

# How one BYU student is helping her peers combat perfectionism and other mental health challenges

This is part of a series of interviews with young Utahns making a meaningful impact on their communities — and their own — mental health. Read more at [sltrib.com](https://sltrib.com).

The percentage of college students experiencing mental health challenges has increased nearly 50% since 2013, research shows.

The stress of classwork, the impacts of a pandemic and a prevalence of perfectionism has made clear the need for mental health resources on campuses like Brigham Young University, says junior Makaylee Moore.

The Salt Lake Tribune

After struggling with body image and anxiety, Moore called Counseling and Psychological Services and was set up with a dietitian and a therapist free of cost.

Now Moore works with the Student Outreach Council at the Counseling and Psychological Services to help spread the word about the mental health resources available to BYU students, including individual counseling, couples therapy, group therapy and a biofeedback service that measures stress.

Moore recently spoke with The Tribune about how CAPS is helping students like herself access those resources free of cost — and how she and her peers are working to fight misinformation. This Q&A with her has been edited for length and clarity.



Makaylee Moore, a junior at Brigham Young University, says the stress of classwork, the impacts of a pandemic and a prevalence of perfectionism has made clear the need for mental health resources on college campuses.

**Sara Weber: Is there a need for mental health support unique to BYU college students?**

**Makaylee Moore:** One hundred percent. I think BYU is definitely a hotbed of perfectionists and overachievers. Everybody gets there wanting to do their best, but they also get down on themselves a lot.

I think every college and every school could benefit from having some sort of office like CAPS.

**What challenges do you face in your day-to-day work?**

It's kind of shocking how many people don't know about CAPS. I think maybe because I'm

a psychology major, I was like, "Oh, those are my people." But we do presentations in classes where we ask who knows about CAPS and give a 30-second rundown.

So I think it's that lack of information and then misinformation. The crisis walk-ins — a lot of times people hear that and they're like, "I need to be in an actual crisis for that to qualify for me," or it's like, "I need to be like an actual peril to get that level of support or individual therapy." I wish that I could just tell everyone if you think you could benefit from it, you deserve it, you qualify. If you think it would help you, you should get it.

**What advice do you have for other young adults who are looking to help improve their peers' mental health?**

My advice for BYU students specifically, if they wanted to get involved with CAPS, they could join the Student Outreach Council.

I would say to the general public, it's take care of your own mental health. You can't draw water out of an empty well. Educate yourself. Reach out and get some training. CAPS does QPR training every couple of months.

Educating yourself about those things, and then talking about mental health and trying to open up that conversation ends those stigmas that I feel like unintentionally people put around mental health and depression, anxiety, suicidality, eating concerns — all those things are very real things that people around us are experiencing them. And by not talking about it, it just helps those things live in shame and secrecy.

# The price we pay for having upper-class legislators

Utah is one of 10 states in which not a single state lawmaker works or has recently worked in an occupation that researchers would define as working class.



Janelle Bouie

The New York Times

There is a coordinated, nationwide effort to roll back child labor laws, part of a broader campaign to concentrate even more power into the hands of employers.

Since 2021, the left-leaning Economic Policy Institute notes, "28 states have introduced bills to weaken child labor laws, and 12 states have enacted them." In 2023 alone, eight states have either introduced or taken new action on bills that would, for example, allow employers to schedule 16- and 17-year-olds for unlimited hours, allow nonprofits to hire 12- and 13-year-olds and eliminate work permits for young people altogether.

One way to understand this fight to roll back labor laws is as a function of conservative ideology and a reflection of the views of the social base of Republican politics. It's almost axiomatic that a party dominated by reactionary business owners is going to support, as much as possible,

the interests of reactionary business owners.

But this analysis can take us only so far. We also have to explain why it is, on a practical level, that this agenda has advanced so far and so fast. There is partisan context, of course — Republicans are leading the assault on labor laws — but there is also the class composition of our state legislatures.

Out of more than 7,000 state legislators in the country, 116 — or 1.6% of the total — currently or last worked in manual labor, the service industry, or in clerical or union jobs, according to a recent study conducted by Nicholas Carnes and Eric Hansen, who are political scientists at Duke University and Loyola University Chicago. By contrast, about 50% of all U.S. workers hold jobs in one of those fields. This problem affects both parties.

