



By Olivia Potter

LIFE LINE

Oxford High school senior discusses the impact RISE club has made on the mental health conversation in his community.

In 2017 across the US over 11% of teens suffered from depression. Mental health is a struggle for many people across the country and it is a struggle Jess Edge, 17, knows well. Mental health includes everything from anxiety and OCD to depression and bipolar disorder. For Edge, he has struggled with anxiety and depression for the past few years. "I'm pretty open about talking about [my mental health and] I've been through the wringer with anxiety and depression. I go to a therapist and have been for five years," Edge said. While mental health takes its toll on people and, in some cases, can be debilitating, Edge has used his own struggles to boost up his peers and help them with their own issues.

"I'm now a certified peer educator through a club at my school called RISE which stands for reach, inspire, support, and empower," Edge said. "We got certified through the NSPA. We went through an 8-week course with 8 tests that got us ready to talk to our peers and be able to help them through the normal high school issues like depression, anxiety, and peer pressure for drugs or drinking."

In Edge's small town of Oxford, Mississippi, things like mental health can be difficult to discuss, over 70% of teens countrywide who deal with depression do not seek or receive any help, but RISE is trying to start a positive conversation around mental health and encourage people to talk about their issues. "At first, people were weary, but we started going to the [freshman leadership] class every once in a while, just giving them our spiel telling them what we were about and obviously [there

are] kids in the class who think it's stupid, but there's also some kids that really cared a lot. [It] was surprising to me how much they cared," Edge said. The stigmatism around mental health is more prevalent than ever in today's high schools and Edge has a theory as to why. "I think a lot of the stigmatism around [mental health] is due to social media," Edge said. "People have sort of turned it into a joke like when people say, 'lol I want to kill myself' as a joke. It's not funny cause people really struggle with it and since it's such a joke when you put it in a serious context, people get

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uncomfortable." The club is full of people like Edge who want to make a positive impact in their community. "No person in our club is the holy child, like no ones perfect, but we're all trying to better the community around us," Edge said. "We have so many different people, its underclassmen in with the seniors and we

have kids that do things like play cello but we also have the quarterback." For Edge, the club has inspired him to be as nice as he can to people and he feels like it makes a genuine impact. "I try my best to be liked by everyone, I don't know if that sounds snarky but it's my goal to just be nice to people and be liked. I think if I use my platform and tell my story like, 'hey I go to therapy and I have depression and anxiety,' it makes it easier for someone else to realize that it's not weird," Edge said. "Everyone has something going on but that enables us to be more empathetic and relate to people."

[Why do you think a stigma surrounds mental health issues in highschool?]



"We're all growing and it's a point of life where you are learning who you are and you doubt yourself. You see the romanticism around suicide and the media says it's an option which is hard for people to see," said Ava Adamson, 15, from Clark Central High School.



"I feel like it's been stigmatized cause high school is an awkward period and parents of them downplay it because it's an awkward time they take it as oh you're an edgy kid and they don't realize your health could really be at jeopardy," said Kenedi Mitchell, 18, from Ota High School.