MIT students turn their brainpower toward suicide prevention

February 15 2016, by Collin Binkley

In this Monday, Feb. 1, 2016 photo, Massachusetts Institute of Technology student Andy Trattner, of Portland, Ore., displays a wrist band that features the acronym TMAYD for "Tell Me About Your Day," a campaign to encourage students to talk to one another in an effort to defuse to the stress of campus life before it leads to a crisis. There were several campus suicides last year. MIT officials recently set aside thousands of dollars for grants to help support campus projects dealing with mental health. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

After seven suicides in two years, students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology are looking for their own solutions to prevent more deaths.

The school unveiled a sweeping plan to bolster mental health last fall, adding staff psychologists and expanding counseling hours, among other measures. But students have added their own ingenuity in recent months, starting a wave of grassroots projects intended to defuse the stress of campus life before it leads to a crisis.

One group of students launched a texting hotline called Lean On Me this month, letting students chat anonymously with trained student volunteers about anything that's troubling them. Other students plan to install artificial light boxes on campus, meant to treat depression that can take hold during dreary months.

By her count, sophomore Izzy Lloyd has handed out more than 4,000 specially made wristbands that say TMAYD. It's short for "tell me about your day," a message that aims to get students talking with one another. Lloyd started the project last year after two of her freshman classmates took their own lives in the same week.

"It's suicide prevention by community building," said Lloyd, 19. "We're showing people who may feel like they have nothing left that they have a world of people who do care about them."

In this Monday, Feb. 1, 2016 photo, from the left, Andy Trattner, of Portland, Ore., Linda Jing, of San Gabriel, Calif., and Nikhil Buduma, of San Francisco, Calif., use their computers to work on an anonymous texting site they created called "Lean On Me," on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology campus, in Cambridge, Mass. The texting site is among a wave of new student projects aimed to defuse to the stress of campus life before it leads to a crisis. There were several campus suicides last year. MIT officials recently set aside thousands of dollars for grants to help support campus projects dealing with mental health. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

Other projects take a lighter tone, like the new MIT Puppy Lab that will bring therapy dogs to campus this semester.

Campus officials recently awarded almost $50,000 in grants to support campus projects meant to improve mental health. They say the new work is a reflection of MIT's culture, marked by a drive to solve problems. But students said they're also meeting a demand for services that were

missing on the campus of 11,000 students.

"If we really solved the problem, we wouldn't be running into this same cycle of mental illness that we've been seeing," said Nikhil Buduma, who graduated last year and founded Lean On Me with two current students. The hotline, he added, lets students get help anonymously and avoid stigmas tied to mental illness.

Across the country, experts say, college students are playing a bigger role in suicide prevention. And more often, schools welcome that kind of help.

In this Monday, Feb. 1, 2016 photo, Massachusetts Institute of Technology students, clockwise from the left, Linda Jing, of San Gabriel, Calif., Nikhil Buduma, of San Francisco, Calif., and Andy Trattner, of Portland, Ore., use their computers to work on an anonymous texting site they created called "Lean On Me," on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology campus, in Cambridge, Mass. The texting site is among a wave of new student projects aimed to defuse to the stress of campus life before it leads to a crisis. There were several campus suicides last year. MIT officials recently set aside thousands of dollars for grants to help support campus projects dealing with mental health. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

"We have found time and again that students listen to students before they listen to anyone else," said Nance Roy, clinical director at the Jed Foundation, a nonprofit group based in New York that works to prevent suicide among college students. "These issues can no longer just fall to the counseling center."

Roy said there's no evidence that elite schools have disproportionately high suicide rates. But a national study suggests that MIT's rate was above average last year.

The average suicide rate among college students was seven for every 100,000 students between 2004 and 2009, according to research from the University of Rochester. Three MIT students took their lives last year, translating to almost 27 for every 100,000. There have been at least seven student suicides since 2014, according to reports from the school's student newspaper.

Some students and alumni say that MIT's culture pushes students to extremes, sometimes at the expense of a social life or emotional health.

In this Monday, Feb. 1, 2016 photo Massachusetts Institute of Technology students, from the left, Linda Jing, of San Gabriel, Calif., Nikhil Buduma, of San Francisco, Calif., and Andy Trattner, of Portland, Ore., talk about the development of the anonymous texting site they created called "Lean On Me," on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology campus, in Cambridge, Mass. The texting site is among a wave of new student projects aimed to defuse to the stress of campus life before it leads to a crisis. There were several campus suicides last year. MIT officials recently set aside thousands of dollars for grants to help support campus projects dealing with mental health. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

"It's heroic and glorified to push oneself to the point of our boundaries, of our physical or bodily needs," said Sahar Hakim-Hashemi, a 2013 graduate who's filming a documentary called "Sleep is for the Strong," exploring mental health at MIT and ways to improve it. "It's like it shows how hardcore and strong someone is."

And while students come with big ambitions, MIT officials said, they don't always have the skills to cope with the pressure.

"We recognize that a lot of kids coming in today are not as well-prepared for these challenges," said Rosalind Picard, a professor of media arts and sciences who leads the school's campaign to support [mental-health](#) projects.

Picard says the new work on campus is a turning point. Beyond treating [mental illness](#), she said, there's a new focus on preventing problems.

Meanwhile, some of the new student projects have begun drawing interest elsewhere. Six other schools have bought Lloyd's TMAYD wristbands for their students, and dozens more have said they're interested. The team behind Lean On Me has received inquiries about the texting hotline from outside MIT, and they hope to bring it to other schools.

"It's not a product built only for MIT students," Buduma said. "Our goal is really just to help people feel like they belong to a community."