



Pre- and Post-Show
DISCUSSION GUIDE

For
The Thin Line

A guide to helping students and communities
address eating disorders.

Welcome

Thank you for choosing **The Thin Line** for presentation in your community. We at **ADD VERB Productions** are very passionate about our goal to promote understanding and support for those who are coping with eating disorders, and you have made an important step in furthering this goal. It is important to understand, however, that for this program to be as successful as possible, it's vital that the leaders in your community understand key issues surrounding eating disorders and how to help those in search of guidance. **The Thin Line** is meant to prompt serious discussion and action toward change, and be sensitive to individuals' healing process. This is why **ADD VERB** requires each performance to be followed by a minimum 30-minute talk-back period.

In addition to the post-show debriefing, it's important that audience members are prepared for the intensity of **The Thin Line** and understand the subject matter. Enclosed in this packet you will find advice on how to prepare your audience, as well as how to conduct a post-show discussion. You will find valuable questions (and answers) for prompting discussion, and information on how to locate valuable resources in your area. If you have any questions about this guide please do not hesitate to call your booking agent or **ADD VERB Productions** main office for clarification.

Before the show comes to your community

GATHER YOUR PANEL and SELECT A MODERATOR:

The Thin Line will open up hearts, minds and dialogue; but, it cannot answer questions or offer treatment and support. All performances need to be followed by some form of debriefing by local and outside resources (see **Discussion Format Options**). For more in depth assistance in creating a panel, as well as panel pitfalls to try and avoid, see **Assembling Your Panel**, below. Choose someone who has community respect and who will be good at facilitating a discussion between the audience and the panel members. An explanation of the **Moderator's Role, Tips for Moderator and Moderator Script** for introducing the play are also included in this packet. If you are the Site Coordinator, consider your work/stress load and whether it might be helpful to have someone either assist you or be the Moderator.

Arrange for an appropriate number of support people to be in attendance for the size of the audience and the intended format for the talk-back discussion. Plant some of these people to watch the door in case someone leaves the room upset and needs support. It is appropriate to arrange for an available safe room if someone needs privacy and support.

INFORM:

The Thin Line deals with a very sensitive subject matter. Because it can be traumatic for people to see themselves or those that they love in the story of **The Thin Line**, **it's important that audience members are made aware of the subject matter beforehand**. We do not recommend surprising an audience with the presentation. If the play is performed in a school, as anywhere, no one should be forced to attend or remain in the room. The seriousness of eating disorders is reflected in the fact that it is the mental illness with the highest fatality rate in this country. However, eating disorders have little to do with 'eating', and people who are suffering from eating disorders are coping with complex psychological and social factors. Please make choices that are respectful and in the best interest of your audience.

POST AND PUBLICIZE:

It is recommended to post flyers, put notices in community newsletters and/or submit press releases inviting people to the show. Generic press releases, information on actors and publicity photos are available to download from the website. A poster is included in your Thin Line packet, which may be reproduced, but feel free to design your own. If you design your own please include the following: "The Thin Line by Cathy Plourde. A One-Woman Show and Discussion on Coping with Eating Disorders. Produced by ADD VERB Productions Arts & Education. For more information, contact info@addverbproductions.com, 207-772-1167 or visit www.addverbproductions.com."

Of concern particularly in College or Community settings is the pain of throwing a party that no one comes to. In middle and high schools we are generally performing for 'captive' audiences; in colleges we know from experience it can be hard to pull people out of their busy schedules to attend a wellness program, unless a good portion of them are required to be there. We recommend that you actively recruit professors or organizations to require students to be present or to offer extra credit. Think about counseling/psych programs; social, medical or nursing classes; education programs; and women's studies. Several colleges have had great success filling the house with cooperation from Athletic Departments and Greek Life Organizations.

Parents will appreciate an opportunity to be present. Local resources in your community such as counselors, therapists, community extension educators, nurses, nurse practitioners, doctors or other trained adults are often willing to be present as a supportive audience member, as a panel member, or a small-group leader. Often they may be willing to help subsidize performances: it can't hurt to ask!

