

How '13 Reasons Why' can drive discussion around mental health

Kevin Solari and the Associated Press May 3, 2017



This image released by Netflix shows Katherine Langford in a scene from the series, "13 Reasons Why," about a teenager who commits suicide. The stomach-turning suicide scene has triggered criticism from some mental health advocates that it romanticizes suicide and even promoted many schools across the country to send warning letters to parents and guardians. The show's creators are unapologetic, saying their frank depiction of teen life needs to be "unflinching and raw."

AP Photo

A high school is reeling from the suicide of one of its students. Her locker is decorated with cards and flowers and students mourn by taking selfies in front of it. Teachers begin class by telling students where they can find counselors if they need to talk. But as the community tries to get their lives back to normal, one student receives a box – old-fashioned cassette tapes from the girl herself, detailing her life and why she killed herself.

Since its release a month ago, the Netflix series "13 Reasons Why" has created discussion about how it addresses suicide. Not least controversial is a final, graphic scene of the suicide, part of why the show is rated TV-MA, despite the target audience.

"It's definitely geared towards adolescents," said Diana Farrell, chief clinical officer at North Central Behavioral Health Systems in La Salle.

The show is based on a young adult novel "Thirteen Reasons Why," which was published in 2007 and became a best seller in 2011.

The mature rating means the show may be unsuitable for children under 17, and three episodes that contain explicit material have "viewer discretion advised" warnings.

But some mental health professionals are going further, with the National Association of School Psychologists declaring, "We do not recommend that vulnerable youth, especially those who have any degree of suicidal ideation, watch this series."

Critics of the show argue that depression and mental illness — keys to understanding suicide — are rarely mentioned and the fact that its heroine, Hannah, gets to tell her story after her death sends a potentially dangerous message. They're also upset that the school guidance counselor depicted on the show seems to blame the victim.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide was the second leading cause of death for children and young adults ages 10 to 24 in 2014.

The Werther Effect?

The concern is not new. In the late 1700s, the epistolary novel "The Sorrows of Young Werther" became a huge bestseller in the area that is now Germany. The protagonist writes a series of letters detailing a painful love triangle and commits suicide to resolve it.

Reports at the time said a wave of imitative suicides followed the novel's success.

"At the time, people didn't have such a strict understanding of the difference between fiction and non-fiction," said Robyn Schiffman, dean at Illinois Valley Community College. Formerly an English professor, Schiffman has written several academic articles on "Werther," "People thought it was real."

The author, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, even said that he based his novel on the life of a real man named Jerusalem.

The copycat suicides that followed were, about a century later, called "The Werther Effect." But Schiffman cautioned that there is not data from that time period, just reports of the copycat suicides linked to the novel.

But it shows that fandom is nothing new.

"People imitate fictional characters," she said, noting Star Wars fans that dress up as characters.

Farrell doesn't think "13 Reasons Why" will lead to the same type of copycat behavior, but that doesn't mean the show can't be used as a discussion point between parents and kids.

"Adolescents lead very secretive lives," Farrell said. "And the adults that are in on it are often not the best role models."

To avoid awkwardness, she suggested having conversations in the car, when it would be less uncomfortable than having conversations while looking at one other across the kitchen table.

"Having discussions is imperative," Farrell said. The events that lead kids to take their own lives are often embarrassing, traumatic or linked to an all-or-nothing sense of success, she said.

Rather than copying a character from a Netflix show, Farrell said she would be more concerned with kids copying someone they know.

"Don't be secretive about it," she said.

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