The numbers grab headlines - 1 in 4 individuals will suffer from depression at some point in their lifetime, and 1 in 10 will consider suicide. But it is the stories that really move us to action. Stories are about speaking out within communities to create connection. In the words of Harvey Milk, “hope is never silent,” and it is the stories of Suicide Prevention Week that remain in our hearts and give us the hope that we are creating change and a more compassionate community. Our theme, CONNECTION IS PREVENTION, was mirrored at each event, and guides the ongoing work of the ever-active Suicide Prevention Committee (suicideprevention.uconn.edu).

Two-hundred and fifteen strong completed our First Annual Run with Your Pack 5k, an event designed to highlight the positive impact of both exercise and community on our mental health, and to raise funds to support Active Minds, a national organization with a UConn chapter, designed to fight the stigma of mental health issues on college campuses.

A community effort it was! Early Saturday September 20th, the second day of Family Weekend, Mike D’Alfonso from Recreation Sports and his amazing crew was ready to roll with large tupperware bins, from which emerge all the makings of a road race. A whole battalion of ROTC students and volunteers donned fluorescent vests to direct traffic. Campus Police were at the ready and the runners arrived for a beautiful fall run. A proud mother of two vibrant UConn daughters, an entire family, Mom, Dad, Brother, and Grandma all showed up to run and cheer on their UConn student. Both Jonathans (the four-legged and two-legged) were there to support the cause. The Filipino Student Organization crossed the finish line as one, hand in hand, giving us a snapshot of the power of community, supporting one another in a difficult challenge. Suicide Prevention Committee member, Paula Wilmont, from the Honors Program observed, “If you really listened, people would share with you why they were running. This is an issue that touched almost everyone who ran.”

About 36 hours later I was loading up our rental van with yoga mats and doubting why I ever planned this next event. “Seriously,” I thought, “What college student is going to get up at 6 a.m. on a Monday morning to do yoga outside?” Quite frankly, I spend a lot of time with students who aren’t coping that well, and had begun to despair about the capacity of the entire generation to proactively engage in self-care. My ever-helpful and optimistic husband suggested we should take all the mats, to which I quickly replied, “I will bet you seeing the next super hero movie that no one will show.” And then came the clearing Sunday night and a perfect Monday morning. Four shuttle vans later, over 50 students welcomed the picture perfect sunrise on Horsebarn Hill for a moving, once-in-a-lifetime community yoga experience. Rolf Gates, one of my favorite yoga instructors and authors writes, “We all know more than we think we do, and we are stronger than we believe ourselves to be. We come to our mats and to our lives, to learn by going where we have to go.” That morning was one of the most memorable I have spent in my 25-year career in higher education. Together this gathering of UConn students gave me a much-needed reminder that their story is also one of resilience, and that they will go where they have to go to be well.

For an entire week, the students of Active Minds UConn staffed the Field of Memories, a display of over 1100 flags representing the number of students lost to suicide each year on college campuses in the U.S. The flags pay moving tribute to the hundreds of ways students are personally touched by the issue of suicide and mental health. Active Minds members tell me that they are surprised by the number of students who have lost immediate family members to suicide, and thank volunteers for one simple thing - not being silent about the issue.

Our annual Student Voices Panel, hosted by the African American Cultural Center, was standing room only and continued the theme of breaking silence. Students who either had struggled with depression themselves, or had close connections to suicide bravely told their stories of survival, highlighting the notion that the more we talk, the better chance we have to identify individuals in distress and intervene. Along that note, over 150 undergraduate and graduate students became trained in QPR during Suicide Prevention Week (and over 600 UConn folks are trained annually). QPR is a suicide prevention...
Finally, our week concluded with keynote speaker Kevin Hines, author of Cracked Not Broken. A picture can tell a thousand words. The Student Union Theater was filled to capacity and sadly we had to turn 200 students away. Kevin talked about his struggle with bipolar disorder and attempt to end his life at age 19 by jumping off of the Golden Gate Bridge. As a community we were moved by his message that by simply connecting, we can save a life. Kevin shared that had anyone asked him, “Are you O.K.?” “Is something wrong” or “Can I help” on that fateful day, he would have gotten help, and would not have jumped. A student shared on Twitter, “Seeing Kevin Hines tonight @ UConn was the best thing I’ve ever attended.”

And so we concluded our week with what I believe was a “right-sized” message of resilience for this generation. In our age of Facebook, where everyone appears to be having it better and easier than us, Suicide Prevention week and Kevin Hines remind us that life is both difficult and to be celebrated! “We can overcome anything and everything life throws our way. Not necessarily to live a life free of pain, but we are here!” As it turns out, I don’t need to go to the next super-hero movie, Suicide Prevention Week has reminded me once again of the special powers of the human spirit!

Suicide Prevention week is held annually in September. Consider being involved in our events: suicideprevention.uconn.edu. For more information on campus mental health resources please go to counseling.uconn.edu.