

13 Reasons Why 13 Reasons Misses the Mark

It is impossible, if you are a teenager, spend any time with teenagers, or are simply a fan of binge-watching Netflix, not to have heard about their new original show “13 Reasons Why.” The show, based on the young adult novel by Jay Asher, focuses on a teenage girl, Hannah Baker, who has recently died by suicide. Hannah makes a set of tapes detailing her path towards suicide and the individuals she holds responsible. I admit that I binge-watched this show myself and as I watched, I kept waiting for Netflix to demonstrate some understanding of the sensitive nature of the content they were making available with such a vulnerable target audience. I kept waiting for a positive or at least educational message to balance out the intense, emotional, and at times misguided series. But this information never came. It bothered me so much that I wrote the following open letter:

Dear Netflix,

I am a huge fan. I often find myself binge-watching the many high quality, entertaining programs you provide. When I heard about “13 Reasons Why” on NPR, I immediately made it a television priority. Now, after having watched this emotionally evocative series, I am deeply conflicted. This show both impressed and disappointed me, and I want to communicate my conflict to the people responsible for the show. (I thought about putting them on tapes, but this seemed more direct and less dramatic.)

I took this show personally. You see, I am a clinical psychologist specializing in working with children and adolescents. I work with many teens struggling with anxiety, depression, self-injurious behaviors (e.g., cutting), and yes, suicidal behaviors. I have also taught classes to high school students on the depiction of mental illness and the media. Personally, I am also a recent first-time mom of a beautiful little girl and identified with the parents in this show. And of course, I was once a teenager myself. I watched the show from all of these vantage points. From its powerful platform, the show attempted to address many significant issues facing teens today, but missed the mark. Here are the 13 Reasons Why:

1. **The show is good.** This is not, in itself, a bad thing. But it should be understood as a *big responsibility*. People (especially teenagers and young adults) want to watch this show. *I* wanted to watch this show. The plot is captivating, the characters compelling, the acting well done, and the storylines relatable. I cared about Hannah Baker. I cared about Clay Jensen, Jessica Davis, and Justin Foley. Your target audience will recognize these characters in their own lives. They will identify themselves in them.

From a developmental psychology perspective, adolescence and emerging adulthood is when teens and young adults really determine who they are, and they often look to their peers – real and fictional - to figure this out. Because of

this, whether you intended it or not, this show could become a “how to” manual for teens.

2. **The graphic sexual assault scenes are gratuitous and potentially triggering.** Unfortunately, the sexual assaults that occur in the show are not uncommon experiences among teens. The fact that the sexual assaults occur, and the emotional, psychological repercussions of these sexual assaults for the characters involved, are well-established. Showing these scenes in multiple flashbacks, across multiple episodes, and in great detail, was an artistic choice, but was also likely triggering for people – especially teens - who have had similar experiences. I did appreciate the warnings prior to these episodes, but these warnings were not provided at the start of the series. We know from the “binge-watching” phenomenon that it is unlikely that anyone would stop watching the show nine episodes in. Furthermore, these episodes lacked any message for affected viewers on how to get help. But more on that later in reason #13.
3. **The graphic nature of the suicide scene is also gratuitous.** Perhaps this choice was made as a means to deter teens (or anyone) from cutting their wrists, but it certainly also provides step-by-step instructions on how this can be done. The scene is also depicted with artistry and drama, which glamorizes Hannah’s death. The viewer really feels Hannah’s parents’ devastation upon finding her. Feeling important and valued by others is a primary goal of adolescence/early adulthood. The show, and this scene in particular, depict this gruesome, fatal act as one way of achieving this goal. Which leads me to reason #4.
4. **The show suggests that suicide is a way to be popular.** All Hannah wanted was friends. Upon her death, there is a memorial dedicated to her, all of the students are talking about her, and she is a primary focus of everyone’s attention. Again, this is reflective of a primary goal of adolescence. In figuring out who they are, teens are constantly evaluating who they are to their peers. Hannah was invisible, or even hated by her schoolmates...until she died. After her death, everyone spent significant energy thinking about her, trying to understand her, grieving her. Hannah’s suicide gave her the prominence and relevance she craved when she was alive.
5. **The show suggests that suicide is a way to get revenge.** Hannah was treated terribly and assaulted by her peers. This is not an uncommon experience for teens. Hannah gets her revenge, but only does so by taking her life. Other characters appear to also find revenge in unhealthy/unsafe ways. That the most relatable, likeable heroes of the series (Clay, Tony) also commit to Hannah’s revenge plans only gives the plans more credibility and justification. Many teen viewers have been victimized by their peers and may be looking to dole out their own retribution. Hannah’s revenge is successful in many ways, and teens may think of this as a viable option for themselves.

