Sometimes the Silence Can Seem So Loud: Teen Suicide

An EVC Study Guide
Acknowledgements

STUDY GUIDE
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SOMETIMES THE SILENCE was produced by eleven New York City youth who participated in EVC’s Spring 2005 Documentary Workshop.

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Introduction

The Educational Video Center is a non-profit youth media organization dedicated to teaching documentary video as a means to develop the artistic, critical literacy, and career skills of young people, while nurturing their idealism and commitment to social change. Founded in 1984, EVC has evolved from a single video workshop for teenagers from Manhattan’s Lower East Side to become an internationally acclaimed leader in youth media and education. EVC’s teaching methodology brings together the powerful traditions of student-centered progressive education and independent community documentary.

EVC CORE PROGRAMS

**Documentary Workshop** is a 15-week credit-bearing course that teaches high school students from undeserved communities across New York City to research, shoot, and edit compelling documentaries that examine issues of immediate relevance in their lives.

**Youth Organizers Television (YO-TV)** is a ten-month pre-professional paid internship that jumpstarts the college and media careers of graduates of the Documentary Workshop.

**External Education Programs** provide workshops and resources in media production and EVC’s methodology, including EVC’s Youth-Powered Video DVD Curriculum, for K-12 teachers and after-school educators, nationally and abroad.

**Community Engagement** promotes civic engagement and social change through the distribution of EVC’s youth-produced documentaries in collaboration with strategic partners. An important component of the Community Engagement program is the Youth Speakers Bureau, a group of EVC alumni who receive training in public speaking and facilitation skills and who use this training to lead screenings in local schools and community organizations and encourage audience members to engage with important social issues.
Guidelines For Using This Tape

EVC documentaries are powerful, and often deal with sensitive issues. For this reason, we recommend that you preview the Sometimes the Silence Can Seem So Loud: Teen Suicide documentary and supporting materials before using them in the classroom. The curriculum we’ve prepared represents suggestions for using Sometimes the Silence. If any of the activities are not useful to you, feel free to modify them and design your own.

Before using these materials, consider the following questions.
• How similar/different are your students and their experiences from the students who made this video?
• How does this video relate to the subject you are teaching?
• What results do you hope to see from using this video?
• What concerns do you have about your students’ responses to the issues raised in this video?
• What background information will your students need before viewing this tape?

Assumed in this guide are the following beliefs about teaching and learning:
• Writing deepens thinking and is one of the best ways to explore sensitive issues, even before discussion.
• All learning starts from the students’ own experiences.
• Diversity of opinion is useful in a classroom and must be respected.
• Students can make a difference in the world.
• Students can learn from each other.
• Social issues and community problems are an integral part of the school curriculum.
• Students learn from a variety of methods.
• Students learn best through experience.
• An active viewing experience leads to a richer understanding of the documentary.

For many teachers, having students write or take notes while viewing is not something new. For others, this aspect of active viewing is a bit controversial. Some feel it gets in the way of their viewing experience, while others feel it enhances it. You may want to show the tape twice: the first time to view it, and the second time to complete the viewing exercise. Your comments and questions are always welcome. Contact us at info@evc.org.
RUNNING TIME: 19 minutes

SYNOPSIS: Suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15-19 year-olds in the United States, and yet it remains a taboo subject that few care to discuss at school or at home. EVC youth producers tackle this difficult but important issue in a frank and compassionate way that teens can relate to. Through interviews with peers, family members, and social workers, they explore the possible causes, warning signs, and resources for teens in crisis.

INTERVIEWEES (in order of appearance):
Anonymous Girl describes her own struggles to overcome suicidal thoughts.
Esdras felt suicidal after coming out to his very devout and disapproving family.
Denia talks about her sister’s attempts to commit suicide.
Joshua attempted suicide after he was abused by his step-father.
Kim Strauss, Executive Director, Rita Project. Kim started Rita Project, a non-profit arts program, in memory of her sister who committed suicide.
Alan Ross, Executive Director, The Samaritans of New York
Darby Moore, School Counselor, Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School
Kenneth Kastenbaum, School Counselor, Brooklyn International High School
Steve Zbaida, Assistant Principal, Satellite Academy High School
Carla Silva, Prevention Social Worker, LGBT Youth Enrichment Services
Rachelle Kammer, Mental Health Association of New York City

