



Two high school suicide clusters in six years rocks the affluent town of Palo Alto, California. Emotions run high and while no one has a silver bullet solution to this crisis, the students rise up to make sure their voices are heard.

The Edge of Success Discussion Guide
In collaboration with The Jed Foundation (JED)

The Edge of Success is a feature length documentary that looks at the issue of teenage suicide through the eyes of six teenagers whose school was thrust into the national spotlight after two suicide clusters in the span of six years.

These students bravely open up and talk about their mental health struggles in hopes of helping others who might be struggling with their emotional and mental health. The film aims to help spur discussion about mental health that ultimately reduces the shame surrounding it and promotes awareness in a positive light.

The Edge of Success Discussion Guide is meant for educators, mental health professionals, students and advocates to promote awareness, jump-start conversation, and provide talking points for adults, students, and teenagers.

We highly recommend providing one or more mental health professionals to participate in the panel discussion or Q&A.

Planning your screening:

- Think about partnering with one or more organizations to generate interest and buzz about the screening.
- Consider the audience. Is this parents and adults only? Teenagers only? Both? Tailor discussion and panel around who is in attendance.
- People connect with real stories and while documentary films can serve as a powerful medium, consider including a teenager (with parental approval) for the panel who is comfortable telling his or her mental health story.
- Panel size. An ideal number for the panel is between 2-4 people.

Screening Night:

- Welcome/Introduction.
- Play the documentary.
- Panel Discussion.
- Call to action or interactive experience.

Brief welcome and documentary introduction:

Give the audience a brief description of the film and what to expect after the screening.

See the sample introduction:

Hello and welcome to tonight's screening of The Edge of Success. Documentary film is a powerful way to give a platform to people with important stories to tell and this documentary is no exception. Many people have a hard time talking about teenage depression and suicide, but the students you're about to meet in this film share some of the hardest moments in their young lives in hopes of helping others.

After the screening, we'll open it up to a short Q&A and panel discussion.

Enjoy the film.

Film Screening:

Go to [Alexander Street](https://www.alexanderstreet.com) to purchase a digital streaming link, download, or DVD of The Edge of Success. The link to purchase is: <https://search.alexanderstreet.com/preview/work/4075516>.

We recommend doing a test screening to make sure the link or DVD works before the actual screening.

Panel Discussion and Q&A

We highly recommend including a mental health professional, ideally someone who works with adolescents/families, in the panel and/or Q&A. We also encourage having a moderator to help facilitate this portion of the event. A good moderator is one that is comfortable with the panel, the subject matter, and is often associated with the organization sponsoring the screening. Journalists also tend to be good moderators.

Panel Discussion Topics

Theme #1: Let's talk about Mental Health

Teenagers today no doubt feel lots of stress and pressure. They're stressed about school, friends, what they're seeing on social media, etc. While feeling pressure and under stress is normal, there are signs someone might be feeling depressed or anxious. What are the signs someone may need professional help?

- Insomnia or sleeping excessively
- Talking about wanting to end it all
- Personality shifts (anger, aggressiveness, withdrawal)
- Neglecting appearance
- Loss of self esteem
- Loss of interest in favorite hobbies or pastimes
- Decline in academic performance
- Weight loss or loss of appetite

Question: What can family members and adult do to support children?

- Don't wait until you suspect a problem to discuss mental health with your kids. By encouraging open dialogue around mental health, you can keep a pulse on how they are feeling while reducing the stigma associated with mental health.
- Ensure they have a trusted adult who they know they can talk to about their feelings (a parent, relative, or friend).
- Pay attention to changes in behavior that could be signs of mental health disturbance (disruption to normal sleep patterns, moodiness, withdrawal)
- Don't dismiss behavior or verbal cues as "teenage angst". Listen, observe, and engage.
- If you suspect someone might be suffering, express your concern and ask questions.
- Call a mental health professional if problems seem serious or are lasting a long time.

Theme #2: Pressure to get into "right" college

Question: The film talks about "Duck Syndrome", where students appear cool, calm, and collected on the surface, but below the water they are paddling like mad to keep up with expectations from themselves and others. How do we combat this phenomenon?

