

13 Things You Should Know About *13 Reasons Why*

1 **What it is.** *13 Reasons Why* is a popular Netflix web television series. There are thirteen one-hour episodes that viewers can access on the website Netflix.com. Select scenes are also posted elsewhere online.

- The series is based on the 2007 young adult book, *13 Reasons Why*, by Jay Asher.
- The plot revolves around two high school students, Clay Jensen and Hannah Baker, the latter of whom dies by suicide before the story begins. She has left behind cassette tapes wherein she describes the demoralizing circumstances in her life. The tapes provide her version of the reasons why she died by suicide and name the people she feels are most responsible.

2 **Why it's worth a look.** If you don't have thirteen spare hours, you might watch a few parts of a few episodes of *13 Reasons Why*, even if it bores or disturbs you. Once you have a feel for the style and content, you could read the plot summaries of the episodes online.

- Watching some of the series will help you understand its pros and cons better than simply reading this info sheet.
- Watching some of the series will give you additional credibility with anyone interested in discussing or debating its content and merits.

3 **Why talking about it helps.** It is far better to talk about the phenomenon of suicide than not to talk about it. The Netflix series strikes some viewers as tiresome, melodramatic, or too disturbing to watch, but it has sparked some helpful conversations.

- **When a caring person listens, empathizes, and discusses suicide with a distressed person, it decreases the chances of that distressed person ever making an attempt.** Yes, suicide is an uncomfortable topic, but talking about any uncomfortable topic demonstrates your concern. Talking about Hannah's suicide in *13 Reasons Why*, even if you haven't watched the series, is an opportunity for candid discussion.
- In addition, you can point out some of *13's* inaccuracies, including: the unethical and unprofessional behavior of the (apparently unlicensed) school counselor (see Point 9 below); Hannah's elaborate pre-suicide planning; the depiction of suicide as a logical and viable way to cope with break-ups, bullying, assault, and betrayal; and the disinclination of Hannah's classmates to seek adult support. Sure, most teen films portray adults as unhelpful. But in real life, most adults are helpful and most adolescents know whom they can lean on for support.
- For more inaccuracies, check out Point 7 below.

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How it recycles timeless themes. *13 Reasons Why* is not uniquely violent or provocative, but the rape and suicide scenes are particularly disturbing.

- Similar emotional turmoil, interpersonal violence, self-harm, and intrigue exist in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (wherein both main characters commit suicide) as well as in his plays *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*. (Two of Shakespeare's late plays feature cannibalism and incest: *Pericles* and *The Tragedy of King Lear*.)
- These 16th-century themes were dramatized more recently in the 1995 independent film, *Kids*, directed by Larry Clark, and the semi-autobiographical *Thirteen*, the 2003 film written by Catherine Hardwick and Nikki Reed. Both of these films and *13 Reasons Why* are more gratuitous and less literary than Shakespeare, but that makes them more accessible to a teen audience. Still, the content is classic, which further supports Point 3 above.
- Conclusion: Many adolescents have seen worse online or read something similarly disturbing for their English class. Young people are growing up in an environment that is more saturated with violent and sexual media (e.g., news, movies, video games) than in any previous generation. To read my thoughts on exposure, visit: http://campspirit.com/files/2016/03/CM-XXX-posed_2015.pdf
- Recommendation: Whenever possible, parents, teachers, and other caring adults should sensibly restrict and monitor the exposure young people have to content. Whenever possible, adults and young people should watch and read together, or learn about that content together by sampling it or reading summaries. Then, discuss it. Only by engaging in candid conversations that contextualize content can we promote healthy development and model healthy choices around relationships and entertainment. See: *Harkness Method*.

5

How to distinguish fantasy from reality. Death by suicide is tragic, not romantic, not glamorous, and not an effective coping strategy.

- Suicide is a permanent action that causes widespread distress in all survivors. Hannah's leaving a box of cassettes to wreak havoc on her peers (and the threat of back-up boxes if they stop the chain of listening) shares something chaotic in common with Heath Ledger's portrayal of the violently sociopathic Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008).
- Hannah has symptoms of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder; she may also have antisocial personality disorder or borderline personality disorder. There is more here diagnostically than a mood or anxiety disorder.
- **Healthy and effective ways of coping with distress, as well as evidence-based treatments for mental illnesses, offer hope for anyone in emotional pain.** Psychotherapy and medication may take time and effort, but they work.

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Why the series is controversial. In addition to its graphic cinematography and disturbing content, *13 Reasons Why* has also stirred debate about whether it glamorizes suicide. Having watched many parts of the series, I am confident saying that it does indeed glamorize suicide. So why the debate?

- On one hand, most of the characters in this fictitious series have glamorous dimensions: good looks, fancy homes, fashionable clothes, trendy mannerisms, impeccable manicures, etc. On the other hand, the main character is clearly in pain, having been the target of serious mistreatment. The guilt that many of the survivors feel is also clear and somewhat realistic.
- On one hand, this is a stylish, web television series, which makes it inherently glamorous, albeit fictional. Millions of people have ogled at Hannah's painful experiences and tragic, calculated suicide. On the other hand, the series does try to illustrate individuals' psychological diversity and the painful interpersonal worlds of some adolescents.

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Which parts are most inaccurate. The title and plot falsely suggest that the reasons people die by suicide are typically discoverable and logical.

