



# SEIZE THE AWKWARD

## CAMPAIGN CASE STUDY

### Background

**Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young adults between 16 and 24 years of age.** For every youth who dies by suicide, it is estimated that 100–200 others attempt suicide (Ad Council, 2020).

Research conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) suggests that 90 percent of people who die by suicide may have experienced symptoms of a mental health condition (NAMI, 2024).

# #2

LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH AMONG  
16–24 YEAR-OLDS IS **SUICIDE**.

Nearly 20 percent, or **1 in 5 high school students**, reported serious thoughts of suicide.

Young adulthood is a critical time, when many people experience mental health issues and significant stress from major life transitions like moving away from home, friends and family, and beginning college or careers.

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), **suicide rates for youth and young adults increased 52.2%** between 2000–2021. Those most impacted include American Indian/Alaskan Natives, followed by non-Hispanic white people. High school students who identify as sexual minorities, within the LGBTQ+ community, are five times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual students (Health Disparities in Suicide, 2024).

In order to approach the issues of mental health awareness and youth suicide prevention, the Ad Council, in partnership with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) and The Jed Foundation (JED) launched a campaign focused on helping young people start conversations about mental health with their friends. **The Seize the Awkward campaign debuted in January 2018** (dentsu, 2021).

### Target Audience

The campaign primarily targeted **friends of teens and young adults (16–24 years old)** who may be struggling with mental health issues (and who may be at risk for suicide).

Over time, the campaign's target audience was further segmented. Recognizing the need for culturally relevant content and resources for Black and Hispanic/Latine young adults, a 2021 refresh of the campaign focused on a more diverse range of young people (Ad Council, 2020).

### Formative Research

To help identify the factors that influence how young people think about—and personally help with—teen suicide prevention, **campaign researchers talked to 400 16-to-25 year-olds**.

A **pre-task survey** asked participants to share instances when they had provided or sought support to or from friends.

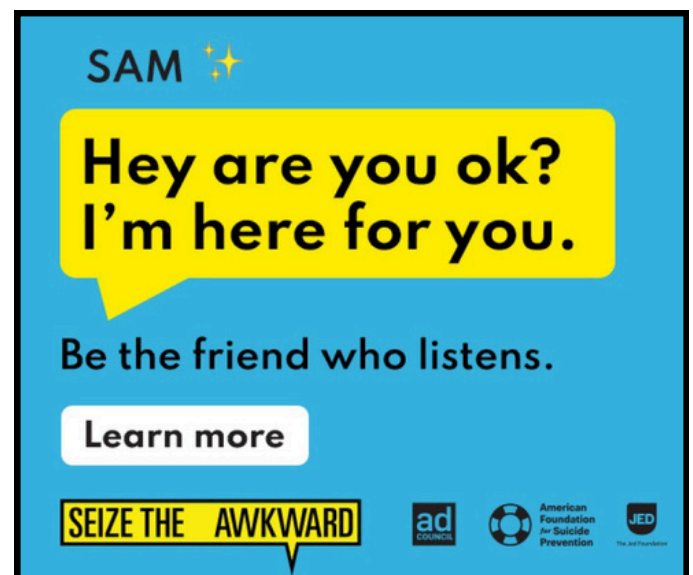


Figure 1: Seize the Awkward text bubble social media banner

This was followed by **interviews** and **focus groups** with three different cohorts of young adults:

- **Small group workshops** focusing on the “rules of engagement” for friends providing support
  - **Cohort 1:** young adults with limited experience of mental health issues
  - **Cohort 2:** those who’ve helped friends with mental health issues
- **One-on-one conversations** exploring experiences where support was needed
  - **Cohort 3:** those who’ve personally struggled with their mental health (recruited in assistance with our nonprofit partners)

The collected data showed that **peer helping and support was considered to be among the most effective strategies** for improving adolescent mental health and, ultimately, preventing teen suicide.

**76%**

OF YOUNG ADULTS WILL **TURN TO A PEER** IN A TIME OF CRISIS FOR SUPPORT.

The researchers also concluded that, **while many adolescents understand the concept of “being there” for their peers, they don’t necessarily know what to say** and how to say it when a friend expresses negative emotions, including suicidal thoughts. They further delved into the factors that can make young people feel more confident in delivering positive messages to their peers.

