

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT *13 REASONS WHY*

Tips for Having Safe Conversations with Students about Mental Health

In promoting mental health, what is necessary for some is often good for all.

While some students need explicit teaching about coping strategies, how to interact with peers, or strategies to manage emotions, ALL students could benefit from learning or re-learning those concepts. The way this information is shared is also important: ongoing, evidence-informed content by knowledgeable, caring adults will ensure the greatest impact and most effective learning. ***But not all information is equal.*** With growing awareness about mental health, more people are offering content to teach about mental health problems without consideration to the potential negative impact it can have on vulnerable young people. ***As a result, 13 Reasons Why (the book or Netflix series) and other similar content should NOT be used as a teaching tool.*** Since students may access it on their own time, this document will provide strategies to support safe conversations in the classroom if it arises.

WHAT IS *13 REASONS WHY*?

Recently, Netflix has released a series, *13 Reasons Why*, based on a young adult novel by Jay Asher that depicts events leading to death by suicide of a young fictional character. In the series, the young person that dies by suicide leaves tapes that outline reasons that she took her own life. If you have watched the series, you will know it includes ***graphic content related to suicide (including means) and sexual assault, glamorization of suicidal behaviour, and negative portrayals of helpers*** (including peers and guidance counselors) which may prevent youth from seeking help.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

While the series may not pose risks for most students, ***we believe it has potential for harm for students who may be struggling with a mental health problem and/or suicidal ideation.*** It may also encourage feelings of guilt in survivors of suicide loss (students and staff) who are themselves attempting to understand why someone close to them completed suicide. Finally, it presents myths about suicide without addressing accurate facts in return which perpetuates the stigma and shame associated with suicide and mental health problems.

WHAT CAN I DO IN RESPONSE?

1. Encourage critical thinking and media literacy: critically viewing media is a valuable tool for today when we have access to “news” through social media and other potentially

unreliable outlets. This series is a fictional drama that includes many unrealistic elements. While young people may have had similar experiences to the character, there are much more healthy ways to cope with these feelings and that the examples given in the series were for dramatic effect only. For tips on teaching media literacy, go to: <http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/general-information/digital-media-literacy-fundamentals/media-literacy-fundamentals>.

2. Offer facts to clarify misinformation in the series: 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. [For resources on teaching healthy coping in elementary and secondary, contact the Mental Health Lead.](#)

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. **If you are concerned about a young person, please contact your**

Administrator as soon as possible so they can inform the School Psychoeducational Clinician immediately for a suicide risk assessment.

You can provide students with the number for Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 and also inform them of the Be Safe App.

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.

6. Link learning to ongoing initiatives for mental health promotion: students may want to become more involved in promoting mental health and well-being in their school or community. Consider informing them of ongoing initiatives in their school and community, committees/clubs (eg. Wellness or equity and inclusive education committees), or advocacy campaigns (eg. CMHA Mental Health Week) to help make a difference.

7. Improve your understanding: students may be presenting with signs or symptoms of suicidal ideation and it is important to intervene early by telling an administrator who will inform the School Psychoeducational Clinician immediately. Refresh your knowledge of the Suicide Prevention Protocol Quick Reference Guide on the Intranet for a list of signs and symptoms. You can also go to <http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/preventing-youth-suicide/13-reasons-why-netflix-series-considerations-for-educators> for more information for Educators and Families.