YOUR COMMUNITY'S INVOLVEMENT:

Don't underestimate the importance of this piece. **Arrange for an appropriate number of support people to be in attendance for the size of the audience and the intended format for the talk-back discussion.** More information on putting together this piece of the presentation is at the end of the guide. Local resources in your community such as counselors, therapists, community extension educators, nurses, nurse practitioners, doctors or other trained adults are often willing to be present as a panel member or a small-group leader—and may be willing to help subsidize performances. Parents will appreciate an opportunity to be present.

For Colleges or For Community Audiences

It is a good idea to include resource numbers and local health services on the flyers for colleges and community audiences, and to post the flyers in places where it is easy for people to access the information anonymously (e.g., dorm bathrooms, bulletin boards, dining halls, and health centers). If you are presenting a community show in affiliation with your school you may want to send out a mailing which includes all of the same information as the flyer. Invite parents to attend with their students.

ASSEMBLING YOUR PANEL

The panel and how it is facilitated is the most important and most difficult aspect of bringing *The Thin Line* to a community.

It will take some phone calls to set this up, but if you can identify one area resource, they will likely know of others in your area that would like to be a part of this program.

Please contact Add Verb's office if you need suggestions or assistance with finding and contacting panelists. If we don't have direct experience with contacts in your area, the National Eating Disorders Association's website has a helpful Referral section that can help identify experts: www.nationaleatingdisorders.org .

PANEL MEMBER IDEAS:

- Your school Nurse and/or Guidance Counselor
- LCSW, therapist, nurse or doctor who specializes in eating disorders.
- Dietitian or nutritionist.
- Coach or fitness person who is educated on and sensitive to the issue.
- The actor can also join your discussion. Though trained as an actor and not a therapist, she has had contact with many schools, audiences and stories, and may be useful or informative to your discussion.

WHAT ABOUT HAVING A PERSON WHO IS IN RECOVERY AS A PANEL MEMBER? We do not recommend this. While it may be useful for the speaker in his/her recovery, and while healthy people in the audience may find it moving or enlightening, we are concerned about the health and safety of those in the room who are struggling with an eating disorder. Please consider the possible unintended ramifications of putting someone on stage who has an eating disorder or who is in recovery.

HOW MANY PEOPLE SHOULD BE ON A PANEL? Less is more! We have found that if a panel is too big, the panel experts do more of the talking than the audience does. While it might be useful in certain situations to have them come in and talk at length, this most likely isn't one of those situations. After seeing a moving performance, many audience members will need an opportunity to talk. We suggest only 2 or 3 panelists (including the actor, if you elect to have her), and we caution the panel members to be aware of their talk time.

Provide panel members with the Letter to Panel, which describes their role and tips; the Plot Summary, and Discussion questions. Brief the panel members on how *The Thin Line* program fits in with the rest of the community's work or study on eating disorders.

LETTER TO PANEL: YOUR ROLE AND TIPS

In advance of the performance, please make each of your panelists has a copy of this letter, the Plot Summary, and the discussion information.

Dear Panelist,

Welcome, and thank you for being a part of the presentation of THE THIN LINE. The play is a dynamic educational tool to help a community better recognize and understand eating disorders, but the local resources are the key to a successful presentation and critical for after-care. If you've not see THE THIN LINE before, we hope the following information will be useful to you. Please bring any materials or business cards to leave with the site coordinator who may have future referrals for you.

TIPS FOR PANEL MEMBERS:

- Find out the context of this program - what else has been done, and what are their future plans? Is there a perceived problem in the community?
- Keep your introduction brief. Consider including your credentials and relevant information about your work in the context of answering a question.
- When speaking, use microphones or be sure you are loud enough. Most people don't like microphones, but, if you are talking, you need to be heard. Not being able to hear the panelists has been a common complaint in our feedback, and only you can change that!
- NEVER ask the audience if they know someone with an eating disorder, or if they know someone who cuts himself or herself--chances are they are sitting right next to them.
- Always rephrase the question to let the rest of the audience know what you are speaking about, also to be certain you are sure you've heard the question properly.
- Listen to the other panelists' responses, and evaluate if enough has been said on the topic.
- Avoid getting into overly personal situations with audience members - ask them to see you afterwards when you can better address their concern.
- Keep your answers succinct and jargon-free.
- Answer in age-appropriate language without talking down.
- Remember the goal is to give information, but it will be impossible to give out everything. Answer to the best of your ability, but let them know where to go for more information.
- Asking the audience an honest question, or one with many answers, can be an engaging strategy that will also serve to point out where they are in need of additional information.