RELEVANT STATISTICS:

• Suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15-19 year olds in the United States. (Columbia University TeenScreen Program)

• Adolescent depression affects 750,000 teens at any one time. (Columbia University TeenScreen Program)

• Each year, more than 3 million teens think seriously about suicide. 1.7 million teens actually attempt suicide. More than half of these attempts require medical attention and about 1600 succeed. (Columbia University TeenScreen Program)

• Recent surveys show that gay teens are 3 to 5 times more likely than their straight peers to attempt suicide. (Mental Health Association of NYC)
• EVC youth producers conducted an informal survey of 172 New York City high school students who listed their top three most stressful situations (in order of importance): 1) family problems, 2) school, and 3) relationships.

• Only one-third of teens at risk for suicide and one-fifth of those with depression ever receive treatment. (Columbia University Teen Screen Program)

• 63% of youth who die by suicide exhibit symptoms for more than a year before their suicide; indicating a significant window for potential intervention. (Columbia University Teen Screen Program)

**WARNING SIGNS OF MAJOR DEPRESSION:**

• Depressed mood (feeling sad or empty)
• Lack of interest in previously enjoyable activities
• Significant weight loss or gain
• Decrease in appetite
• Insomnia or hypersomnia (sleeping too much)
• Agitation, restlessness, irritability
• Fatigue or loss of energy
• Feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, guilt
• Inability to think or concentrate
• Recurrent thoughts of death, suicide attempt or a plan for committing suicide

*Source: Mental Health Association of NYC, http://www.mhaofnyc.org

**HOW UNTREATED DEPRESSION CAN AFFECT A YOUNG PERSON’S LIFE:**

• Poor school performance
• Poor school attendance
• Failure to graduate high school, failure to get into college
• Poor peer and teacher relationships
• Strained relations with parents and siblings
• Social withdrawal leading to a reduced support system
• Increased chance of smoking and excess alcohol and drugs
• Potential for suicide

*Source: Columbia University TeenScreen Program, http://www.teenscreen.org
Lesson Plan

**FOCUS QUESTION:** What can we as a school and as individuals do to prevent teen suicide?

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Students are provided the opportunity to share what they know about teen suicide – either from the media or from personal experience.
- Students reflect on social, biological, and psychological factors that can lead someone to attempt suicide.
- Students reflect on factors in their own life that cause them stress and share their own ideas of healthy ways to cope with stress.
- Students review the warning signs of serious depression and establish an action plan in the event that a friend or classmate shows these warning signs or asks for help.

**EDUCATION STANDARDS**

NYS Language Arts Standard 3; NCTE Standard 9; NYS Social Studies Standard 5, NYS Arts Standard 3; NETS Technology Standard 6; NYS Mathematics, Science, & Technology Standard 7

**PREPARATION:** Since the issues raised in Sometimes the Silence are very powerful, we strongly recommend that you preview the video before showing it to your class (See Guidelines for Using This Tape on Page 4). It’s also a good idea to check in with your school’s social worker or counselor. Let him or her know when you’re planning to show the video to your class and invite them to join you. They can help with facilitating the discussion and, by being there, can observe whether any of your students need additional support and follow-up. If it’s not possible to have a school counselor or social worker present, we recommend the lesson plan that follows, making sure to leave enough time to go over the action plan so that your students know who they can contact if they need help. You can also share your observations with the school counselor after the screening.

Before starting the lesson, make sure your students have paper for journaling. Prepare markers and large newsprint for note-taking (or you can use the chalkboard). Photocopy the handouts on pages 11 and 12 and cut in half so you have 2 handouts per page. Test out the TV and VCR and make sure the volume is set to a good level. Ideally, all your students will be seated close enough to the TV to read the captions, but, if not, you can pause the video and read the captions aloud to your class.
GROUND RULES: (4 minutes) Explain to the class that today you’ll be watching a video and having a class discussion about teen suicide. It’s important to acknowledge that suicide is a difficult issue that can bring up a lot of emotions. So we as a class need to discuss this in a way that shows sensitivity, compassion, and respect for one another. Ask the class to come up with a list of ground rules for creating a safe space for your discussion. Possible suggestions include: only one person talks at a time (one mic), active listening (let others know that you hear them, try to relate what you say to comments others have made), respect others’ opinions even if you don’t agree with them, avoid negative labels (i.e. that comment was stupid, wrong, bad, etc.).