The feedback that was collected during the formative research phase of the campaign ultimately helped the team create **messaging that encouraged young people to do more than just “be there”** for their friends (Hopelab, 2023).

## Campaign Message

The campaign messaging empowered teens and young adults to reach out to and support their friends who may be struggling with mental health issues by encouraging them to **“Seize the Awkward”** – use an **awkward silence** or moment as an opportunity to **talk to a friend about their mental health**.

The campaign **avoids explicitly addressing the topic of suicide**, and rather focuses on “conversations your friends about their mental health.”

### Messages included:

- “If you suspect a friend is struggling, **reach out and check-in** (this can be face-to-face, text, or online).”
- “**You don’t need to be an expert** to recognize when someone needs outside help – if you can tell a friend isn’t doing well, they might need a greater network of support.”
- **Be the Friend Who Listens.** Starting a conversation about mental health does not need to be uncomfortable, and it can make all the difference.
- “**We don’t need to physically be there**, to be there for our friends.”
- “Whether it’s over a virtual dinner, while playing video games, or via a call, text, emoji, or a GIF, **what matters is that you reach out.**”

## Marketing Channels

The Seize the Awkward campaign features **TV, radio, online videos, digital banners and social media posts**. Since it launched in 2018, it has continuously launched digital and experiential activations to coincide with key moments in time, including Mental Health Awareness Month in May. A TV spot even aired during President Obama’s online graduation ceremony for high school students.

The campaign has **leveraged platforms popular among teens and young adults**, including Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Reddit, Shine, Tumblr and Twitch. The Broadway musical Dear Evan Hansen, art community Goodtype, and creative platform Social Native helped to amplify the campaign message (ARF, 2020).

Seize the Awkward has **prioritized partnering with actors, musicians, athletes, and other celebrities**. Creators and influencers who shared their personal struggles with mental illness include Billie Eilish, Megan Thee Stallion, Caleb Williams, Noah Cyrus, Tyler Posey,

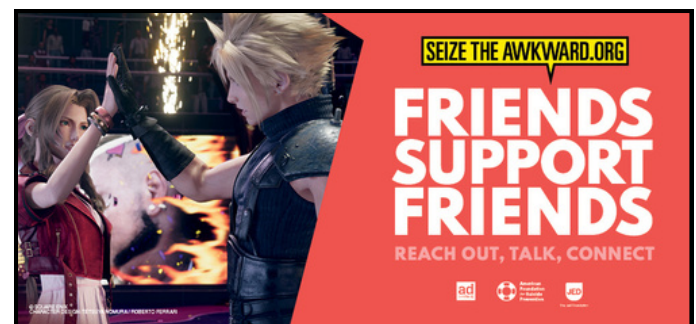


Figure 2: Friends Support Friends banner ad



Figure 3: Totally Worth It banner ad

Lauv, Christina Perri, Liv Morgan, Big E, and Markiplier.

The campaign **reaches online gamers** through partnerships with the makers of Final Fantasy and Guild Wars 2. To raise awareness about how friends can help and support one another through hard times, Guild Wars 2's 11 million players each received a free "Seize the Awkward" t-shirt for their in-game character during a month-long promotion in 2020 (The Drum, 2020).

## Project Evaluation

A study by Ipsos Public Affairs showed that, as of March 2020, those who were aware of the Seize the Awkward campaign were **significantly more likely to have taken key actions** compared to those who are not aware of the campaign. Reported actions included:

- **76% talked to a friend** about their mental health (vs. 65%).
- **49% visited a website** to get more information about how to support a friend (vs. 30%)
- **29% called or texted a hotline** to get more information about how to support a friend with their mental health (vs. 15%)

A brand study was conducted by Perksy simultaneously, showing a **significant increase** in website traffic, brand awareness and logo recognition (ARF, 2020).

Partner Llama Lead Gen reported that leveraging YouTube and Meta ads, campaign results included:

- **55M impressions**
- **3M video views**
- **106K clicks**
- **67%** of the clicks from Facebook/Instagram ads converted into a landing page view on the campaign website (Llama Lead Gen, n.d.).

