

What Parents Should Know About *13 Reasons Why*

At Riverside Trauma Center, we encourage efforts to raise awareness about mental health challenges and about suicide because such efforts reduce stigma, help those struggling to feel less alone, and lead people to access help. So you would think that when a popular Netflix series comes along and brings the conversation about suicide into the mainstream, we would be on board. Unfortunately, it's not that simple. As with most difficult topics, the issue of suicide is incredibly nuanced.

The new Netflix series, *13 Reasons Why*, based on a book by Jay Asher, follows the classmates of Hannah, a high school student, as they react to secret cassette tapes she recorded narrating the circumstances that led to her suicide death. (Spoiler alerts ahead.) In these tapes, she reveals the identities of 13 people whose actions or omissions she alleges directly caused her death. She describes scenarios that include rape, deceit, bullying, sexual harassment, and stalking. The show includes explicit scenes of these incidents, including rape, a fatal car crash, and a particularly detailed, intense scene of a suicide death.

The show's creators have emphasized their intentions behind the creative decisions they made – choosing to dramatize situations that would be familiar to their audience, and to do so in a manner that would be perceived as real and honest, without glossing over adolescent pain. Issues such as sexual assault, stalking, underage drinking, bullying, and suicide are important topics that need to be discussed with young people. Parents are frequently told that it is critical to have conversations with their teens about sexual consent, mental health, suicide, and bullying. So when a show comes along that is popular with this age group, it presents an opportunity to open up discussions in families. Unfortunately, there are some serious problems with the way in which *13 Reasons Why* portrays these important issues.

Research tells us that viewing particularly disturbing images has a powerful and lasting impact on our brains. We have learned from past events like 9/11 that repeated exposure to images depicting violence, death, and destruction can be harmful. Similarly, trauma survivors are often highly distressed by visual reminders of their trauma. Given the rates of suicide attempts and sexual assaults among adolescents, it's likely that many of the adolescents watching the TV show are themselves survivors of such adverse life events, and therefore likely to find the content highly distressing.

There have been over 50 studies conducted over the past several decades which conclude that the way in which a suicide is depicted, both in media and in news reports, directly correlates to subsequent increases in rates of suicide in communities where those reports were published or aired. For example, detailed, glamorized, or highly publicized suicides as well as fictional depictions of suicide deaths have been shown to cause a direct increase in suicide rates following those reports.

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We know that some factors, such as showing scenes where a suicide took place or giving specific descriptions of the actual method of death (both of which occur in *13 Reasons*), lead to increases in suicide deaths. There are various ways to discuss with adolescents the many challenges they may confront in life, without exposing them to graphic images or exposing them to messages that are conveyed in unsafe ways.

Despite our concerns, it is also important to acknowledge what the show does well. It does present the very helpful theme of what can happen when people ignore the voices of their conscience. It also details the destructive consequences of negative behaviors and choices.

On the surface, *13 Reasons Why* might come across as a show that discusses mental health, however the issues of mental health or illness are never explored in the show. While a varied number of issues were presented in the show (e.g., sexual assault, sexual orientation, sexting, etc.), for Hannah they seemed to generally manifest themselves as shaming and harassment. The overwhelming message seems to be centered on the oft-cited but misleading narrative that bullying ultimately leads to suicide. The storyline espouses that the simple solution to Hannah's struggle – indeed the cause of most of her strife – was the unkindness, and in some scenarios, the downright cruelty of her friends. While this is an important theme to explore, causal links between bullying and suicide are simplistic and as such, problematic.

With reports of children as young as 10 years old watching the series, and knowing that many young people are watching without their parents knowing what they watch, the following are a few recommendations we have for parents:

- Ask your children what they know about the show. Have they heard about it? Have they watched it?
- If your children want to see the show, and you feel that is appropriate given their ages, temperaments, and backgrounds, watch the show with them. For many families, the right decision will be to not watch the show.
- Discuss that you know there are scenes that graphically depict sexual assault and suicide, and decide together that it may be best to skip those scenes. Give them reasons as to why you don't want them to watch these scenes.
- Counter the romanticized storytelling technique that people can communicate with and manipulate people and relationships from beyond the grave.
- Frame suicide as a person's misperception that the act is their only solution to a problem about which they feel hopeless. It's important to create the narrative that suicide rarely happens because of one reason. People are often struggling with a whole host of reasons, and then sometimes one thing becomes the proverbial, "straw that broke the camel's back." Mental illness, such as depression, is most often implicated as a significant contributing cause of



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suicide. And, as most symptoms of mental illnesses are treatable, suicide can often be preventable when people get proper treatment.

- Reinforce that any young person who is struggling with any of the issues raised in the series should talk to a trusted adult to get help. No one should struggle alone. Review with your children who are their trusted adults at home, in their community, and at school.
- Discuss key elements of the show after each episode. To get a conversation started, here are some questions you can ask:
 - What do you think about...?
 - How do you feel about ____ reacting in that way?
 - Do you think he/she could have done something differently?
 - What kinds of problems do you think this is going to cause him/her in the long run?
 - How would you have preferred the adults reacted in this situation? Or, if you were the adult in this situation, how might you have reacted differently?

As with most difficult topics, conversation with your children is the key. Be curious about their thoughts and feelings, and ask open-ended questions.

For more information on talking to youth about difficult topics or help with coping, please check out the Trauma Center Resources section on our website at www.riversidetraumacenter.org. For immediate support, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or text the word "HOME" to 741741 at the Crisis Text Line.

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