THE THIN LINE PLOT SUMMARY

The Thin Line is a one-woman play, approximately 30 minutes in length. It features four characters: a girl who is struggling with an eating disorder, her internal negative voice, her mother, and a friend. Great care has been taken with the script to give accurate information in a way that does not blame, that does not offer how-to's, and that illustrates how serious and pervasive eating disorders are.

What follows is a description of the story and action in **The Thin Line**. The actor switches simply and quickly from one character to the next with a pair of glasses or shirt as a prop. You can follow the sequence of characters below, indicated by the bold lettering.

Cindy is struggling with what to do as she recognizes unhealthy behaviors in her friend **Ellen**, and believes her to be in increasing danger. Ellen, a driven athlete and artist and a perceptive young woman, is aware of her eating disorder, is aware of outsider judgments and assumptions, and is at the mercy of the negative voice inside her head. The **Voice** demonstrates her control over Ellen and Ellen's mind and behavior, explaining to the audience how myths and misconceptions about eating disorders make her "job" easier. Ellen, progressively becoming more ill, recounts when she first began dieting and being conscious of her body and tells us how social and family pressures and perceptions affect her. **Ellen's Mother**, with Ellen presumably now getting some treatment, offers how difficult and strange life and her daughter have become. She shares last night's events, which lead to the discovery that Ellen is also cutting herself. The Mother struggles with how this has come to be, with her own guilt, and with judgmental reactions to her family's situation. The Voice, in jeopardy now that Ellen is getting help, becomes even more vicious in her treatment of Ellen, taking a moment to talk to the audience about how language, socialization and name calling can be devastating. Ellen's shame, anger and frustration crest, and she is in danger of dying. Cindy has gotten help for herself thanks to the advice of her brother. He told her the story of his wrestling friend who is recovering from an eating disorder. She speaks to the same counselor, who helps her set healthy boundaries with Ellen, and prepares her for an extremely difficult conversation with Ellen. Ellen is now hospitalized. We get a window into Ellen's level of self-loathing, and it is possible that she may not make it. The Mother is now getting support to help her cope with her family's upheaval, and holds on to hope. Cindy, at last is relieved of the burden of secrecy, and is finally allowed to visit Ellen in the hospital. With a strong support system in place, Cindy is prepared to be the friend she wants to be: "Ellen may think she's alone, may tell me to leave her alone. But she's not alone. And neither am I. Thank you."

Showtime: Moderator's Role and Tips

MODERATOR ROLE

If you are acting as Site Coordinator for this program, you may or may not want to also be the Moderator. Some people find that there are too many details on the day of the event, and having someone else be your Moderator may make things flow more smoothly.

1. Make sure appropriate people are positioned to observe the door. If someone leaves, they should be followed to see if they are in need of support.
2. In large groups or assembly situations, please make sure trouble spots, such as the back and corners of the room, are supervised by adults. Disturbances are distracting to the actor, and can be distressing to audience members who are taking the presentation seriously.
3. Be certain your panel is prepared and briefed for what you expect of them. Materials in this packet will be useful to them.
4. Before you introduce the play, make sure the actor is ready and will understand/be able to hear when you are done with the introduction and she is to begin.
5. Vary the sample introductory script to suit your needs, but include all aspects.
6. Actually MODERATE the discussion. Do not expect your panel to do this. They are not necessarily skilled in eliciting questions, and do not know your group.
7. Before the post-performance discussions begin, announce what time is allowed, and honor that time.

