

How have your mental health experiences helped you to create a supportive and open mental health environment with your peers, within and outside of your high school?

Middle school was a turbulent chapter in my life, marked by the suffocating isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ignition of family conflicts that erupted in flames like a wildfire. The once-stable foundation of home life crumbled under the weight of constant proximity, disagreements, and misunderstandings. At the same time, I was grappling with my own internal battles, overwhelmed by anger and frustration that I couldn't fully articulate or control. These emotions eventually spiraled to a point where I attempted to take my own life, leading me to spend time in a mental hospital. While this chapter was undeniably painful, it became the turning point that reshaped not only my perspective on life but also my ability to foster a supportive and open mental health environment for others.

In the mental hospital, I encountered people from all walks of life, each carrying their own heavy baggage. Some were battling depression, others addiction, and many were facing struggles they couldn't name. It was here that I began to understand the sheer diversity of human pain. Hearing their stories, I realized that while everyone's experiences were unique, we were united by a shared need for understanding, patience, and empathy. This realization shifted my perspective: I was no longer alone in my struggle, and the act of listening to others became a lifeline for us all.

Through therapy and group discussions, I learned the tools to manage my anger and navigate the volatile dynamics at home. One crucial lesson was the importance of communication—not just speaking but actively listening without judgment. I began to apply this at home, addressing conflicts with a calmer, more understanding approach. Though the process was slow and imperfect, it allowed me to build bridges where there were once walls. This journey of self-discovery and conflict resolution gave me a newfound empathy for others, as I began to understand the layers of emotions and experiences that can shape a person's actions and reactions.

As I transitioned to high school, I carried these lessons with me, determined to create a more supportive environment for my peers. When I founded the Young Women of Excellence club I made it my duty to find ways to normalize discussions about mental health. In my roles, I emphasized the value of vulnerability, sharing my own story when appropriate to encourage others to open up. I quickly realized that simply being honest about my struggles could create a ripple effect—my peers felt less alone when they saw someone else who had faced similar challenges and come out stronger.

One particularly rewarding experience was organizing a mental health awareness campaign at school. We hosted workshops on stress management, created a peer-support system, and invited local mental health professionals to speak to students. I spearheaded the creation of anonymous “Letters of Hope,” where students could write messages of encouragement to their peers. Reading the heartfelt notes, I saw how much people longed for connection and support, even if they were hesitant to ask for it outright. The campaign reminded me of the lessons I learned in the hospital: everyone is carrying something invisible, and a small act of kindness can make a world of difference.

Outside of school, I’ve carried these principles into my relationships and community. Whether it’s comforting a friend, volunteering with organizations focused on mental health, or simply offering a listening ear to someone who needs it, I’ve become a person others can turn to in moments of vulnerability. I’ve also learned the importance of setting boundaries and taking care of my own mental health, ensuring that I can continue to be a source of support without losing myself in the process.

My journey has taught me that empathy is a powerful tool for connection. You never truly know what someone else is going through until you take the time to listen and understand. What started as one of the darkest periods of my life became a catalyst for growth, allowing me to develop resilience, compassion, and a deep commitment to supporting others. By fostering an open and supportive environment, I hope to make a lasting impact, helping my peers feel seen, heard, and valued in a world that often overlooks the quiet struggles we all endure.