- **In many cases, suicide is an impulsive action, taken by someone whose judgement is clouded by one or more of the following: depression, substance use, trauma, or hopelessness.** (The series does illustrate how alcohol abuse, reckless online behavior, relationship violence, and plain old gossip fuel psychological distress.) Suicide is rarely the last step in an elaborate plan.
- In many cases, the unknown and undiscoverable details of a person's state of mind before dying by suicide add a lugubrious cloud of suffering to the death itself. In some ways, *13 Reasons Why* provides an abundance of answers to the questions everyone asks—but precious few ever get to answer—after a suicide. Therein lies the lurid popularity of the series.

8

How to understand the causes of suicide. The title and plot falsely suggest that suicide is the sole fault of the survivors. Only sensitive and well-intentioned Clay is exonerated, barely.

- **Dying by suicide is more a symptom of mental illness than a direct consequence of other people's actions or inactions. With the exception of violent perpetrators, suicide is rarely the fault of the survivors, even those who are named in a note, tape, or video.**
- Yes, certain people may have traumatized the person who attempts to end their life by suicide. And yes, we must continue to prevent bullying and assault, in all their forms. But suicide is not an effective way to retaliate or get revenge. Perpetrators of traumatic violence are unlikely to be effected by their target's suicide, let alone remediated by it.
- One interesting conversation to have is about which characters in *13 Reasons Why* contributed most to Hannah's deep distress. Some are clearly guilty, but viewers will find themselves asking how some people who are the targets of physical and interpersonal violence recover and live happy, productive lives; others live, but in emotional pain; and a few others die by suicide. Research suggests that one important factor distinguishes resilient survivors: Having at least one, loving, reliable interpersonal connection.

9

Where to find support. Watching *13 Reasons Why* and other provocative content is likely to stir up uncomfortable feelings, whether viewers admit them or not.

- You can provide support to others by empathizing and asking open-ended questions. Comments such as, “It was hard to watch” and questions such as, “How else might she have expressed or coped with her pain?” help to start supportive conversations.
- You can remind others of the professional and lay resources available to them, such as licensed mental health professionals, clergy, parents, teachers, coaches, peers, mentors, and family friends.
- Rest assured that trusted adults are rarely as negligent as the “school counselor,” Mr. Porter. In response to Hannah’s concern about being sexually assaulted, Porter asks, “Did he force himself on you?” Hannah replies, “I think so,” at which point Porter incorrectly and unethically asserts that if she can’t give him the boy’s name and is unwilling to press charges, then “there really is only one option...you can move on.”
- NOTE: Almost anyone, regardless of educational qualifications, can call himself or herself a “school counselor.” Reputable schools, camps, and other youth-serving organizations employ only licensed professionals with a master’s or doctorate in clinical social work or clinical psychology.

10

How to respond to suicidality. There are excellent online courses for anyone wishing to learn the best ways to spot and respond to signs of distress.

- Screening for Mental Health, Inc. has the best 90-minute online course for non-mental health professionals and unlicensed counselors. The course is called *Plan, Prepare, Prevent: The SOS Signs of Suicide®* and is available here: mentalhealthscreening.org/Gatekeeper
- You should consult a licensed mental health professional whenever you have a concern about a friend’s mental health. Handouts on suicidality are intended to provide context and assist you in the initial stage of providing support. They do not qualify you to make an assessment of lethality.

11

The reality that underlies 13’s fantasy. The dramatic fantasy in *13 Reasons Why* is that Hannah can connect with others *after her death*. We all want to connect, to feel that we belong, and to nurture relationships. The tragic flaw in Hannah’s magical thinking about posthumous connection, retaliation, and justice is that no mere mortal can connect with others after they die.

- It’s normal to imagine what it would be like to be dead. We’ve all wondered how others would react, but we will probably never know.
- However, we can connect while we are alive, even with those who have hurt us or whom we love but feel disconnected from. **Seeking help and forging new connections in times of distress is a sign of strength.** That support can lead to healthier mental states and improved relationships.

12 **How to reframe distorted thinking.** Many young people (especially those with symptoms of anxiety or depression) believe everything they think. We do not need to believe everything we think.

- If a person is catastrophizing or engaging in black-or-white thinking (e.g., “I’ll never get into a good college” or “I’m a total failure” or “I have zero friends” or “My life is meaningless”), **then provide empathy and a gentle nudge to look at themselves and their circumstances in a more accurate, nuanced way.**
- **Try saying something like, “It may feel bleak right now. I can see how upset you are.” You might add something like, “It hasn’t always been like this, but it’s hard to imagine things getting better. Maybe part of it is how you’re seeing things right now. Let’s talk about it some more. What’s one time when you haven’t felt completely alone or like a total failure?”**

13 **What to expect next year.** The young people talking about 13 Reasons Why today will be talking about something else next year. New media and new people will enter the conversation. But like today, everyone will benefit from conversations about the meaning and effects of the latest content. Sex and violence have always been part of the human experience. One could even argue that some places in the world are more civilized than they were 1,000 or 10,000 years ago. It’s the daily, vivid, gratuitous saturation with this content that seems to have accelerated. It will probably continue. What to do?

- Don’t just talk about *what* you see (e.g., “There was another ISIS suicide bombing in London.”). Talk about *how it makes you feel*. (e.g., “When I watch the news and see pictures of dead bodies on the street, I feel helpless and angry. Groups like ISIS really frighten me, even though I don’t want to let them. It’s just awful.”).
- Just as you may be a supportive rock for someone, you need your own supportive rock. Reach out to someone you trust and lean on them when you need it.