PRE-VIEWING EXERCISE: (5 minutes) Ask students to write a journal entry answering the following two questions: What do you know about teen suicide? Did you learn this from the media, from parents, friends, or your own experience? Let students know that you would like to collect their responses, but this is not something that they will need to share with the class unless they choose to. Once students have finished writing, ask one or two volunteers to share what they wrote.

INTRODUCTION: (2 minutes) Take a moment to introduce the documentary. Here are a few suggestions.

- *Sometimes the Silence Can Seem So Loud: Teen Suicide* is a documentary video produced by eleven high school students from the Educational Video Center in New York City.

- The students made this video because they wanted to encourage youth to talk more openly about depression and suicide and to come up with better ways to support one another.

WHILE VIEWING THE DOCUMENTARY: Write on the board: What factors might trigger someone to think about suicide? Ask students to take notes on this while they watch.

SCREEN THE DOCUMENTARY: (19 minutes)
DISCUSSION – Part 1: (5 minutes)
What are the factors that can lead someone to think about suicide?

Write the following three headings on the board – Social, Psychological, Biological. You can explain them to the class as follows.

Social factors leading to suicide come from people and institutions outside ourselves: our work, school, church, parents, friends, the media. Psychological factors leading to suicide have to do with how we respond to these outside pressures: How do they make us feel? How much opportunity have we had to process traumatic events in a healthy way? Biological factors leading to suicide have to do with mental illnesses like clinical depression and bi-polar disorder.

Next, ask a few student volunteers to share their notes on the video. What are some factors that can lead youth to think about suicide? Write students’ examples under one of the three headings to visually show the range of factors and how they can easily build on one another. Here are a few examples:

Social: *(See note on the adjoining page)*

- Family: Esdras’s family rejected him when they learned that he was gay.
- Religion: Esdras’s religion excludes gay people from participation.
- School: Rita Strauss had just started college when she committed suicide. (School factors can include stress around making new friends, impressing teachers, getting good grades, etc.)

Psychological:

- Alienation/Isolation: The anonymous girl at the beginning felt very depressed when she moved to the United States from another country.
- Rejection/Discrimination: Esdras felt deeply rejected and unloved when his family and his church refused to accept him for who he truly is.
- Abuse: Joshua was raped by his step-father. Being violated by someone close to you can evoke a profound sense of despair and confusion.

Biological:

- Mental Illness: Rita Strauss was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. Mental illness can greatly increase the risk of suicide.
**Note: Students may ask why so much emphasis was placed on gay teens in the
documentary. In truth, EVC youth producers devoted equal time to the stories of gay and
straight teens. They included the section on gay teens to underscore the fact that gay teens
are 3 to 5 times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers (See Background
Information on Pages 5 & 6). EVC youth producers hoped that by including these very
honest stories of struggle, their peers would focus on the social factors leading these
individuals towards suicide – rejection by family, school, church, peers, and other outside
forces – something we can all relate to, regardless of sexual orientation.

**DISCUSSION – Part II: (10 minutes)**
What can we do to prevent teen suicide?

Let students know that all the factors listed on the board can lead someone to have
very powerful and overwhelming emotions. Some people may consider transforming
these emotions into a physical act against themselves. However, it's extremely
important to remember what Alan Ross from the Samaritans said in the video:
“Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.” These feelings are born
out of frustration and a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. While they may
feel overwhelming in the moment, there are ways to get help and relief. It's
extremely important not to make a decision that you can never take back.

What can you do if you or someone close to yo

Possible Answers: (Write responses on the board)

- Tell your parent
- Tell your teacher or school counselor
- Call a suicide hotline – what are some examples? (see handout page 11)
- Go for counseling (see handout page 11)

What if your friend tells you not to tell anyone? Is it a betrayal if you tell?
Answer: No, it's never a betrayal. It shows that you love your friend and are not
willing to risk their life and their long-term happiness for the sake of keeping a
secret.

