yes, if things get out of control, I can take a break. But I have to know the boundary between taking a break just for leisure, for procrastination, versus taking a break for balance."

Jake has also made a commitment to

exercise six days a week since the start of this year. He sees his physical health as being an integral part of his self-confidence and just as important as mental health.

"While I'm exercising, it's difficult, and sometimes I just hate it," Jake said. "But once I'm done, I feel so much better. I feel like I pushed myself, and I feel more confident about my abilities and pushing myself mentally."

These workout sessions have been greatly helped by the new schedule. Because of the 8:35 a.m. start time, Jake has been able to exercise each morning before school. And that's not the only way the new schedule has helped Jake out.

"Even though sometimes it can be confusing, I feel like I adjusted to the rotating schedule within two weeks of school," Jake said. "It's a nice change of pace instead of having the same thing every single day. And the long free periods are so beneficial."

While the new schedule has been a welcome change, the outbreak of a global pandemic most certainly has not been. Jake is thankful for the close friends he is still able to talk to, but wishes it wasn't so hard to socialize with the rest of his classmates.

"I feel like I haven't been able to connect with the rest of my grade the way I anticipated I would," Jake said. "Unfortunately, COVID has physically and socially distanced everyone from each other."

Jake believes that COVID-19 has certainly contributed to mental health problems among the student body but recognizes that mental health was an issue long before the pandemic, one that may have flown under the radar.

"At an environment like St. Mark's, there are so many kids — I know so many kids — who have mental health issues, and anxiety's one of the most common ones," Jake said. "That's just evident in the way that the school is built. We push ourselves, and finding balance is difficult."

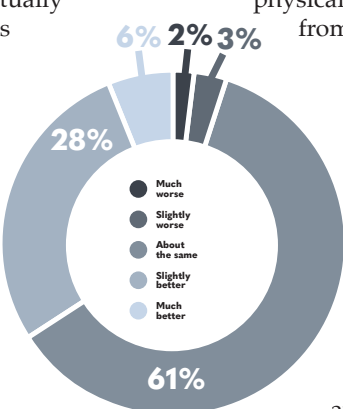
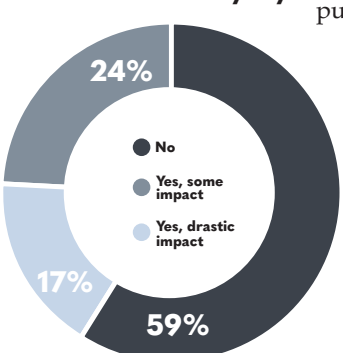
For anyone dealing with their own mental health struggles, Jake suggests getting help, regardless of how big or small one thinks their mental health problems are.

"For any student who's seeking some sort of help, they just need to forgive themselves and try not to downplay whatever they're going through," Jake said. "Don't say, 'I don't need to see Dr. Bonsu,' or 'I can just get through this on my own.' Go seek help if you have the slightest inclination to get it."

Overall though, Jake believes the most important thing is having a support network, and he's thankful for the people in his own life he has been able to lean on when he was going through tough times.

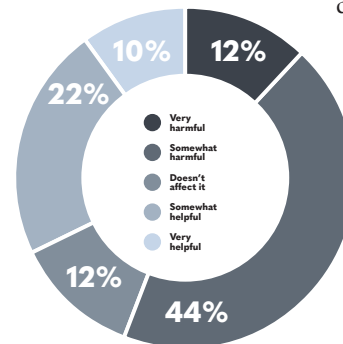
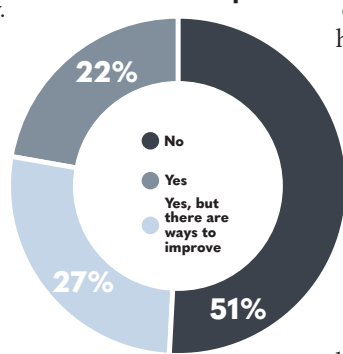
"The surprising thing that I noticed was just how caring and supportive all of the people around me ended up being," Jake said. "I realized how grateful I am for the people that I have because I know that not everyone has such a strong and supportive social network. But I was lucky to have a bunch of people who cared about me, especially my family, but my friends and teachers as well."

Has the new schedule positively affected your mental health in anyway?



In your opinion, has St. Mark's improved its available mental health resources for students in the past year?

Do you think we talk enough about mental health on campus?



Do you believe that the present environment here is helpful or harmful to students' mental well-being?

Resetting the norm

At first, Arthur* saw his mental health issues as abnormal. But as he's adjusted, he's found out how normal — and manageable — they actually are.

He still wasn't sold on the idea of therapy. His first session seemed stuffy, a bit formal — he felt like he was being examined for the flu or screened for cavities.

"Lots of people go on to do great things," the psychologist said. "Edgar Allan Poe, Vincent Van Gogh, Ernest Hemingway..."

Arthur's stomach sunk. Everything in the room felt curated. A wide window overlooked a highway. He sat on a couch several feet away from the therapist, and the room felt infinite and depersonalized.

He struggled to speak. Talking with other kids was already an unclimbable mountain — how could he expect to open up to a stranger? It didn't feel normal.