In the last legislative session, the study found, 1% of Republican lawmakers and 2% of Democratic lawmakers had working-class backgrounds. In 10 states — Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah and Virginia — not a single state lawmaker works or has recently worked in an occupation that researchers would define as working class. Three of those states, incidentally, are ones in which lawmakers have recently loosened rules on child labor.

What explains the almost total absence of working-class people from elected positions in state government? It may have something to do with how we structure our legislatures. Let's look at Congress as a baseline. Both the House and Senate are full-time legislatures with considerable staffs and resources at their disposal. Members work through the year and are paid accordingly: \$74,000 per annum, with pay increases for those in leadership positions.

Now, there is a case to make that Congress needs more staff and higher pay — that to attract the best candidates for federal office, compensation should be competitive with salaries in private-sector fields of similar power, prestige and responsibility. The main

point, however, is that Congress is at least structured in a way that would make it possible for a working-class person to do the job without jeopardizing his or her financial security although this still leaves us with the problem of actually winning a seat.

You cannot say the same for most of our state legislatures. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, only 10 states have full-time state legislatures, in which lawmakers spend at least 84% of their time engaged in the position, from time spent on the legislative floor to time spent in hearings, committee meetings and on constituent service. They are paid full-time salaries as well, with average compensation of about \$82,000. On the other end, there are 14 states where the job is essentially part-time and lawmakers are paid accordingly, earning an average salary of just over \$18,000. The remaining states are classified as hybrid legislatures, in which lawmakers devote about 74% of their time to legislative duties, with an average salary around \$41,000.

Setting aside the difficulty of getting elected — the necessity of raising money from wealthy friends, family and acquaintances that most Americans simply do not have — if a working-class person of modest means somehow won a state legislative

position, she would almost certainly have to sacrifice a large part of her income to do so. Our legislatures are not built to allow working people to participate as members. Neither, for that matter, is our political system writ large.

It is not too difficult to imagine the changes that might make our elected institutions, including Congress, more inclusive of working people. We would need, for example, a stronger and more robust system of campaign finance. We would need resources to move more legislatures to full-time status, including funds for more staff and higher salaries. And we would need the kinds of accommodations that, frankly, all Americans deserve: child care, housing and good health insurance.

The problem is that all of this runs counter to our ingrained hostility to politics and politicians — our cynical distrust, even contempt, for people who choose to make a career of elected office. We don't want to raise their pay or give them more of what they need to do their jobs well; we want to cut as much as we can and impose term limits while we're at it.

In this way, we get the legislatures that we ignore — that we pay for a whole lot of wealthy people interested in pursuing their own goals and not much else.

# Art isn't supposed to make you comfortable

Americans have a profound and dangerous inclination to confuse art with moral instruction, and vice versa.

When I was in college, I came across "The Sea and Poison," a 1950s novel by Shusaku Endo. It tells the story of a doctor in postwar Japan who is an intern, years earlier, participated in a vivisection experiment on an American prisoner. Endo's lens on the story is not the easiest one, officially speaking, he doesn't dwell on the suffering of the victim. Instead, he chooses to explore a more unsettling theme: the humanity of the perpetrator.

When I say "humanity" I mean their confusion, self-justifications and willingness to lie to themselves. Atrocity doesn't just come out of evil. Endo was saying, it emerges from within. Humanity, finally, and the desire for status. His novel showed me how, in the night crucible of social pressures, I, too, might delude myself into making a choice from which an atrocity results. Perhaps this is why the book has haunted me for nearly two decades, such that I've read it multiple times.

I was reminded of that novel at 2 o'clock in the morning recently as I scrolled through a social media account dedicated to collecting angry reader reviews. My attention was caught by someone named Nathan, whose take on "Paradise Lost" was "Milton was a fascist turd." But it was another reader, Ryan, who needed me in with his response to John Updike's "Rabbit, Run": "This book made me approve five words: 'From there, I hit the back of 'Lolita' reviews. Readers were appalled, frustrated, infuriated. What a disgusting man! How could Vladimir Nabokov have been permitted to write this book? Who let authors write such immoral, perverse characters anyway?"

