



Upstream Prevention

Once there was a woman named Emma who lived in a village near a river. Every day, Emma walked along the river into the woods. There was a waterfall about a mile upstream that she enjoyed visiting. It was an eighty-foot drop from where the river left its banks until it crashed thunderously on the rocks below.

One day on her walk, Emma heard the sound of panicked shouting coming from the river. She hurried to the shoreline above the falls and saw a teenage boy thrashing around in the water. He was about to go over the falls. Without hesitation, she dove in, swam to the boy, and pulled him back to shore - saving his life. The next day on her walk, Emma heard more shouting from the water and ended up saving a teenage girl. It happened again on the next two days. On the fifth day, there were two.

She knew something was wrong and she needed help. So, she talked to her neighbors and organized a life-saving group that started taking turns rescuing kids. The number of kids in the water continued to grow. The townsfolk applied for permits from the planning department to build a dock that protruded into the water so they could get closer faster. After a long wait, while the city council argued, and considered opinion from several consultants and committees, they approved the permits. The group then built a boom that could swing out into the water and invested in floatation devices they could throw to struggling kids. The village's response consumed much of their time and resources but they felt it was worth it.

Unfortunately, though the villagers put forth a valiant effort, the number of kids found struggling in the water did not decrease. There were too many to rescue, and no matter how hard they tried, some kids went over the falls. There was no way to survive such a fall. It broke their hearts but they did not know how else to respond to the crisis.

One day, in the midst of the busyness and chaos, Emma decided to leave and walk further upstream. One of her fellow lifesavers saw her walking away and shouted after her in alarm, "Hey, where are you going? We need all hands on deck!" Emma turned and said, "I'm going upstream to see why there are so many kids in the water." Maybe we can keep them from falling in. If not, we should teach them how to get out themselves."

A few miles upstream she found a place where kids gathered and did what kids do. There were no caring adults anywhere. She started introducing herself. Initially the kids were hesitant to trust her but eventually, they realized they enjoyed talking to her. And she enjoyed talking to them. She discovered that no one was teaching them to swim or warning them about the dangers of the river and waterfall. She also noticed that most of the kids were so distracted by their smartphones that they didn't notice when they were near the river's edge. She watched several fall in during the short time she was there. No one else seemed to notice.

Emma observed and interacted for a while and realized that several kids seemed to be in the centers of their different groups of friends. She invited them to talk with her and told them the story of the villager's life-saving efforts. While she had their attention, they watched two more of their friends fall in. After their conversation, the kids she had talked to decided to do something. They went back to their groups and told their friends what they had heard. The groups began talking about it and paying more attention to the river's edge. They also built a protective railing, posted signs and asked Emma to teach them how to swim. She went back to the rescue operation and recruited some of the villagers to help. Soon, the number of kids falling in the water was drastically reduced.



The National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine

Preventing Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders Among Young People: Progress and Possibilities (2009)

"We propose a new emphasis on **true prevention**, which for the purposes of this report we define as occurring prior to the onset of disorder, as well as mental health **promotion...** an important and largely ignored approach toward building healthy development in all young people."

"This report documents that an increasing number of mental, emotional, and behavioral problems in young people are in fact **preventable.**"

"Several decades of research have shown that the promise and

potential lifetime benefits of preventing mental, emotional, and behavioral (MEB) disorders are greatest by **focusing on young people.**