Arthur's mental health issues

began early on, as a child and soon-to-be teenager who found himself terrified by the idea of large social events. Celebrate Seven, eighth grade mixers, freshmen dances — each contributed to an idea of terror that he'd somehow mess something up, a familiar kind of social anxiety felt by millions of teenagers.

"I'm out there, and I'm very worried about what impressions I'm making, what I'm saying, what I'm doing," Arthur said. "I'm acutely aware of that. And the ironic part is that people can tell you feel that way, which makes the problem even worse."

After trying a series of therapists, though, he found one he could speak with candidly and comfortably.

"The second person I talked to felt a lot more casual, more like a friend," Arthur said. "That does mirror the shift in mindset from seeing it as a medical thing that should not be happening to a normal thing that I can deal with."

But as he progressed in his therapy sessions and understanding the way he made decisions, he began to realize that everyone — even if they don't have mental health struggles of their own — acts in psychologically definable patterns.

"There are people who are not easily explainable," Arthur said, "but a lot of the time, their actions are. So once you come to that realization, it can be really hard to dislike someone that you realize you could really empathize with."

See also: "One year later" and "The daily battle of an average Marksman," page 16.

Editor's note: Jake and Arthur are pseudonyms for unnamed Marksmen who prefer to remain anonymous. Jake retains his pseudonym from the previous coverage in March 2020.

In their own words

Dr. Gabby Reed, director of Counseling, and Dr. Mary Bonsu, Upper School counselor, on their daily goals in helping students.

Dr. Gabby Reed
Director of
Counseling



"Good counseling in a school is critical, because most of the time, if someone's not doing well mentally, they're also not doing well academically, and struggling academically is linked directly to struggling mentally and emotionally. For teenagers, there's no way to separate school from mental health."

Dr. Mary
Bonsu
Upper
School
Counselor



"If they come through my door, it's my job to try to help them feel comfortable, make them feel heard, make some kind of a connection — the practitioner term is 'building rapport.' You have to make sure in that 10 to 15 minutes he'll find value in sitting in that chair."

Mental health challenges heightened by pandemic

Loss of time, experiences and life. They have become themes of the past year — a year marred by COVID-19. And it's taken a toll on the mental health of teens and adults alike.

Marksmen of all ages have spent the year isolated in some way; it's difficult to come to terms with the fact that seniors never had their last homecoming, their last SPC tournament, their last in-person chapel.

The pandemic complicated an already complex developmental period for adolescents. Now, they can view mental health from a new angle that psychiatrist Dr. Fred Gioia encounters with all his patients.

"In general, the pandemic has been more of a catalyst for poking at things that have already been a struggle for people," Gioia said.

The emergence of underlying issues comes from the lack of social opportunity, among other pandemic-related lifestyle changes.

"From what I've found in seeing people who were on different spectrums, a lot of people's struggles have had to do with either feeling isolated and really struggling with the loss of social output, loss of activities or loss of ways of dealing with existing struggles that they've already had," Gioia said.

Everyone has felt the impact of the pandemic on their mental health, some more than others. To Gioia, even a small change in one's mental well-being should be given attention during these delicate times, especially for adolescents.

"The threshold for speaking to someone, a parent or a professional, should be pretty low," Gioia said. "There's so much more availability for telepsychiatry and teletherapy now. You can use your phone and have a video chat with someone. It's not as if you have to go to someone's office, especially now with the risks of COVID. Hopefully people are finding that it's a little bit easier to reach out."

Of course, not everyone will be willing to speak about their mental health to someone outside of their close circle. But, if that close circle becomes distanced, through a lack of face-to-face time or isolation, seeking a professional's advice may be the best option.

"Social contacts, especially when teenagers are so habituated to being around certain people all the time, and that suddenly drops off — that's a major disruption," Gioia said. "Developmentally, it's so important for teenagers and adolescents to be with their peers, not just stuck at home with their families."

Social contact has sharply decreased to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, but, in doing so, teenagers have lost a large portion of their high school experience.

"There's nothing that's going to replace the high school prom," Gioia said, "and there has to be a kind of mourning of not having these things. Then, we must work through that mourning. That process is a little bit different for everybody."

It's difficult to deal with an unfulfilling and frustrating year, but Gioia wants to turn lemons into lemonade.

"These losses that we experience can be really profound avenues for growth, internally and interpersonally," Gioia said. "The losses we experience can make us look into our lives in a more holistic manner."

When people cut out the accessory aspects of their lives, they can begin to focus on what's truly important to them. But it's certainly not easy.

"Just like the folks who came out of the Great Depression in this country, they learned some very powerful lessons," Gioia said. "Sometimes that caused certain behaviors that were maladaptive in the future, but sometimes it can provide a sense of great perseverance."

76%

of surveyed students said that COVID-19 impacted their mental health.

33%

of adults nationally showing symptoms of anxiety as of February 2021.

42%

of adults nationally showing symptoms of depression as of February 2021.

Source: CDC - National Center for Health, *ReMarker* poll

14, 15

Perspectives

The ReMarker • March 11, 2021

FALLING APART
Students facing mental health struggles suffer in all parts of their life.

STORY Jamie Mahowald, Henry McElhaney, Robert Pou PHOTO Jack Davis