

13 Reasons Why – Suggestions for Educators

Use of the Netflix series, ***13 Reasons Why***, as a teaching tool is not recommended. The material is graphic and potentially triggering for vulnerable young people. However, some of your students may access this material on their own and may be left with questions and concerns. If educators are approached by students about this material, in addition to suggesting that students talk with their parents/guardians about their feelings, the following suggestions may be of help:

1. Encourage critical thinking: Highlight that this series is a fictional drama that includes many unrealistic elements. Note that it is common for young people to identify with characters on TV or in movies, and that they may have similar experiences and thoughts as some of the characters in this series. However, it is important to remember that there are much more healthy ways to cope with these feelings and that the examples given in the series were for dramatic effect only.

2. Offer facts to clarify misinformation in the series: For example,

- Suicide and the reasons for it are complex. The majority of people who die by suicide are living with a mental illness, but this does not mean that all people who struggle with problems in this area will experience suicidal thoughts or behavior. There are effective treatments for people struggling with a mental illness.
- 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.
- There are many things that are protective when someone is struggling with emotional difficulties. Asking for, and receiving, support is one of those things.
- Suicide is never a heroic or romantic act. The death by suicide depicted in the series (although fictional) is a cautionary tale, not meant to appear heroic and should be viewed as a tragedy.
- Memorializing someone who died by suicide is generally not a recommended practice at school.
- The death of a person by suicide is never the fault of survivors of a suicide loss. There are resources and support groups for suicide loss survivors.

3. Encourage Healthy Coping: Emphasize for students that it is normal to experience periods of stress and mental distress. Provide examples of some of the many healthy ways to cope with stress (e.g., engage in exercise, read a book, listen to music, talk with friends, enjoy nature, etc.). Explicitly model self-care and healthy coping.

4. Encourage Help Seeking: Point out that the ways in which the helper characters in the series were depicted is not an accurate portrayal of how most counselors would behave. Note that school counselors are professionals and a trustworthy source for help. In addition, you may wish to remind students that there are many other places to seek support if they are struggling – a family member, counselor, teacher, coach, etc. Indicate that they could also tell a friend, but that together it is important to find an adult who can help. In our school, you can also talk to <insert name of individual who provides emotional support in the school>.

You can provide students with the number for Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868.

5. Encourage Caring Support: Talking openly and honestly about emotional distress and suicide is okay. It will not make someone more suicidal or put the idea of suicide in their mind. If you are concerned about someone, ask them about it. If someone tells you they are suicidal, take them seriously and get help. Knowing how to acknowledge and respond to someone who shares their thoughts of emotional distress or suicide with you is important. Don't judge them or their thoughts. Listen. Be caring and kind. Offer to stay with them. Offer to go with them to get help or to contact a crisis line.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to talk to a member of our Mental Health Leadership Team listed below <list key contacts>.

Note: These suggestions were drawn from talking points prepared by Suicide Awareness Voices of Education & the Jed Foundation, in collaboration with Netflix. Many thanks to Diane Mullane (DCDSB) and Stefani Burosch (PVNCCDSB) for additional perspectives related to our Ontario context. Note that many of these points are also reinforced in the School Mental Health ASSIST Decision Support Tool: <https://smh-assist.ca/resources/?tag=345>, Youth Suicide Prevention at School: A Resource for School Mental Health Leadership Teams, and Life Promotion / Suicide Prevention Framework.

Further information can also be found in our board's Suicide Prevention and Intervention Protocol....<insert link to protocol>