TIPS FOR MODERATOR:

- The play is intense! It will take them a few minutes to warm up into a discussion. Start by having your panel briefly respond to the play.
- When asking a question of the audience, don't be afraid of "wait time." They are processing what they just experienced and need to be given a chance to think.
- Be familiar with the issues and the material in this discussion guide and in the handouts.
- Have strategies for generating questions from the audience. It is NOT recommended to get questions from audiences before they even see the play. One strategy that has been effective is to pass out index cards to the audience before the play and then collect them during the discussion period.
- Do not be afraid to interrupt a panelist to get him or her back on track, or to move things along. Failure to do this robs the students of an opportunity to respond and engage.
- Also do not let the adults in the audience dominate the conversation. This is the biggest complaint from both adults and youth of the post-show events.
- Be aware of gender balance with audience participation.

- Be sure either you or the panelists rephrase the question so that all can hear what has been asked.

Moderator's Script – Introducing the Play

- Introduce yourself!
- "The show you're about to see is about eating disorders, the mental illness with the highest fatality rate in this country. People who suffer from the disease do so in silence. The Thin Line is an effort to break this silence and help those who are suffering find help and support."
- "The Thin Line is about 30 minutes long and one actor will play the role of four different characters--a friend, a girl, her internal negative voice, and a mother."
- "There will be a discussion period immediately after the show. During this time you will be able to ask questions, and later you will receive handouts with helpful information." [Inform them what form this discussion will take, whether you will break into small groups, or have a large group discussion with a panel.]
- Introduce the support team in the room to the audience:
- With younger audiences: "Please give respect not only to the actor who is concentrating, but to the people in the room who may have friends or family who are suffering: please, no talking or clowning."
- "Please turn off cell phones, alarms and pagers at this time."(Especially if you have parents and visitors!)
- "Now we will start The Thin Line, written and directed by Cathy Plourde, and performed for you today by (actor's name): _____."

After the Show

DISCUSSION FORMAT OPTIONS

Immediately following the presentation of **The Thin Line** the Moderator who introduced the show should organize the audience for the post-show discussion. Site Coordinators often want some information on how others structure the post-performance program:

Several schools and organizations who have booked **The Thin Line** for large audiences have had success with doing a 20 or 30 minute whole-group discussion with the panel, followed by inviting people who wish to talk in greater depth about the issues to go to designated rooms for smaller-group interaction with the panel members, sending the rest of the audience back to classes. Some schools do a whole-group panel discussion with small group follow-ups with advisors or homerooms. Some just have a whole-group panel discussion. Please create the format or combination that works best in your location and for your population, keeping in mind the well-being of your audience!

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

If you are breaking into small groups, explain to the audience that trained adults will facilitate the groups, and inform them of where they need to go. Once in the small groups, the facilitator should begin

by establishing guidelines for how the group will operate. This would include how to respect the group members as well as an agreement of confidentiality. Asking each member of a group to contribute one thought on the show is a good way to generate discussion. Invite the group to generate questions about the characters in the play and about eating disorders. Ask if there were things in the play that people did not understand or still have questions about. Use the small group time to formulate a question for the panel if you are returning to the large group after this smaller discussion.

Please be sure to train the facilitators to be sure they are comfortable and knowledgeable. Discuss with them what to expect from the program, what issues are prevalent in the school at the time, and how to answer common questions and observations by students.

LARGE GROUP PANEL DISCUSSION

If holding a panel discussion with the whole of the audience, invite the panel members to the front of the performance space and have them briefly introduce themselves, and perhaps give a short reaction to the play. Panel discussions work best if introductions are done as quickly as possible and then the floor is opened up to questions from the audience.

One effective strategy has been the use of note cards. The audience members are given note cards when they arrive, their questions written after the performance are collected on the aisles, and given to the moderator to ask of the panel.

Roving or audience microphones in the aisle are also viable options.

Note: the actor is available to participate as a panel member, though it is not required that you do so. She is not trained to facilitate discussions and does not take the place of your local resources.

A SAMPLE DISCUSSION APPROACH

This is one but certainly not the only way a discussion could go. When you let your audience guide the discussion, together you may make many wonderful discoveries and observations. We've included the following based on a couple of years of audience conversations, which may be of use to you in mentally preparing for how your discussion might go. You will have to respond to and name what issues, concerns, emotions are raised particular to your community's situation. Good luck!