Since it launched in 2018, the campaign has continued to use research and data analysis to optimize their messaging. In 2021, they teamed up with Dentsu's Attention Lab and VidMob to analyze the campaign using artificial intelligence and data science. Creative

assets were analyzed with machine learning to identify the key visual elements that resonated most with audiences. Insights were implemented, and the optimized assets drove increased engagement across all three platforms. (dentsu, 2021). Results included:

- Instagram: **21% increase** in Page Engagement Rate.
- Snapchat: Swipe Rates more than doubled from the 2020 media flight with a **120% increase**.
- TikTok: **112% increase** in Click Through Rate.

## Assessment of Theoretical Application

The Seize the Awkward campaign addresses the key insight that **while nobody likes an awkward silence, taking advantage of the awkward moment can really help those struggling with their mental health**. The goal of the campaign is to encourage 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.

### Social Integration Theory

French sociologist Émile Durkheim theorized in his 1897 book "Suicide: a study in sociology," that **the more socially connected people are, the less likely they are to commit suicide** (Durkheim, 1951). This social theory became known as "social integration," with the idea being that as social integration decreases, the likelihood of suicide increases.

The campaign's goal is to reduce suicide rates among young people by **deepening their social connections**. I believe that the Seize the Awkward campaign's strategy and messaging were built on a foundation of Durkheim's social integration theory and his theory of suicide.

The campaign's research and performance data suggests that **proactive support from friends** is one of the most successful ways to help youth and young adults who are at risk of dying by suicide (ARF, 2020).

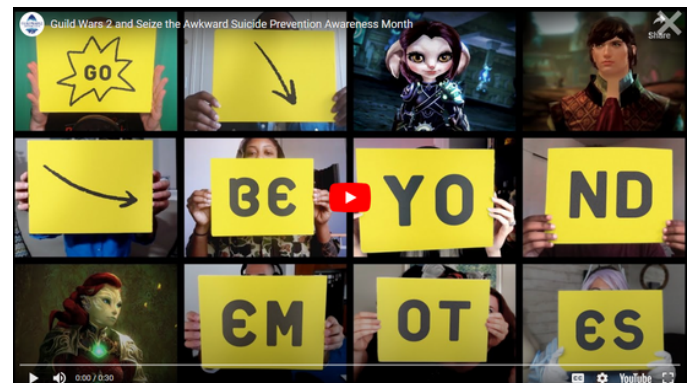


Figure 4: Screenshot of Guild Wars 2 [Seize the Awkward video](#).

## Works Cited

2020 ARF David Ogilvy Awards. Advertising Research Foundation. (n.d.). [https://thearf-org-unified-admin.s3.amazonaws.com/ARF Ogilvy Award Case Studies/2020 ARF David Ogilvy Award CS/Seize-the-Awkward.pdf](https://thearf-org-unified-admin.s3.amazonaws.com/ARF%20Ogilvy%20Award%20Case%20Studies/2020%20ARF%20David%20Ogilvy%20Award%20CS/Seize-the-Awkward.pdf)

Ad Council: Seize the awkward. Droga5. (n.d.). <https://droga5.com/work/ad-council-seize-the-awkward-ii-2/>

Case study: Social impact marketing for mental health advocacy. Llama Lead Gen. (n.d.). <https://www.llamaleadgen.com/case-studies/social-impact-marketing>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024, May 16). *Health disparities in suicide*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/disparities>

Collaboration with the Jed Foundation to develop Digital Campaign Guidelines. Hopelab. (2023, April 27). <https://test.hopelab.org/case-study/jed>

Durkheim, Émile. (1951). *Suicide: a study in sociology* (J. A. Spaulding & G. Simpson, Trans.). Free Press.

New Ad Council campaign empowers young adults to “seize the awkward” and start the conversation with friends at risk. (2018, June 27). *PR Newswire*. Retrieved September 21, 2024, from <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/new-ad-council-campaign-empowers-young-adults-to-seize-the-awkward-and-start-the-conversation-with-friends-at-risk-300583759.html>.