What are some positive ways to relieve stress?

- Talk to someone: seek out a friend or a family member
- Exercise: go for a walk or a run, go to the gym
- Listen to music

**HANDOUTS:** Pass out the student handout on page 11.
Teen Suicide Handout

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PREVENT TEEN SUICIDE?

1. **Know the warning signs of major depression**
   - Depressed mood (feeling sad or empty)
   - Lack of interest in previously enjoyable activities
   - Significant weight loss or gain
   - Decrease in appetite
   - Insomnia or hypersomnia (sleeping too much)
   - Agitation, restlessness, irritability
   - Fatigue or loss of energy
   - Feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, guilt
   - Inability to think or concentrate
   - Recurrent thoughts of death, suicide attempt or a plan for committing suicide

2. **Tell someone.** Here are numbers you can call to **get help** if you or anyone you know is seriously depressed or thinking about suicide:

   - **For anyone in the U.S.:**
     - 1-800-SUICIDE: The National Hopeline Network
     - 1-800-283-TALK: The National Suicide Prevention Hotline

   - **For New York City Residents:**
     - 1-212-673-3000: Samaritans Suicide Prevention Hotline
     - 1-800-LIFENET: (LifeNet crisis support in English)
     - 1-877-298-3373: (LifeNet crisis support in Spanish)
     - 1-877-990-8585: (LifeNet crisis support in Chinese)

   - **For More Suicide Hotlines in Your State:**
     Visit http://suicidehotlines.com/

3. **Promote an open, safe, and supportive environment for everyone at your school.** Start a Gay Straight Alliance. To find out more, visit the Gay Straight Alliance Network at [www.gsanetwork.org](http://www.gSANetwork.org)
Appendix A: Websites

WEBSITES OF RELATED ORGANIZATIONS:

American Association of Suicidology  www.suicidology.org
The AAS promotes research, public awareness programs, public education, and training for professionals and volunteers. In addition, AAS serves as a national clearinghouse for information on suicide.

Columbia University TeenScreen Program  www.teenscreen.org
The Columbia University TeenScreen Program is a national mental health and suicide risk screening program for youth. The goal of the TeenScreen Program is to make voluntary mental health check-ups available for all American teens.

Mental Health Association of New York City  www.mhaofnyc.org
The MHA of NYC fights to shape the policies that benefit those who suffer with mental illness, promotes early detection of mental illness and facilitates access to treatment, and pioneers direct service programs.

National Hopeline Network  www.hopeline.com
The Kristin Brooks Hope Center (National Hopeline Network) is a non-profit organization dedicated to suicide prevention, intervention and healing.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline  www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org
A national, 24-hour, and toll-free suicide prevention service available to all those in suicidal crisis who are seeking help.

Rita Project  www.ritaproject.org
Rita Project is a 501c3 non-profit organization devoted to using the arts to help survivors of suicide connect with the power of creation, and, in doing so, foster transformation.

The Samaritans  www.samaritansnyc.org
Samaritans USA is a coalition of 11 non-profit, Samaritans suicide prevention centers in the United States. Its primary purpose is to befriend people who are depressed, in crisis, and suicidal through a volunteer-staffed crisis response hotlines, public education programs, and survivor support groups.

Sibling Survivors  www.siblingsurvivors.com
A web site dedicated to supporting people who have lost a sibling to suicide.
Appendix B: Online Resources

ONLINE RESOURCES:

Focus Adolescent Services
Resources on Counseling and Therapy
http://www.focusas.com/CounselingTherapy.html

Mental Health Association of New York City
A Guide to Finding Mental Health Treatment for Your Child
http://www.mhaofnyc.org/4CAservé.html

The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children
How to Answer Questions Teens Ask About Suicide
http://www.tlcinst.org/PTRCteenquestions.html

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
After an Attempt Guide Booklets
http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/training/default.aspx

New York State Office of Mental Health
Suicide Prevention Awareness Education Kit
http://www.omh.state.ny.us/omhweb/speak/speakcrisisnumbers.htm

UCLA School Mental Health Project
Information to help schools deal with youth suicide, depression, and violence.