

## **13 Reasons Why**

The new Netflix series, *13 Reasons Why* (*13 RW*), is based on a young adult novel by Jay Asher. It revolves around Hannah, a teenage girl who takes her life by suicide. Hannah records 13 tapes for 13 people who she believes are responsible for her suicide.

Singer and series producer, Selina Gomez, said that she wanted to put the spotlight on what teenagers deal with in modern-day high schools: bullying, depression, suicide, and emotional abuse.

"Unfortunately, kids don't care," she says, "They have to see something that's going to scare them. They need to see something that's frightening.

"I want them to understand it. I would do anything to be able to have a good influence on this generation." ([source](#))

Despite Ms. Gomez' honourable intentions, the program is controversial among parents and educators. [CTV's](#) report of the Netflix series includes a message to all Ontario school boards issued by School Mental Health Assist, an organization that works in conjunction with the Ontario Ministry of Education:

"Use of the Netflix series, *13 Reasons Why*, as a teaching tool is not recommended," it read. "The material is graphic and potentially triggering for vulnerable young people... It has graphic content related to suicide, glamorization of suicidal behaviour and negative portrayals of helping professionals, which may prevent youth from seeking help," the memo said.



CTV mentions the concerns that mental health professionals have expressed about the series, which has a sizeable following among young people, some viewers as young as 10. Chief psychiatrist at the Hinks-Dellcrest Centre for Children and Families in Toronto, Dr. Marshall Korenblum, says, "The cat is out of the bag. It's out there so kids are going to watch it."

He doesn't find any harm in talking about suicide, "but it's got to be balanced, reasonable and include a message of hope and optimism."

### **Discussion Points from Community Suicide Prevention Network**

The Community Suicide Prevention Network (CSPN) of Ottawa notes that television can be an excellent springboard for discussion, but is concerned with the graphic nature of *13 Reasons Why* which has potential triggers for vulnerable people.

CSPN has developed some talking discussion points for teenagers, young adults, and parents, and hopes that people use the show as an opportunity for open and honest discussion:

- What do you like about the series? What don't you like? What could you do differently if you were Hannah? There are more healthy ways to cope with the feelings Hannah experiences – let's talk about some of them. What are some healthy ways you like to use? What are the things that make you feel happy and that you enjoy?
- What would you do if your friend asked you to keep a secret about suicide like they do in the show? What were the advantages and disadvantages of all the keeping of secrets in the show?
- What should you do if you try to talk to an adult when you are struggling, but you don't feel like they heard you? Who are the adults in your life that you can talk to when you are struggling?

When discussing the show with young people, it's important to support them so they understand:

- It's important to seek help when you are struggling. While not everyone will know what to say or have a helpful reaction if you ask for help, there are people who do, so keep trying to find someone who will help you. If someone tells you they are struggling with suicide, take them seriously and get help.

- How the guidance counselor in *13RW* responds is not appropriate and not typical of most counsellors. School counsellors are professionals and a trustworthy source for help. If your experience with a school counsellor is unhelpful, seek other sources of support such as a crisis line.
- Ask if your child's school is running [Sources of Strength](#), a program to promote help seeking among youth. For schools that have the program, consider hosting a campaign about breaking codes of silence around suicide and seeking help from adults.
- If you have watched the show and feel like you need support or someone to talk to reach out. Talk with a friend, family member, a counselor, or the crisis line. There is always someone who will listen.
- If someone tells you they feel empty or hopeless, or unable to go on, ask them to describe it, keep the conversation going and don't be afraid to eventually ask if they're thinking of suicide. Be there to listen, and provide empathy.

Knowing how to acknowledge and respond to someone who shares their thoughts of emotional distress or suicide is important, CSPN says. They suggest that people listen, and listen without judgement; be kind and caring, offer to stay with the person in question, offer to accompany them to get help, or contact a crisis line.

### **Collaborative Discussion Points from Netflix, Suicide Awareness Groups, and the Ontario School Board**

The following [talking points](#) around *13 RW* were drawn from points prepared by the [Suicide Awareness Voices of Education](#) and the [Jed Foundation](#), an organization that empowers teens and young adults with the skills and support to grow into healthy, thriving adults, in collaboration with Netflix, with points from the Ontario School Boards:

1. *13 RW* is fictional. When you die, you do not get to make a movie or talk to people any more. Leaving messages from beyond the grave is a dramatization produced in Hollywood and is not possible in real life.
2. Suicide and the reasons for it are very complex. There is no one single reason why someone takes their life. In fact, suicide is not a common response to life's challenges or adversity. The vast majority of people who experience bullying, the death of a friend, or any other adversity described in the series do not die by suicide. In fact, most reach out, talk to others and

seek help or find other productive ways of coping. They go on to lead healthy, normal lives.

3. Suicide is never glamorous or romantic as this series may lead someone to believe. Death by suicide is tragic.
4. It is important to know that, despite the portrayal of a serious treatment failure in *13RW*, there are many treatment options for life challenges, distress, and mental illness.
5. Suicide is never the fault of survivors of suicide loss. There are resources and support groups for suicide loss survivors in your community.
6. Encourage help seeking behavior and talk about trusted adults and resources in our community including walk-in counselling, peer support and support groups and individual counselling.

### **CSP's Statement and Media Guidelines**

In specific regard to the issues that *13 RW* Suicide addresses, the Centre for Suicide Prevention (CSP) acknowledged in a [statement](#) that suicide is complex and is not usually brought on by just one cause, like bullying, and suicidal people do not take their own lives to seek "revenge" against people who hurt them. The dramatic portrayal of a suicide death glamorizes an utterly desperate act that results from deep psychological pain and acute suffering.

The CSP has concerns about the series not following the Canadian Association of Suicide Prevention and the American Association of Suicidology's [media guidelines](#). These emphasize the presentation of suicide to discourage imitative or copycat suicides and minimize details and generalizations, and guidelines for print media to reduce the imitative effect. The organization stresses that suicide is reported in a straightforward manner so that suicide doesn't appear exciting.

While *13 Reasons Why* may glamorize suicide to some or affect already vulnerable people, but it also opens massive discussion around suicide, mental health, and bullying. Perhaps it's the mystery behind the story and not the suicide itself that young people are buzzing about; perhaps it is drawing out peer and social issues that may cause triggers and suicidal ideation and bring them to light.

No matter where you stand with *13 Reasons Why*, there is help available if people would just reach out.