Partner toolkit. Seize the Awkward. (n.d.). <https://seizetheawkward.org/partner-toolkit>

Seize the awkward. dentsu International. (May 2021). <https://www.dentsu.com/us/en/our-work/seize-the-awkward>

“Seize the Awkward” Partners with Guild Wars 2 Game. The Drum. (2020, September 11). <https://www.thedrum.com/profile/ad-council/article/seize-the-awkward-partners-with-guild-wars-2-game-1>

Seize the Awkward Reminds Young People Everywhere That You Don’t Need to Be There, to Be There. (2020, May 20). *Ad Council*. Retrieved September 21, 2024, from <https://www.adcouncil.org/learn-with-us/press-releases/seize-the-awkward-reminds-young-people-everywhere-that-you-dont-need-to-be-there-to-be-there>.

Suicide prevention month. NAMI. (2024, September 19). <https://www.nami.org/get-involved/awareness-events/suicide-prevention-month/>

## Image Assets

Ad Council Creative Studio. (n.d.-a). *Friends Support Friends banner ad*. Ad Council. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, The Jed Foundation. Retrieved September 21, 2024, from <https://www.adcouncil.org/asset/friends-support-friends/204495667>.

Ad Council Creative Studio. (n.d.-b). *Seize the Awkward Logo*. Ad Council. Retrieved September 20, 2024, from <https://www.adcouncil.org/campaign/suicide-prevention>.

Ad Council Creative Studio. (n.d.-c). *Text Bubble social media banner*. Ad Council. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, The Jed Foundation. Retrieved September 21, 2024, from <https://www.adcouncil.org/asset/text-bubble/204416397>.

Ad Council Creative Studio. (n.d.-d). *Totally Worth It banner ad*. Ad Council. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, The Jed Foundation. Retrieved September 21, 2024, from <https://www.adcouncil.org/asset/totally-worth-it/204495665>.

Droga5. (n.d.). *Mosaic Series banner ad*. Ad Council. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, The Jed Foundation. Retrieved September 21, 2024, from <https://www.adcouncil.org/asset/sta-reachingout-lucilaperini-print-version2/203013116>.

NCSOft. (n.d.-a). *Screenshot of Guild Wars 2 Seize the Awkward video*. Guild Wars 2. Retrieved September 20, 2024, from <https://www.guildwars2.com/en/seizetheawkward>.

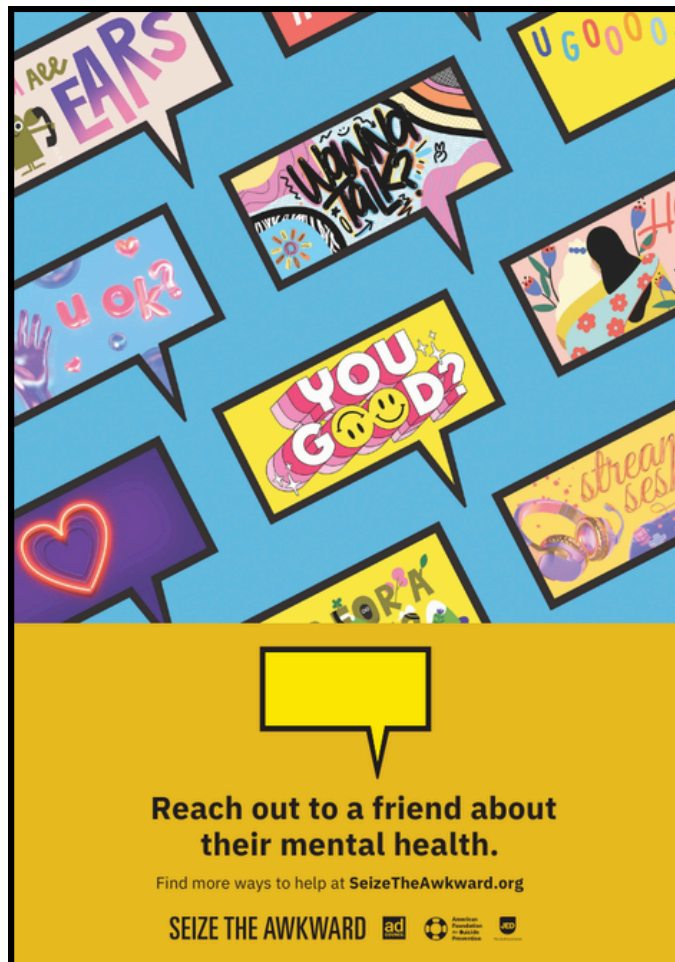


Figure 5: Mosaic Series banner ad