



youth service bureau

13 Things Parents Should Know About *13 Reasons Why*

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13 Reasons Why is a new, popular series on Netflix based on the Jay Asher novel by the same name. The series is centered around a high school student, Hannah Baker, who dies by suicide. Hannah leaves cassette tapes behind to let others know what were her “reasons” why she chose suicide, and what the individuals did to contribute to her death. There are some positive aspects of this show, but I also have many concerns about how suicide is depicted in this series.

Here is what the show addresses well:

- 1) **Bullying and “slut shaming.”** This show highlights the impact that bullying, spreading rumors, and “slut shaming” can have on teens. Teens’ reputations are important to them, and rumors can spread very quickly (see #2). One of the great takeaways from this show is the importance of being kind to others and treating others well.
- 2) **The impact of technology and social media.** A picture can circulate throughout the school within minutes, and things that are sent cannot be unsent. A picture of Hannah, taken out of context, began her downward slide toward isolation.
- 3) **Rape/sexual assault.** The series shows that rape and sexual assault are a problem in high schools and that these crimes often go unreported. Victims don’t report for multiple reasons including shame, self-blame, fear of retaliation, and fear of not being believed. These scenes are unnecessarily graphic, which is also important for parents to know.
- 4) **The parents’ reaction to their child’s suicide.** Hannah’s parents are devastated by her death, and they have a hard time focusing on anything other than what happened. They are living in anguish, searching for how their child could have done this.

Here is where the series misses the mark:

- 5) **Suicide was the only option.** The series does not show Hannah seeking help in any meaningful way. Throughout the series, she writes an anonymous note and poem, and she makes “one last attempt” and visits her school counselor. Mr. Porter admittedly misses an opportunity to be helpful and ends up blaming the victim for her sexual assault (see #3). Hannah does not reach out to any other trusted adults, including her parents, during the course of the show.
- 6) **No discussion or mention of mental health or illness.** For those who die by suicide, more than 90% have a diagnosable mental illness (SAMHSA.gov). The show missed an opportunity to discuss how bullying and other life events could have impacted her mental health.

7) **Suicide is glamorized.** The creators of the show refute this claim, but I disagree. Hannah was beautiful and intriguing. Her tapes made her mysterious and powerful – the other students must follow her orders or risk the tapes being released publicly. She is portrayed as a hero for getting revenge on those who did her wrong (see #10).

8) **“Living on” after death.** Hannah is able to “live on” and communicate with her peers after her suicide. This is not reality. After a suicide, a person is dead. No more communicating. No more relationship. The person has died.

9) **Blaming others for suicide.** Rather than focusing on Hannah’s internal emotions and struggle, the show is very much “other-focused.” She leaves tapes for her “reasons” to hear what they did to her. Blaming others simplifies why a person chose to end his or her life, and implies it is a fully acceptable option.

10) **Revenge suicide.** Along with #9, Hannah was able to exact revenge on all of the people she blames for her suicide. This is a dangerous message to send to youth. Instead of addressing problems head-on using assertive communication, the show focuses on passive or passive-aggressive communication (leaving notes in bags, keying a car, etc.) Of course this is part of what makes television dramatic, but Hannah doesn’t confront any of the people she blames until after her death... when no one can do anything about it. This is not a helpful message to youth who are struggling or vulnerable.

11) **The aftermath of a suicide.** Hannah’s peers were more concerned with the tapes being made public than actually grieving for a lost friend. In my experience providing support services to classmates following a suicide, students are devastated: not only friends of the student that died but also others that may not have personally known the person.

12) **The graphic depiction of suicide.** This show explicitly shows the act of Hannah dying by suicide. As an adult, this scene was very difficult to watch, and this is by far the most concerning element of the series. The show creators claim to have consulted with professionals during the creation of this show, however, this scene flies in the face of research by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Showing a graphic depiction of suicide in this manner increases the risk of additional or “copycat” suicides.

13) **TV-MA.** This show is rated TV-MA for a reason – there are many graphic scenes as well as intense subject matter. Given that this show is so popular with middle and high school students, the content of the show is concerning. The show does display warnings before particular episodes, but teens are unlikely to think, “Oh, this might be too much for me. I’ll shut it off.” The regulation centers of teen brains are not developed enough for that.

What can parents do?

If your child plans to watch the series, take their age and maturity into consideration as well as their mental health status. Then, *watch WITH them*. Pause the show as needed to discuss important scenes or things that jump out to you.

If your child has already watched the series, *ask questions about their experience*. What did they learn? What did they like/dislike? What messages do they take away from having watched the show? Do they know what to do if they are having thoughts of harming themselves?

Provide some guidance and support. Tell them what steps you want them to take if they are feeling stressed, isolated, angry, embarrassed, frightened, confused, overwhelmed, or abused. Share with them that there are better options available than pre-planning revenge and ending their life.

Connect with your child regularly. Sometimes it takes a few attempts (or many) to get your child to open up about his or her experiences. Kids often say, “I’m fine” when we ask how they are doing. Ask more open-ended questions about their day and their life to find out what is really going on.

Parents – Do you want your teens to have the take-away message that placing blame and seeking revenge after the fact are the only ways to handle stressful problems? Or that your child’s pain must be insignificant because it doesn’t compare to Hannah’s experiences? *This is an opportunity to connect with your child and help reduce feelings of stress and isolation.*

We encourage you to review the following resources for more information about the series, talking points about the show, and a discussion guide:

- [The Jed Foundation and \(SAVE\) Suicide Awareness Voices of Education](#)
- [Common Sense Media](#) - click on the tab called “Families Can Talk About” for discussion topics related to the show
- [There's no reason to buy '13 Reasons Why' imagery](#) (Star Tribune)
- [‘13 Reasons Why’ depicts a graphic suicide. Experts say there’s a problem with that.](#) (Washington Post)

As always, if you have individual concerns about your child related to mental health, or need additional resources, please contact Youth Service Bureau. We will help your family to navigate these challenges.

Youth Service Bureau’s mission is to help youth and families learn the skills they need to be more successful at home, in school and throughout their community. YSB provides Youth-Focused Family Counseling, Diversion and School-Based Services (including mental and chemical health, and crisis response services), and Youth & Family Education.

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