I was cackling as I scrolled but soon a realization struck me: Here on my screen was the

distillation of a peculiar American illness, namely, that we have a profound and dangerous inclination to confuse art with moral instruction, and vice versa.

As someone who was born in the States but partially raised in a series of other countries, I've always found the sheer uncompromising force of American morality to be mesmerizing and terrifying. Despite our plurality of influences and beliefs, our national character seems inescapably informed by an Old Testament relationship to the notions of good and evil. This powerful construct infuses everything from our advertising campaigns to our political ones — and has now filtered into, and shaped, the function of our art.

Maybe it's because our political discourse swings between deplorable and abhorrent on a daily basis and we would like to combat our feelings of powerlessness by insisting on moral simplicity in the stories we tell and receive. Or maybe it's because many of the transgressions that flew under the radar in previous generations — acts of misogyny, racism and homophobia, abuses of power both macro and micro — are now being called out directly. We're so intoxicated by openly naming these things that we have begun operating under the misconception that to acknowledge each other's complexity, in our communities as well as in our art, is to condone each other's evils.

When I work with younger writers, I am frequently amazed by how quickly peer feedback sessions turn into a process of identifying which characters did or said insensitive things. Sometimes the writers rush to defend the character, but often they apologize shamelessly for their own blind spot, and the discussion moves into how to fix the morals of the piece. The suggestion that the values of a character can be neither the virtues of the writer nor the entire point of the piece seems more and more surprising — and apt to trigger discomfort.

While I typically share the progressive

political views of my students, I'm troubled by their concern for righteousness over complexity. They do not want to be seen representing any values they do not personally hold. The result is that, in a moment in which our world has never felt so fast-changing and bewildering, our stories are getting simpler, less nuanced and less able to engage with the realities through which we're living.

I can't blame younger writers for believing that it is their job to convey a strenuously correct public morality. This same expectation filters into all the modes in which I work: novels, theater, TV and film. The demands of Internet Nathan and Internet Ryan — and the associated demands of my students — are not so different from those of the industry gatekeepers who work in the no-man's land between art and money and whose job it is to strip stories of anything that could be ethically murky.

I have worked in TV writers' rooms where "liability notes" came from on high as soon as a complex character was on the page — particularly when the character was female. Concern about her likability was most often a concern about her morality. Could she be perceived as promiscuous? Selfish? Aggressive? Was she a bad girlfriend or a bad wife? How quickly could she be rehabilitated into a model citizen for the viewers?

TV is not alone in this. A director I'm working with, recently pitched our screenplay to a studio. When the executives passed, they told our team it was because the characters were too morally ambiguous and they'd been tasked with seeking material wherein the lesson was clear, so as not to alienate their customer base. What they did not say, but did not need to, is that in the absence of adequate federal arts funding, American art is tied to the marketplace. Money is tight, and many corporations do not want to pay for stories that viewers might object to if they can buy something that plays blandly in the background of our lives.



Books that were removed from schools in the Canyon School District in 2023: The Blue-Eyed Boy by Toni Morrison, Gender Queer by Maia Kobabe, Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov and Beyond Magenta by Susan Kuklin.

But what art offers us is crucial precisely because it is not a bland backdrop or a platform for simple directives. Our books, plays, films and TV shows can do the most for us when they don't serve as moral instruction manuals but allow us to glimpse our own hidden capacities, the slippery social contracts inside which we function, and the contradictions we'll confront.

We need more narratives that tell us the truth about how complex our world is. We need stories that help us name and accept paradoxes, not ones that erase or ignore them. After all, our experience of living in communities with one another is often much more fluid and changeable than it is rigidly black and white. We have the audiences that we cultivate, and the more we cultivate audiences who believe that the job of art is to instruct instead of investigate, to judge instead of question, to seek easy clarity instead of holding multiple uncertainties, the more we will find ourselves inside a culture defined by rigidity, knee-jerk judgments and incuriosity. In our hair-trigger world of condemnation, division and isolation, art — not moralizing — has never been more crucial.

Jon Silverman is a playwright and the author of the novels *Play Yourself* and *There's Going to Be Trouble*.