1. **Start** with what the audience has just experienced. (This will give you a sense of where they are emotionally, and will begin to engage participation.) What surprised you in this play? Why? Was this realistic? How so? What do you know now that you didn't know before?
2. **Move** into what they already know. (This will make it less lecture-like for them, and give you a window on what they already know.) What are the different types of eating disorders? Can you ALWAYS tell by looking at someone that they have one? What are symptoms, medical complications and conditions that develop?

Young people can be drawn in to the seriousness of the issue by hearing about some of the difficulties like the burning of the esophagus lining, tooth decay, the loss or prevention of a period, the stress on the organs etc.

3. Things that seemed to help students "get it." **If it's not about eating, what is it about?**

Control, relationships, and stress, are among many other factors. Caution: Connecting it to sexual abuse, while often true, may not be responsible in some settings.

What connections can you make between eating disorders and other mental illness and self-destructive behaviors?

Addiction is something students are culturally, if not personally familiar with, and is understood as a mental illness: some people try to hurt themselves with alcohol or drugs, some people cut themselves, others suffer from low-self esteem or depression. Caution: be sure they know not everyone who cuts has an eating disorder; not everyone with an eating disorder cuts.

What is the difference between disordered eating and an eating disorder?

What is disordered eating? Not everyone who has a drink is an alcoholic, not everyone who diets has an eating disorder. Just as drugs and alcohol affect your brain and body's development and can lead to addiction, disordered eating hurts your brain and body, and can lead to an eating disorder.

4. For the boys in the audience who think this play and eating disorders have nothing to do with them: **(Boys are at risk, and Girls often care what boys think.)**

Why is it important for males to know about eating disorders? Why are more and more males being diagnosed with eating disorders than ever before?

Males have more pressure to be macho and buff than ever before. Coaches and doctors are starting to become aware, so perhaps more are diagnosed. Certain sports are more prone to eating disorders: wrestling, swimming, gymnastics. Body image problems are not just girl problems. What about guys who use steroids to buff up? How is steroid use like what people are going through who have eating disorders?

5. For the people in the audience who say, "Yes, I know all this-- so what do I do to help my friend?"

What strategies can you think of? What things don't help and might even be harmful?

The teenager's peer world is everything and adults in general forget how devastating rifts in friendships can be--do not underestimate or minimize this! Over and over it comes up how hard it is to have a friend who is struggling, and how awful it can be to try and say something. Note how hard it can be to be the friend in this situation. The hand out on how to help a roommate or friend is very good.

6. CLOSING THE DISCUSSION

It is vital that every audience member understand that support is available to them and that though the program itself has concluded, people in their community are available to help them at any time. Make certain to identify who these people are, how they can be contacted, and make available to all audience members a list of these resources. Thank the audience for making a positive step toward breaking the silence around eating disorders, and that each person's words and actions have impact on those who are struggling with this illness.

HANDOUTS AND OTHER MATERIALS

Students should receive a copy of the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) handouts or other materials you plan to provide. Please distribute to everyone as they leave, or when they return to class. We find that passing them out just before a discussion tends to undermine discussion. Information on your local resources should be printed up ahead of time and given to EVERY student so that no one declines help because of fear of drawing attention to him or herself.

Discussion Questions

General Questions

- What do you know now about eating disorders that you did not know before this presentation?
- What questions do you still have about eating disorders?
- Would it be hard for you to talk to a friend you suspected had an eating disorder? Why?
- Cutting is also a form of self-destruction. Not all people with eating disorders cut, not all cutters have an eating disorder. Why do people hurt themselves? How does it affect you when people comment on the way you look?
- How do people in magazines or movies affect the way our culture thinks about appearance? Do you think they are really that perfect?
- What does it mean to be healthy?

QUESTIONS WITH GUIDED ANSWERS*

*Please note that entire books and studies are dedicated to answering these questions. We offer some general responses that only begin to get at the heart of the matter. ADD VERB Productions does not imply these are conclusive answers.

An eating disorder is not about eating. What do you think it is about?

