

# Amid a youth mental health crisis, Utah teen is working to get a counselor in every school

This is part of a series of interviews with young Utahns making a meaningful impact on their communities — and their own — mental health. To protect their privacy, participants under 18 are identified only by their first names. Read more at sltrib.com.

Avery, a Utah high school student, estimates she's participating in around 12 extracurricular activities at any given time. Between 4H Club, Future Farmers of America, women's empowerment meetings and more, she was approached with an opportunity to work with Weber Communities That Care, a group dedicated to preventing youth substance use and suicide.

She says that she originally joined the Weber CTC Youth Council because she was told it would look good on her resume.

"Obviously, I'm gonna join if it looks good on resumes," she told *The Tribune*. "But then I got there and the people there were really nice, and it was just a great environment in general. Then I realized what was actually going on in our community, and I wanted to make a difference."

She spoke with *The Tribune* about her work and why it's so important to talk about "heavy topics" like depression and suicide. This Q&A with her has been edited for length and clarity.

**Sara Weber: Can you tell me a little bit more about the work you do with Weber Communities That Care?**

**Avery:** We host activities for our youth and our families to come to, because we realize that family bonding is really important for our community. That's a protective factor, as we like to call it.

We've also noticed a significant increase in sixth graders experiencing mental health challenges. What we think that would help the most is getting full time counselors in the elementary schools. You wouldn't expect them to have all these mental



High school student Avery is working to get a counselor in every Utah school.

health challenges but they're starting to self-harm, and their depressive rates have gone up a lot. What we think that would help the most is getting full time counselors in the elementary schools. Right now, only a couple of those counselors are full time. Some charter schools don't even have a counselor.

We're speaking to lawmakers and school board members at events and dinners and even in Washington, D.C., about making it happen.

**What made you want to get involved with this kind of work?**

I realized that there were a lot of mental health issues going on — that people were really suffering within our community. Weber County is one of the top places in Utah with mental health challenges.

**Have you noticed any impact on your own mental health working with all these**

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### programs?

I definitely have, because I've realized that these are heavy topics — especially for a young person. I've realized that the more that we talk about suicide, it doesn't make somebody else want to die by suicide. Talking about it actually helps [that person gets the support they need].

**What kind of challenges do you face when you're doing this kind of work?**

We definitely face the possibility of people not showing up to our events, but it seems like people do want to get involved in their community; they want to feel like they belong somewhere.

**What kind of impact have you seen in your community?**

There's this thing called the

SHARP Survey, and we've noticed that the eighth to 12th grade students have really improved their mental health. Since 2021, there are less depressive symptoms, less self-harm and less suicidal thoughts, too.

**Based on your experience, do you think that this mental health crisis that people talk about is unique to Utah? Is it unique to teens? Or is it more pervasive?**

I think it's unique to every situation in general. For teens, it's definitely harder because we had to grow up in the pandemic. And same with adults.

**You've mentioned the pandemic a couple times. Can you tell me what kind of mental health impacts you saw in you and your peers because of that?**

Just being on social media — it's just kind of withdrawing and not knowing how to talk to people. I think that was the biggest

**"I've realized that the more that we talk about suicide, it doesn't make somebody else want to die by suicide. Talking about it actually helps [that person gets the support they need]."**

thing. It's harder to just go up to a teacher and be like, 'Hey, I'm having trouble with an assignment. Now it's, "Oh, I'm gonna email them. But then I have to get my email proofread. I just don't want to make them upset."

**Do you think social media helps or hurts mental health?**

I honestly think it can be both. It just depends on what sites you get on. There are definitely positive accounts, and then there are bad accounts. It's just how you treat it. I'm a teenager, but I'm on the good side of it, so I'm not really that affected. It's just a fun resource to be like, "Oh, I love these prom pictures. You look so good girl — pop off!"

**What kind of advice do you have for other teens who are interested in helping others improve their mental health?**

Most schools in Utah have a Hope Squad program, or you can see if there's a youth coalition that you can join. If there's not, talk to local community members and health department workers to see if you can start one.

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