6. **Hannah is only a heroine because she was (relatively) chaste.** Hannah's bullying is largely depicted as being unfair because it is based on false information. She gets labeled a "slut" because people think she engaged in more sexual activity than she actually did. While I certainly am not advocating for teens to engage in sex (though many of them will), would Hannah have deserved the bullying and assaults if the rumors were true? Focusing on the fact that Hannah had not engaged in this sexual activity suggests that she did not "deserve" her treatment, which in turn suggests that Hannah could have brought the bullying and assaults on herself if she had been sexually active. This perpetuates the justifications of victim blaming faced by many women.
7. **Hannah's suicide is blamed primarily and directly on the action or inaction of others.** The entire premise of the show, the focal point of the characters' growth, is that they were *all to blame* for Hannah's suicide. This is the (excuse the pun) fatal flaw in the plot. No matter how immoral or even violent their actions were, none of these characters can be held responsible for Hannah's death. (And I'm not saying Hannah herself is to blame. More of that in reason #12).

My biggest issue with blame is its the placement on Hannah's schoolmates. I work with so many teenagers who hold themselves responsible for the well-being of their friends, especially their friends struggling with mental illness. Even the most mature teenagers are still children, and cannot and should not be held accountable for the actions of others. They should certainly be accountable for *their own* actions (especially something as serious as sexual assault), but even Hannah's parents were not equipped to protect her.

I respect the message that teens - and we as a society more generally - should be more respectful and caring towards each other. But the message that suicide is anyone's *fault* is not only irresponsible and shaming, but truly dangerous. Even the school counselor's complete ineptitude in his role is not to blame. Sending the message that anyone is to blame for someone ending their own life is wrong and places undue responsibility on your audience. The message, whether intended or not, is: It is up to you to prevent suicide in everyone you know. If anyone you encounter dies by suicide, it is (at least partly) your failure. This is not only unfair, but untrue.

8. **Hannah's suicide is the culmination of a love story.** The most problematic tape for me was Clay's. While Hannah clarifies that he did nothing wrong, she confuses this message by including him in the tapes at all. As the protagonist, Clay's tape becomes the most important and Hannah's relationship with Clay becomes the centerpiece of her story. Hannah repeatedly refers to her potential

romantic relationship with Clay as the sole beacon of light in her depression and describes the many times this potential relationship *almost* kept her from killing herself. But she “tests” Clay in the same way that she tested the school counselor. And Clay failed too. Because Clay is not brave enough to communicate his feelings to Hannah in the way she needs to hear them (in the midst of his own grief, it should be pointed out), he too is held responsible for her death - and in fact, perhaps the most responsible. His love could have saved her.

This point is presented as especially tragic because Clay did love Hannah, but what if he didn't? What if he didn't want to date her? And that the voice of reason on the show, Tony, confirms Clay's analysis that he (Clay) “killed Hannah” was not only heartbreaking but wrong. Hannah's mental health and will to live should not depend on the affections of a teenage boy. Young and therefore unstable relationships are common triggers for self-injury and suicidal behaviors in teens. But the viewers are meant to feel that Hannah and Clay are a sort-of Romeo and Juliet. In this way, the show further romanticizes self-harm and suicide as the ultimate declaration of love and passion.

9. **Hannah did not really ask for help.** Hannah's one attempt at getting help was talking to the school counselor one time. And she bought the razors anticipating that the school counselor would not be helpful. Hannah set him up for failure. And he certainly rose to the occasion. This depiction of mental health professionals is not only largely inaccurate but also dangerous, because it certainly discourages teens from talking to a professional. A mental health professional in this situation would/should believe Hannah (or at least not shame her), and at the very least, would/should have contacted Hannah's parents.

Hannah's communication was indirect, and her life depended on people's ability to read her mind. There are several instances in the show when she almost tells someone, walks away, then expects them to know she wants them to come after her. Most notably perhaps, Hannah does not tell her parents. They have a close relationship and ask her directly if something is wrong, and still she does not tell them. While her parents are not on the tapes, by showing them as distracted and stressed, they are also demonstrated to be to blame.

That Hannah does not openly say, “I am going to kill myself if you do not help me” is not inaccurate; it is common that people will not talk directly about feeling suicidal. But when Hannah (and thus, the viewer) blames various characters for her suicide, it sends the message that getting help was outside of Hannah's control. It is portrayed that she'd exhausted all of her resources when this is simply not the case. Teens watching this show will then potentially take away the message that allusions, anonymous cries for help, and reliance on

others' omniscience are the only ways to get help; or worse, that asking for help is futile.

