
“13 Reasons Why” raises concerns about youth suicide

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Local mental health educators and advocates have several issues with “13 Reasons Why,” Netflix’s popular yet controversial new series dealing with youth suicide. But why not start with the title?

“There’s no specific reason for suicide” in most cases, said Maura Mahoney, manager of social emotional learning at the Worcester public schools. “There aren’t 13 events that happen and then somebody says, ‘That’s it.’ It’s so much more complicated than that.”

The show’s treatment of suicide – the plot revolves around the aftermath of a high school student’s suicide – has worried several Central Massachusetts school districts enough for them to issue messages of caution to families about the series, which was released on Netflix on March 31. Some health professionals, too, have concerns about what they see as a sensationalized depiction of a real and urgent health problem affecting young adults. Some even feel the show could be dangerous if viewed by an at-risk student without proper context supplied by an adult.

Those worries haven’t stopped the series from becoming a major success for Netflix, which has already renewed the show for a second season. Based on the 2007 novel of the same name by author Jay Asher, the series is structured around the 13 reasons for character Hannah Baker’s suicide, explanations of which she has recorded on cassette tapes with the instructions that they be shared with the

people she believes to be most responsible for her death. As the story evolves, it reveals the series of events, from a traumatic rape to her classmates' bullying, which led her to take her life.

According to Laurie Ross, a professor at Clark University and director of the Worcester-based health advocacy group HOPE Coalition, a discussion she had with HOPE's youth members last week about the series revealed many of them found the show to be at least entertaining, and maybe even true to life in some respects.

"They thought it was really well done and creative," she said, adding they appreciated the show's exploration of issues like the particular pressures teenage girls face compared to boys, and the entitlement of popular high school athletes. "It felt real to them."

Ms. Ross, who has seen several episodes of the show herself and found it to be to be a little "over the top," said some coalition members also couldn't imagine the series would be able to compel a viewer to take their own life.

But some mental health advocates believe popular media can be influential, and that a show like "13 Reasons" could even be dangerous in certain circumstances.

"I think unless a young person who is watching this and seeing the message being conveyed can speak (about it) on a rational level with an adult, there's always the possibility it could trigger thoughts of self-harm," said Paul Richard, executive director of the Leominster-based SHINE Initiative, which aims to raise awareness of mental health issues. "That's something that concerns me very much."

Specifically, he said he is worried by the show's portrayal of Hannah's fruitless attempt to reach out to her unhelpful school guidance counselor for support; in reality, he said a suicidal person's best option is to seek a trained professional's help, which the show would seem to discourage through the character's experience.

Several school systems in the region, including Worcester, Fitchburg, and Westboro, in recent weeks have responded to the sudden popularity of the show by either encouraging parents to help their children navigate the themes of the

show, or increasing their own programming around mental health and suicide. Several cited a recommendation from the National Association of School Psychologists that youth dealing with suicidal thoughts not view the show.

"I've been told by staff in our schools that kids are talking about (the series)," Ms. Mahoney said, explaining her district's decision to weigh in on the topic. She added that it's not just high school students seeing the show. "It's actually middle school and elementary kids as well."

In Fitchburg, district nursing director Pamela Rivers said the city's public schools have rolled out curriculum like Lifelines – a suicide prevention program – in response to the show to combat some of the mixed messages it could be conveying to younger viewers. Even if there's some good in the fact that the viral emergence of the show has at least generated some broader discussions about mental health and self-harm, she said, "it portrays (those themes) in a very non-supportive way."

"That's exactly why we wanted to have these education programs out there," Ms. Rivers said, "to separate what's appropriate and what's inappropriate, perception versus reality."

Other mental health experts agreed it's not enough simply to spark a conversation about suicide; the right information needs to be shared as well.

"For schools in their health classes to be talking about depression, for their literature classes to be talking about characters who are depressed, that's really helpful," said Lori Simkowitz-Lavigne, director of UMass Memorial Community Healthlink's Intensive Youth Services. "We just need to be careful about how we talk about it, that suicide isn't seen as a solution."

What troubled some educators and health professionals in particular about "13 Reasons" was the relative lack of attention given to any underlying mental health conditions or traumatic background that might have contributed to Hannah's suicide, even though those factors usually play a large role in real-life youth suicides.

There's also the fact that attempted suicide is unfortunately by no means an extraordinary event in the Worcester area. Ms. Simkowitz-Lavigne said her mobile crisis team, which intervenes in urgent psychiatric cases to help steer

vulnerable patients toward treatment and resources for their depression or other mental health conditions, sees about 1,750 under-21-year-olds each year.

"The acuity of the cases we're seeing seem to be higher than usual" recently as well, she said, meaning those youths are already into the later stages of their suicidal feelings by the time the crisis team gets involved.

Still, she said the service has been relatively successful at assisting those young people, which by the state's standard means they avoid having to send them to a hospital; according to Ms. Simkowitz-Lavigne, around 10 percent of the crisis team's patients end up being hospitalized; the state's target is 18 percent.

The earlier support professionals can get to suicidal youths, the better the outcomes likely will be, experts said, which is why they pointed to intervention from family and friends as one of the most vital tools in preventing self-harm.

"You can't go overboard with help," said Ms. Mahoney. "Asking somebody if they're suicidal doesn't put the idea (of suicide) in their head. It's actually a relief to them."

The Worcester schools' message to parents about "13 Reasons" last week, for example, urged parents with concerns to "be direct and ask your child if he or she is thinking of suicide," and then to get help right away if there is any indication he or she is suicidal. Likewise, the district advised parents to view the show with their kids if they're already watching it, and to discuss their thoughts about it together.

"I really am hoping some positive can come from this," said Ms. Mahoney, who added if there's one truth that often emerges whenever a controversial piece of pop culture grips the school-age population, it's that some parents often don't bother looking closely at what their children are consuming.

On the other hand, Ms. Ross said one of the takeaways from her talk with the HOPE Coalition's youth members was that some of them weren't sure why "13 Reasons" was even a discussion point anymore.

"I think they felt it's a little late in the game," she said, alluding to the fact that the show has been on Netflix for nearly two months now, and its intended audience has seen it and moved on to other things. "It seems like, as always, we're behind

the youth on this.”