An eating disorder is manifested in an effort to cope and to communicate, to gain control in a life that feels out of control. People with eating disorders feel powerless in other parts of their lives and are looking for an outlet where they can feel control in an attempt to establish a stronger sense of self. They are looking for a sense of self-worth, agency, and special-ness. It would fit, then, that a good way to help people with eating disorders is to promote these things; assure them of their self-worth, and help them come to an understanding through positive affirmation that they are unique and powerful. Accepting them for who they are will help them cope with the feelings of doubt, shame and inadequacy that haunt people with eating disorders and will help take the focus off of eating and weight control.

How are eating disorders similar to addiction and substance abuse?

Just as an alcoholic or addict cannot just "be" differently, a person with an eating disorder cannot just "be" differently. People who abuse substances may be trying to change how they feel on the inside-- just like people with eating disorders. There are many forms that self-destruction can take, and while some take it outward, others take their feelings inward. All of these people may feel that their lives are out of control, and while addicts or alcoholics may numb themselves and try to escape, people with eating disorders try to bring control into their lives with food.

Why do you think some people "get" an eating disorder and some don't?

The combination of circumstances, pressures, and a person's own mental health factor in. We cannot predict who will get one, but we can observe that different groups of people are more susceptible. Certain types of athletic activities seem to have a higher rate of eating disorders than others (dance, wrestling, gymnastics, track, to name a few). And while currently over 90% of people with eating disorders are female, everyone is susceptible to eating disorders. It is a disease which is blind to gender, race, and socioeconomic background. Some precursors to disordered eating would include low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy, a tendency to define the self in terms of appearance, a need for

control accompanied by feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, difficulty managing emotions, social anxiety and lack of social skills, and perfectionism. Changing these patterns, and learning to not judge others or oneself by unrealistic standards of beauty are key to the road to recovery.

Do you think that there are differences between the way females and males suffer from eating disorders? Females and males experience eating disorders in the same ways, and, more and more, boys are given narrow and unrealistic messages from the media about what it means to be a man. Unfortunately, a boy is less likely to be diagnosed in the early stages because people still think of it as a girl's problem.

How can I support a friend with an eating disorder?

The NEDA handout is very helpful here. Please review for more information. Here are some general guidelines: When helping a loved one cope with an eating disorder it is important to remember that they suffer from the disease because of low self-esteem and that each interaction you have with them needs to foster that problem. Learn as much as you can about eating disorders, and learn what the differences are between the facts and the myths about weight, nutrition, and exercise. Be honest, and use "I" statements when you speak of your concerns, which will help them not feeling so defensive. Empathize, support their struggle, be a consistent and caring friend, but also take care of yourself. Everyone has limits and if you are not taking care of yourself you will not be helping in a positive way. Instead, set an example of empowerment and respect for yourself. Seek help and support for how to best help and support your friend. Avoid making promises or rules you cannot--nor should not—keep. You are not responsible for your friend's actions. Most importantly: tell someone. The sooner your friend's issues are addressed, the better the chances of their recovery.

What are some ways one might think are helpful, but are really detrimental?

It is a popular assumption that we should not be angry with someone who is sick, but the truth of the matter is that we do feel angry. In a concern with wanting to help, this can often lead to dishonesty in an effort to hide the anger. It is okay to express the ways that a loved one's disease is affecting you, just remember not to pass judgment, to keep your statements to 'I' statements, and to clarify that your emotions are born out of love, a desire to support, and a concern for their safety. Expressing how we feel can also help gain trust and works toward the goal of taking care of oneself, which is an essential tool in helping someone else. Be sensitive to the language you use. Putting down your own appearance, remarking on others, engaging in name-calling or critical remarks, making jokes about eating disorders, keeping secrets when you know someone is in danger. Remember that your friend is a person with a problem, but that he or she is first just a person with feelings.

Thank You

We at ADD VERB Productions Arts & Education are committed to our mission of using theatre as a means of raising awareness, dialogue, and change with socially relevant issues. Your opinion is important to us. If you have any questions or input on how we can better suit the needs of our clients please feel free to call us at any time. Thank you for bringing **The Thin Line** to your community!

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