10. **The show presents all the ways Hannah was led to suicide but provides no ideas for how she herself could have made different (healthier) choices.** I know the plot is predicated on the fact that Hannah does, in fact, die by suicide, but there would have been a number of ways to present alternatives. What if another character in the show struggled with suicidal thoughts but got help? What if another student, in the wake of Hannah's death, talks to his/her parents? What if any of the adults in the show even had a brief conversation about what they wished Hannah would have done? Again, this show's target audience is a vulnerable one, and this was a missed opportunity to not only raise awareness to important issues facing teens but to also inform the audience on what they can actually do about it.
11. **There is no role model for mental health.** Think about it. Who are the most likeable characters in this show? Hannah (died by suicide). Clay (history of anxiety and/or depression but not currently getting help). Hannah's parents (traumatized by the death of their daughter but not getting help). Even Clay's reunification with an old friend, Skye, is characterized by mental illness (cutting). The problem is not the inclusion of so many characters struggling with mental illness (in fact, this is a strength of the show) but rather that not one of them is portrayed as getting help. This side of the story, that people do seek help and can get better, is not included in the series at all.
12. **The show says NOTHING about mental illness.** This was simply mind-boggling to me. The entire series is about suicide and its preceding events. If tapes were made according to what was really to blame, there should have, at the very least, been a tape about depression and a tape about PTSD. Hannah displays many symptoms of depression throughout the series, most notably sad mood, hopelessness, social withdrawal, and of course, thoughts of suicide. She also suffered significant traumatic experiences. Not just her own sexual assault, but also the trauma of directly witnessing another sexual assault, her involvement with the fatal accident of a peer, and being a victim of stalking (to name a few). Hannah's symptoms of PTSD are well documented: flashbacks, hypervigilance, exaggerated startle reflex, emotional numbing, anxiety, irritability, and avoidance of talking or thinking about these experiences. Hannah's suicide was likely significantly related to her own mental illness, and to not address this was one of the most notable failings of the series.
13. **CONTAGION.** It is well-documented that suicides given significant attention (especially by the media) are associated with increases in suicide rates (this phenomenon is called *contagion*). A notable historical example of this was the increase in suicides following Marilyn Monroe's death. Guidelines have been

created for the media on how to report about suicides to best prevent contagion, and can be found through institutions such as the Center for Disease Control or the National Institute of Mental Health.

Hannah Baker is a likeable character who dies in a graphically-depicted suicide and is then avenged/loved/validated in memoriam. The popularity of this series creates a potentially significant risk for contagion. Perhaps it is too much to hope that the producers would follow the guidelines put forth by the CDC, NIMH, and other institutions - which they did not. At the very least, I had hoped the producers would recognize their responsibility in undertaking this project and include some messaging about how viewers can get help for themselves or loved ones, should they be affected by the show and/or have experienced similar struggles to the characters.

There is no information at the end of each show on what to do if/when someone is sexually assaulted or experiences bullying. There is no information provided on how to get help if someone is struggling with suicide or loss. A simple message at the end of every episode would have addressed this head-on. Honestly, a few phone numbers displayed on the screen could make the difference in saving a life. This show is in desperate need of a PSA about these issues. The additional program “13 Reasons Why: Beyond the Reasons” and the website 13reasonswhy.info are good starts but do not do enough to address these issues. There are many ways of getting help, and if this information was not going to be included within the content of the show, producers should have found a way to include it prior to or following each episode. To assist with that, I’ve included some information and resources at the end of this letter.

This show is not all bad. In fact, there is a lot of *good* in this show. But the very things that make it so good are the same things that make it such a problem. In many ways, 13 Reasons Why is a realistic portrayal of the difficulties facing many teens and how tragedies like Hannah’s occur. But beyond the simple, unrealistic, and inaccurate message that we can prevent suicide by simply being kinder to each other, the producers missed an important opportunity to also demonstrate what we can *actually* do about these issues. I will admit, I’m interested in Season 2. I truly hope that Netflix and the show’s producers will utilize their enormous platform to make a difference as they continue this story. Like Tony, I’ll be watching.

Sincerely,
Michelle Reising Scobey, PhD

Resources/Advice to Teens and their Families

If you or someone you know is struggling with thoughts of suicide:

- Tell a trusted adult. If they do not help, tell another trusted adult. Keep telling adults until someone helps you.
- Call a suicide hotline (1-800-273-TALK/8255; 1-800-784-2433)
- Go to the nearest hospital emergency room.
- Call 9-1-1.

If you or someone you know has experienced sexual abuse or trauma:

- Tell a trusted adult. If they do not help, tell another trusted adult. Keep telling adults until someone helps you.
- Get help. Find a therapist who specializes in trauma. Healing is possible.
- Report the abuse or trauma to your state's Department of Children's Services and/or to the police.

If you or someone you know has experienced bullying:

- Tell a trusted adult. If they do not help, tell another trusted adult. Keep telling adults until someone helps you.

Resources about suicide can be found at:

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/suicide-prevention/index.shtml>

<http://www.spsamerica.org/>

Resources about depression can be found at:

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression/index.shtml>

Resources about childhood trauma can be found at:

<http://www.nctsn.org/>

Resources about sexual assault and/or PTSD can be found at:

<http://www.nsvrc.org/>

<https://www.cdc.gov/masstrauma/factsheets/public/coping.pdf>

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>

Resources about bullying can be found at:

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandsafety/bullying.html>