- Make your face match your feet, and voice your struggles. Opening up encourages others to do the same.
- When someone asks "how are you?", answer truthfully. Authenticity breeds authenticity.
- If you see or suspect that someone is struggling, reach out to them. They could be afraid to ask for emotional support or help, but it might make all the difference.
- #SeizeTheAwkward, a campaign by JED, Ad Council, and AFSP, encourages teens and young adults to embrace awkward moments and use them as an opportunity to reach

out to a friend and start a conversation about how they're feeling. If you're unsure of what to say to your friend, here are some opening lines to get the conversation going:

- "I've noticed you've been down lately. What's going on?"
- "Hey, we haven't talked in a while. How are you?"
- "Seems like you haven't been yourself lately. What's going on?"
- For more tips on how to #SeizeTheAwkward, visit seizetheawkward.org
- Be conscious that what you see on social media is often only a small sliver of a person's reality. Everyone goes through ups and downs.
- Practice selfcare by setting aside time every day to do something you enjoy that grounds you. Read for 15 minutes, go for a walk, call a friend, meditate, cook your favorite meal.

Question: In the film, Olivia's dad, Doug Eck, talks about a successful education being one where you leave school having figured out what you love. Aside from grades, SAT scores, or getting into the "right" college, what are some other ways to define success?

- For students, what does success mean to you?

Question: Students and parents stress out about the college admission process. This theme plays out throughout the documentary. How can you make the process easier?

- Visit Set to Go (settogo.org), a JED resource, for more information.
- Where you go is not who you will be - book by Frank Bruni-- highlighting the number of high-powered people who did not go to elite schools, including Bruni.
- Julie Lythcott-Haims literally wrote the book on raising resilient independent children, but even she got caught up in the college admission craziness with her son, Sawyer. This is to say, parents aren't always going to do everything right, but here are some statistics to help keep the college admission process in perspective:
 - There were 4,298 degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the U.S. as of the 2017-2018 school year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics
 - There are enough colleges for everyone who wants to go to four year school.
 - The number of students projected to attend American colleges and universities in fall 2018 is 19.9 million

In the film, you heard several times that talking about suicide doesn't cause suicide, but discussions on the topic of suicide need to be handled in a responsible way.

Question: The film focused on one community, but how common is suicidal ideation amongst teens?

- According to a 2015 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in the 12 months before the survey was administered:
 - Nearly 1 in 5 high school students seriously considered suicide
 - 14.6% made a plan to take their lives
 - 8.6% attempted to take their lives one or more times

Question: Suicide is such a complex issue and there's no one factor that can trigger someone to consider suicide or ideation. What factors can make someone more prone to considering suicide?

- There are many factors that can trigger thoughts of suicide, but suicide is very complex, and there's many factors to consider. It's always important to talk to a mental health professional about specifics, but Experiencing one or more of the following are common triggers for suicide ideation:

- Major loss (i.e., break up or death)
- Substance use issues
- Peer or social pressure
- Public humiliation (including on social media)
- Access to weapons
- Severe chronic pain
- Chronic medical condition
- Impulsiveness/aggressiveness
- Family history of suicide

Question: If a teen suspects a relative, friend, or peer might be suicidal, what should they do?

- Listen to them, express your concern, and ask questions. Asking if they're thinking of suicide won't make them take action. In fact, it can have the opposite effect. It may make them feel cared for and not alone. It also lets you figure out if you need to get immediate help.
- If someone's life is in immediate danger, call 911 or bring them to an emergency room. If it's safe to do so, stay with them.
- As soon as you can, reach out to a trusted adult, or call or text HOME to 741-741 or call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) 24/7 for free confidential support.

In the documentary, Lisa recounts how several of her friends reported her. That's exactly what should happen.

Theme #3: Positive Psychology

Roni Habib, a former Gunn High School teacher created a positive psychology class for students, realizing his students needed this -- just as much as traditional classes like Math, Science and English.

Question: What exactly is Positive Psychology?

- Focuses on positive experiences like joy, happiness, and traits like resilience, gratitude and compassion.
- You can incorporate this into everyday life by doing things like creating a gratitude journal.
- Anyone can do it
- People find benefits from it

Question: What is Social and Emotional Learning?

- This is an education-based curriculum - similar to Roni's positive psychology class.

Question/Discussion: How can social and emotional learning be incorporated in school, and at home?

- Everyone has a role to play-- social and emotional learning can be implemented not only at school, but also at home.
- Set to Go: <https://www.settogo.org/for-students/social-and-emotional-skills/>

Resources

The Jed Foundation

<https://www.jedfoundation.org/help>

[Settogo.org](https://www.settogo.org)

[Halfofus.com](https://www.halfofus.com)

[ULifeline.org](https://www.ulifeline.org)

Crisis Text Line

<https://www.crisistextline.org>

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

<https://afsp.org>

Astra Labs - Technology with a Purpose

<https://withastra.com>