

“13 Reasons Why”: Issues and opportunities

“Hey, it’s Hannah. Hannah Baker...It’s me, live and in stereo. No return engagements, no encore, and this time, absolutely no requests...I’m about to tell you the story of my life.”

“13 Reasons Why,” the recent Netflix series adapted from Jay Asher’s 2007 young adult novel of the same name, commences with these words. What follows is a narrative that is powerful and gut-wrenching, confusing and complicated, and, ultimately, incomplete and irresponsible. The show offers some moments of light: It has generated important conversations on the topics of bullying, sexual violence, mental illness and suicide. It offers some insight into the beauty and importance of human relationships. However, for every moment of insight, there are (at least) 13 reasons why the depiction is problematic.

The series portrays the aftermath of high school student Hannah Baker’s death by suicide using seven double-sided cassette tapes she left behind to narrate the reasons why she chose to take her own life. These reasons are, in essence, the actions of people who Hannah believes are in some way responsible for her death. The series offers the narrative through Hannah’s eyes by way of flashbacks and through the present story of Clay Jensen, the story’s protagonist, Hannah’s crush, and current possessor of the tapes. What follows is a precisely crafted narrative that speaks directly to the young men and women who make up its target audience.

The primary source of the controversy surrounding “13 Reasons Why” is the decision to graphically depict Hannah’s death by suicide. A strong body of evidence supports the existence of suicide contagion, a “process by which one suicide facilitates the occurrence of another,” according to industry studies. In particular, certain depictions and representations of suicide

in mass media (both news and fiction) can lead to this effect. Media guidelines created by the National Action Alliance For Suicide Prevention recommend avoiding the following: sensational coverage, reporting details about suicide method or location, glamorizing or romanticizing suicide, and presenting simplistic explanations for suicide. “13 Reasons Why” tells a story that is explicitly and intentionally sensational, romanticized, and oversimplified, and the depiction provides specific details regarding suicide method and location. Those affiliated with the creation of the show have defended the graphic scene. Writer Nic Sheff stated, “...the most irresponsible thing we could’ve done would have been not to show the death at all.” Despite reportedly consulting with four mental health experts, Netflix disregarded evidence-based research and guidelines intended to protect people who may be negatively affected by such irresponsible portrayals of suicide.

Suicide Risks

If a person talks about:

- Being a burden
- Feeling trapped
- Experiencing unbearable pain
- Having no reason to live
- Killing themselves

Behavior that includes:

- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Looking for a way to kill themselves
 - Acting recklessly
- Withdrawing from activities, family, friends
 - Sleep problems
- Visiting or calling to say goodbye
- Giving away prized possessions
 - Aggression

Moods:

- Depression
- Loss of interest
 - Rage
 - Irritability
 - Humiliation
 - Anxiety

Health factors:

- Depression
- Bipolar disorder
- Schizophrenia
- Borderline or antisocial personality disorder
 - Conduct disorder
- Psychotic disorders or psychotic symptoms
 - Anxiety disorders
 - Substance abuse
- Serious or chronic health condition/pain

Environmental factors:

- Stressful life events such as a death, divorce or job loss
- Prolonged stress such as bullying, relationship problems, unemployment
 - Access to lethal means such as firearms, drugs
- Exposure to a suicide, or to graphic or sensationalized accounts of suicide

Historical factors:

- Previous attempts
- Family history

Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

“13 Reasons Why” presents a complicated web of rumors, lies and cruelty directed at Hannah, and this tangled mess of problems is wrapped up in a neat 13-episode package and delivered as the explicit cause of Hannah’s death. However, even this seemingly labyrinthine portrayal is oversimplified. The show avoids any significant mention of mental illness itself, despite data from the National Alliance on Mental Illness that indicates approximately 90 percent of individuals who die by suicide experience mental illness. Additionally, the majority of people who experience bullying, sexual violence and other challenges portrayed in the show do not die by suicide. While the harmful actions of Hannah’s peers certainly affected Hannah and her well-being, it is inappropriate and incomplete to suggest that these experiences explicitly caused her death.

If you are the parent or guardian of a young adult, it is possible your child has watched or desires to watch “13 Reasons Why.” It is worth noting that in addition to the graphic portrayal of suicide, the show also depicts two graphic rape scenes, underage drinking and drug use, and casual sex. There are a variety of ways to handle this situation, including that you may not permit your child to watch the show, or that you may choose to watch it with them. It is important to consider your child’s well-being and the ways in which the show may affect him or her. Regardless of the specific decision you make, it would be strongly beneficial to begin or continue a dialogue with your child about the issues depicted in the show, particularly that of mental illness. Given that suicide is the leading cause of death among 15-29 year olds globally and that 75 percent of all lifetime mental health conditions begin by age 24, there is no better time to educate yourself and your child about mental health and well-being.

As a person living with mental illness and a lifelong Catholic with a degree in theology, I have grappled with the reality of

the suffering of mental illness and how to make sense of it in light of the faith that I profess. There is much to be said on this topic that extends beyond the limitations of this article, but I will restrict my comments to two brief reflections. First, "13 Reasons Why" offers us an opportunity to recall and reflect on the Church's teaching on suicide. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, "We are stewards, not owners of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of ... Suicide is contrary to love for the living God. Grave psychological disturbances, anguish or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide. We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives." This is a difficult topic, historically mishandled and misunderstood; however, it is important to recognize the full, nuanced teaching of the Church. Suicide is objectively wrong; however, the Church recognizes and accounts for the reality of mental illness and its effect on the human heart and mind.

To its credit, "13 Reasons Why" reminds us of the gift of human relationships. The show, with its many faults and failings, shines brightest when it depicts this gift. This is beautifully exemplified near the end of the show when Clay begins to rebuild a relationship with Skye, a student with whom he used to be friends. She asks him if he is okay, and he responds, "No. Is that alright?" Skye nods. In this brief encounter, Clay offers his broken humanity to Skye, who steps into his story and acknowledges and accepts his suffering. We are called to engage in this practice daily with each human person we encounter. In particular, it is of the utmost importance that we encounter people who live with mental illness and receive their stories as the gift that they are.

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