A Look into the Stigma Surrounding Counseling at Belmont Hill  
*Joshua Lee*

About a year ago, I sent a one-sentence email to Ms. June Schmunk, Belmont Hill’s school counselor, that proceeded to shape my entire high school experience and, without sounding overly dramatic, my entire life. At the time, I thought I was struggling with procrastination and AP US History (sound familiar?); Ms. Schmunk told me I was struggling with slight cases of depression and anxiety.

I proceeded to meet with Ms. Schmunk regularly over the next few months and built a relationship with her that has been invaluable as I have traversed the ups and downs of the past two years. But this is not my sob story, nor is this a unique story; rather, this is a widely untold story that dozens of Belmont Hill students can relate to.

While counseling is not something that students bring up in casual conversation, it is still a prevalent part of Belmont Hill. Last year, a total of 47 students visited with Ms. Schmunk, a number that was down from the 55 students that had gone the year before. Ms. Schmunk said that, over the course of an average academic year, she will see about one-third of the Belmont Hill sixth form. Dr. Thompson, the supervising psychologist for Belmont Hill, added, “Because we have created a place where boys can come talk, it means that by graduation we’ve seen probably 40% of a class on average.”

So if going to counseling is more common at Belmont Hill than, say, being in a theater production, why is it treated like a secret, underground aspect of our supposedly open community? Dr. Thompson said, “Boys fight mental health services because they think it’s going to expose them and make them look weak and less than masculine. But it often leads to boys not knowing what to do with their psychological pain.”

Yet, while all-boys schools, to some extent, carry with them a macho mentality in their student bodies, the “tough-it-out” “hard work can cure all your problems” culture of Belmont Hill seems to exacerbate the unwillingness to be open about needing help. Ms. Schmunk agreed. “I definitely think that it’s harder for a kid to send that first email to me or stop by my room for the first time at Belmont Hill than it is even at another all-boys school,” she said. “There has been, and still is, a general belief that you work out your issues on the field and then you’re all right.”

While there is definitely value in the Belmont Hill “tough-it-out” mentality, when the desire to seem tough starts to impede students’ abilities to seek help when necessary, something needs to be done. The first step is to clear up misconceptions about what going to counseling means at Belmont Hill and who should go.

When I was in the Middle School, I would sit in Dr. Thompson’s chapel talks and think: *I would never go to counseling. I’m a normal kid and counseling is only for crazy people, right?* My misconceptions were obviously naive, yet, to some extent, I think that even some older Belmont Hill students fail to recognize how “normal” it can be to stop in and chat with Ms. Schmunk during a free period. While she definitely deals with some truly heavy issues throughout the year, such as depression, family issues, or loss, Ms. Schmunk will also see a boy after his girlfriend just broke up with him or he lost his last football game.
In order to create the healthiest community possible, Belmont Hill needs to keep working on trying to eliminate some of the stigmas that go along with counseling. Dr. Melvoin, the headmaster of Belmont Hill, said,

“I think we have to normalize it [going to counseling]. Mental health issues are health issues... I find it a sign of strength if someone is able to ask for help.”

But ultimately, no matter how many chapel talks are given or how many Panel articles are written, it will never be easy taking that first step. Yet, after taking the initiative, everyone agrees that it was the right thing to do. A 2012 Belmont Hill graduate said,

“Initiating my meeting with Ms. Schmunk was the hardest part... I remember walking up to her door and being really nervous, not sure what to expect. But, in the end, Ms. Schmunk and the counseling program turned my life around. I don’t know a kid that doesn’t like her or thought the experience was a waste of time.”

Sharif Campbell, a current Belmont Hill fifth former who is part of the Family Group, agreed that, while it was hard meeting at first, talking to a counselor has been invaluable.

“I’ve grown a lot since joining the group because I have a chance to dig deep into questions that I usually run away from,” he said. “Dr. Thompson and Ms. Schmunk are great people and they help and listen to you. Don’t be afraid to go and seek help; you always feel a lot better when you leave.”