

**Testimony before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
Subcommittee on Children and Families
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Statement of Brooklyn Williams

Thank you to all who listen to my story. Looking at me you might not suspect I am dealing with a ton of internal struggles. I am speaking in public so you would not suspect that I have severe social anxiety. I cover my eye bags so no one can tell I struggle with insomnia. I ate my entire breakfast this morning but I still have bulimia. And I got out of bed and did my hair, but I do not “look depressed”. Just because I do not fit the description of someone with mental health problems does not mean that I am fine and I feel we as a society overlook people with these health issues because not all of us fit into the concrete mold in the textbooks of mental health symptoms. There is a fluidity in the way each of us experience mental health, and I feel schools and communities only intervene when it becomes intensely severe or in unfortunate cases, too late.

In my experience, my mental health highs and lows happen in waves. Always sporadic and most recently due to me being a highschool senior in my last year of childhood. As a child I do not remember feeling like there was any disordered thinking in my life, yet looking back on it, I feel that mental health was never a topic of conversation at school or home until I was a teen. When I was 13, my mother passed away from stage 4 metastatic breast cancer after a ten year long battle with the disease. Losing her devastated my family and I felt like a portion of myself died with her. As much as I love my dad and my siblings, my mother was my lifeline and best friend and although we tried to prepare as much as possible for her passing it was still the worst feeling I have ever experienced. The following year was a blur of numbness and therapy sessions, but the pandemic caused everything to shut down and I felt alone.

To combat those feelings of grief, depression, and isolation, I started to paint and do crafts to cope. It helped me to express myself and lose myself in an activity rather than sulk in my emotions. Once school started again I thought “if this is making me feel better maybe others will feel better too”. So I started the Chill Club where we do activities like meditation, yoga, crafts, and painting every month as a group to come together to talk about our shared emotions and not worry about the other problems in our lives.

From starting my club 2 years ago to now I have been graced with many opportunities that have helped me to share my story and cope with the loss of my mom and the struggles resulting from that, but I feel there is still a long way to go.

Incorporating mental health topics from an early age would be the first stepping stone I would take to support people’s needs. Talking about these issues with teens before they are calling out for help. Providing more accessible outreach professionals in schools and having all students speak to these people, not just the ones that come for help. Allowing for mental health absent days to be excused just like having a physical illness because mental health and physical health are equally as important. Allowing for anonymous assistance would also be effective because it is evident that most teens do not want to ask for help publicly. Lastly, professionals working with teenagers should be more open and equipt to talk about mental health struggles by being provided the correct necessities to help teens work through their problems.

I have grown to see that the process of moving from adolescence to adulthood is tricky enough with college essays, picking a major, knowing I will have to leave my childhood behind. So providing teens with accessible professionals to speak with will only benefit our communities. Everyone needs to be aware of their mental health because it is not selective or to be stigmatized or put to the side because it is “too hard” to understand. Working through these issues will not only give opportunities for teens to grow and flourish into adults, but to also allow our communities to become stronger as we improve the way of life one child at a time.