

## I'm Not Alone

Are you safe right now? 4:45 P.M.

I really care about your safety. Can we talk? 4:53 P.M.

Are you there? 5:02 P.M.

Exhaling slightly, I waited for a moment before turning away from the dimly lit computer screen. Although I had received over sixty-five hours of crisis intervention training and navigated countless roleplays, this was different. This was real.

As a new volunteer with YouthLine—a free, confidential, teen-to-teen crisis help support hotline—it felt like the weight of the world was on my shoulders—and at just sixteen years old. What could I say or do to support this actively suicidal person, especially if they weren't responding? My heart fluttered considering the possibility that I had said something wrong in this potentially life-or-death situation.

Hearing the sharp ding of a notification, my eyes darted to the computer.

5:07 P.M. i hate my life and i hate being gay

5:09 P.M. and i have no one to go to for help

5:10 P.M. i just want to die

Sitting back in my seat, the emotion hit me all at once. As someone who struggled with depression, suicidal ideation, eating disorder behavior, and other mental health challenges through middle and early high school, I—for the longest time—believed that no one could relate to my experiences. I felt especially isolated in my rural community, where conversations about mental health and sexuality were nonexistent and where access to care was limited. However, much to my surprise, the person on the other end of the line shared some of the same challenges I once felt alone in. For once in my life, I realized that I wasn't alone.

After working with my supervisor to help the individual develop a safety plan, I remember reflecting on the events of the night during the nearly hour-long commute home. While the experience had changed me in more ways than one—namely, how it reinforced the importance of empathy, compassion, and connection—it made me realize that my mental health challenges

were a microcosm of public health issues that affected hundreds of thousands of teens across the country. That night, I decided that I wanted to change the narrative around mental health in my community and beyond by leveraging personal storytelling to connect with others, encourage help-seeking behaviors, and promote youth well-being.

To achieve this, I spent my high school career advocating for mental health efforts on the local, state, and national levels. During my time on the National Mental Health Advisory Board, I helped guide the development of a digital mental health advocacy toolset. In eleventh grade, I conducted a survey in which I assessed the intersection of diverse student identities with school mental health curriculum. After sharing my findings with my superintendent and other community stakeholders, I created a campaign focused on addressing educational inequities through a student-led, district-wide task force. I also joined The Forward Project—a regional suicide prevention workgroup—as one of only two student representatives. In it, I liaise with my school district to develop a comprehensive plan to suicide prevention under Adi’s Act.

Most recently, I had the honor of testifying in front of the U.S. Senate Finance Committee in support of expansive mental health efforts. In addition to sharing some of the messages I’ve heard from those who’ve contacted YouthLine, I spoke about my lived experience and urged our nation’s legislature to take practical steps in addressing the youth mental health crisis.

Yet, I realize that my work is just getting started.

At Johns Hopkins University, I plan to major in public health studies and computer science with a concentration in data analytics. Using integrative and evidence-based public health practices, I hope to research, design, and implement public health initiatives in underserved communities. I also look forward to using the skills I’ve cultivated throughout my high school career to engage in rigorous mental health research and policy implementation in non-profits and in the public sector. Most of all, I want my future impact to make a meaningful difference in the lives of others, like the work I do with YouthLine. I want to be the person who makes sure others aren’t alone in their struggles because I know how much that sense of solidarity and connection changed my life.

5:45 P.M. if it weren’t for you, i wouldn’t  
be here today

You’re not alone. 5:48 P.M.

I’m not alone.