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When I was a kid, my mom and I made this deal. I was allowed to take three mental health rest days every semester as long as I continued to do well in school. This was because I started my mental health journey when I was only six years old. I was always what my grade-school teachers would call "a worrier," but later on we found out that I have trauma-induced anxiety and clinical depression.

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This made growing up pretty hard. I was worried about a lot of things that other kids weren't, and school got really overwhelming sometimes. This resulted in a lot of breakdowns, panic attacks -- sometimes I was super productive, and other days I couldn't get anything done. This was all happening during a time when mental health wasn't being talked about as much as it is now, especially youth mental health. Some semesters I used all of those rest days to the fullest. Others, I didn't need any at all. But the fact that they were always an option is what kept me a happy, healthy and successful student. Now I'm using those skills that I learned as a kid to help other students with mental health challenges. I'm here today to offer you some insight into the world of teenage mental health: what's going on, how did we get here and what can we do?

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But first you need to understand that while not everyone has a diagnosed mental illness like I do, absolutely everyone -- all of you have mental health. All of us have a brain that needs to be cared for in similar ways that we care for our physical well-being. Our head and our body are connected by much more than just our neck after all. Mental illness even manifests itself in some physical ways, such as nausea, headaches, fatigue and shortness of breath. So since mental health affects all of us, shouldn't we be coming up with solutions that are accessible to all of us?

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That brings me to my second part of my story. When I was in high school I had gotten pretty good at managing my own mental health. I was a successful student, and I was president of the Oregon Association of Student Councils. But it was around this time that I began to realize mental health was much a bigger problem than just for me personally. Unfortunately, my hometown was touched by multiple suicides during my first year in high school. I saw those tragedies shake our entire community, and as the president of a statewide group, I began hearing more and more stories from students where this had also happened in their town.

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So in 2018 at our annual summer camp, we held a forum with about 100 high school students to discuss teenage mental health. What could we do? We approached this conversation with an enormous amount of empathy and honesty, and the results were astounding. What struck me the most was that every single one of my peers had a story about a mental health crisis in their school, no matter if they were from a tiny town in eastern Oregon or the very heart of Portland.

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This was happening everywhere. We even did some research, and we found out that suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10 to 24 in Oregon. The second leading cause. We knew we had to do something.

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So over the next few months, we made a committee called Students for a Healthy Oregon, and we set out to end the stigma against mental health. We also wanted to prioritize mental health in schools. With the help of some lobbyists and a few mental health professionals, we put forth House Bill 2191. This bill allows students to take mental health days off from school the same way you would a physical health day. Because oftentimes that day off is the difference between feeling a whole lot better and a whole lot worse -- kind of like those days my mom gave me when I was younger.

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So over the next few months, we lobbied and researched and campaigned for our bill, and in June of 2019 it was finally signed into law.

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(Applause and cheers)

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This was a groundbreaking moment for Oregon students. Here's an example of how this is playing out now. Let's say a student is having a really hard month. They're overwhelmed, overworked, they're falling behind in school, and they know they need help. Maybe they've never talked about mental health with their parents before, but now they have a law on their side to help initiate that conversation. The parent still needs to be the one to call the school and excuse

the absence, so it's not like it's a free pass for the kids, but most importantly, now that school has that absence recorded as a mental health day, so they can keep track of just how many students take how many mental health days. If a student takes too many, they'll be referred to the school counselor for a check-in. This is important because we can catch students who are struggling before it's too late. One of the main things we heard at that forum in 2018 is that oftentimes stepping forward and getting help is the hardest step. We're hoping that this law can help with that. This not only will start teaching kids young how to take care of themselves and practice self-care and stress management, but it could also literally save lives.

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Now students from multiple other states are also trying to pass these laws. I'm currently working with students in both California and Colorado to do the same, because we believe that students everywhere deserve a chance to feel better.

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Aside from all the practical reasons and technicalities, House Bill 2191 is really special because of the core concept behind it: that physical and mental health are equal and should be treated as such. In fact, they're connected. Take health care for example. Think about CPR. If you were put in a situation where you had to administer CPR, would you know at least a little bit of what to do? Think to yourself -- most likely yes because CPR trainings are offered in most schools, workplaces and even online. We even have songs that go with it. But how about mental health care? I know I was trained in CPR in my seventh-grade health class. What if I was trained in seventh grade how to manage my mental health or how to respond to a mental health crisis? I'd love to see a world where each of us has a toolkit of skills to help a friend, coworker, family member or even stranger going through a mental health crisis. And these resources should be especially available in schools because that's where students are struggling the most.

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The other concept that I sincerely hope you take with you today is that it is always OK to not be OK, and it is always OK to take a break. It doesn't have to be a whole day; sometimes that's not realistic. But it can be a few moments here and there to check in with yourself. Think of life like a race ... like a long-distance race. If you sprint in the very beginning you're going to get burnt out. You may even hurt yourself from pushing too hard. But if you pace yourself, if you take it slow, sometimes intentionally, and you push yourself other times, you are sure to be way more successful.

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So please, look after each other, look after the kids and teens in your life especially the ones that look like they have it all together. Mental health challenges are not going away, but as a society, we can learn how to manage them by looking after one another. And look after yourself, too. As my mom would say, "Once in a while, take a break."

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Thank you.

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(Applause)