



School Social Work Association of America

***13 Reasons Why* – Support for Educators and Families**

13 Reasons Why is a Netflix series that focuses on an adolescent girl who killed herself and left behind a series of audio recordings that explain reasons why she committed suicide. Based on a bestselling book by Jay Asher, the show has garnered significant media attention related to the way the series portrays trauma in the forms of sexual assault, bullying, verbal emotional and physical abuse. Interviews with Jay Asher and the series producers suggested that their intent for the series was to be a catalyst for educators and community leaders to engage adolescents in dialogue on the serious topics of suicide, bullying and sexual violence as a means of prevention. Concerns about the graphic content in *13 Reasons Why* have been raised by teachers, mental health professionals, and practitioners across the country.

Suicide is a serious public health issue facing our nation today and there is no single cause of suicide. “The causes of suicide are complex and determined by multiple combinations of factors, such as mental illness, substance abuse, painful losses, exposure to violence, and social isolation.” (SAMHSA, 2015). *13 Reasons Why* accurately portrays the complexity of suicide and the emotional toll of bullying. While the School Social Work Association of America supports efforts to engage adolescents in dialogue about difficult topics, we have a number of concerns about the content of the series. The graphic depiction of the suicidal act and sexual assaults are extremely troubling as well as the inadequate response of the school and the school counselor. Likewise, the emphasis on internalization of blame experienced by the characters in the series is distressing.

Since the series debut in March 2017, many young adults have binge watched *13 Reasons Why*. There has been a proliferation of posts on social media and discussion among students in schools to encourage them to watch the show. While some adolescents have questioned the content, SSWAA is particularly concerned about those who may be struggling with how to make sense of the subject matter. Many young adults are resilient and able to discern the difference between a fictional story and real life. However, youth suffering from depression and the impact of past trauma or other mental health concerns that watch the series could be at higher risk for self-harm or acts of revenge as a means to address their own anguish. The American Foundation of Suicide Prevention (2017) reported that the risk of additional suicides increases when media explicitly describe the suicide method, use dramatic/graphic headlines or images, and repeated/extensive coverage that sensationalizes death. SSWAA endorses the need for responsible reporting using best practices to dispel the myths and focus on the facts around suicide that can promote individuals to seek help.

Suicide does not discriminate based on age, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, race, religion socio-economic status, etc. The World Health Organization and suicide prevention organizations reported that many suicides are impulsive acts in response to a crisis where there is diminished capacity to respond to life stressors. One suicide occurs approximately every forty seconds, somewhere in the world. The aftermath of suicide significantly impacts communities and leaves a long-lasting devastation for those that are left behind. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among persons aged 10-14 and the second among those between the ages of 15-34 years (Center for Disease Control, 2015).

Suicides are preventable with timely interventions and treatment. Violence, injury and unaddressed student mental health concerns can create learning environments that inhibit learning while adversely affecting the wellbeing of students and school personnel across the United States (Astor, Benbenishty, & Marachi, 2010). Schools districts should have policies and practices in place to prevent suicide as well as in how to address crises. Administrators, educators and school employed mental health providers such as school social workers need crisis intervention training and have systems in place to support schools, families and communities before, during and after a crisis.

School social workers provide support and crisis intervention services in collaboration with other specialized instructional support personnel, school resource officers, public safety personnel, and other first responders. They work together to ensure physical safety of students, the integrity of facilities, and effective school-wide responses. School social workers have the necessary education and training to assist teachers to recognize potential threats of harm and identifying warning signs, such as disturbing drawings or written commentary while avoiding profiling students based on outward appearances. Teachers, administrators, other school staff, parents, and extended family members can work alongside school social workers to be integral parts of early identification systems. School social workers also provide essential follow-up services to members of the school community. (NASW, 2012; Issuradatt, 2013)

The response of the school counselor in *13 Reasons Why* does not accurately reflect how schools can effectively respond before, during and after a crisis. To effectively address various forms of trauma, many schools are transforming into trauma-informed learning communities. They recognize that access to evidence-based interventions in schools is critical and can reduce or eliminate a future need for mental health services (Treatment & Services Adaptation Center, 2016.) Students in schools that utilize a trauma-informed approach learn skills that increase resiliency. Restorative justice practices and high quality universal social emotional learning curricula can further help to create safe and supportive school climates. Students need to develop the interpersonal skills to not only successfully navigate our diverse world but to also ensure academic achievement, employability, and self confidence. All of these models support a school-wide multi-tiered system of supports approach that promotes school safety and academic achievement for all students. (SSWAA, 2014).

SSWAA recommends the following steps for educators and families to effectively address the themes and issues arising from *13 Reasons Why*.

1. Recognize the warning signs of suicide. These can include changes in behavior, feelings of hopelessness or helplessness, talking, drawing or writing about death especially if the person has experienced a recent loss or tragic event/painful event. Here is a list of behaviors to watch for:
 - a. Increased use of alcohol or drugs
 - b. Investigating ways to kill themselves, including online searches for materials or means
 - c. Acting recklessly
 - d. Withdrawing from activities
 - e. Isolating themselves from family and friends
 - f. Sleeping too much or too little
 - g. Visiting or calling people to say goodbye
 - h. Giving away prized possessions
 - i. Aggression
2. If a student exhibits any of the above warning signs, they must be evaluated by a school based mental health professional to assess risk and provide appropriate referrals. If a mental health professional is unavailable, then a school nurse or administrator can provide support until a mental health professional is available.
3. When stress becomes overwhelming, encourage youth to seek support from a safe and trusted adult or a trained mental health provider such as Specialized Instructional Support Professionals in your school like a School Social Worker. Reassure them that school employed mental health providers recognize that the counselor in *13 Reasons Why* did not act in accordance with recognized standards of care. School social workers provide crisis assessment and interventions. They effectively collaborate with school staff, families and communities to address mental health crises.
4. Allow students to share their perspectives and help them make sense of the issues brought forth by this series.
5. When the topic of *13 Reasons Why* comes up, utilize resources such as *13 Reasons Why Talking Points* available at <https://www.save.org/13-reasons-why/> .
6. Inform students of safe people and places they can go to dialogue about intense or overwhelming emotions.
7. For further support in designing and implementing strategies to prevent suicide and to promote social, emotional and behavioral health, SAMHSA has created the following free resource: *Prevention Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools*.

Resources

13 Reasons Why (2017) Talking Points, retrieved from <https://www.save.org/13-reasons-why/>.

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (2016) Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide retrieved from <http://afsp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/recommendations.pdf>.

Astor, R., Benbenishty, R., & Marachi, R. (2010). Violence in schools. In P.A. Meares (Ed.). *Social Work Services in Schools*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

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SAMSHA (2015) Suicide Prevention, retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/suicide-prevention>.

SSWAA Resolution Statement: School Safety: The role of School Social Work in Violence Prevention (2014) retrieved from www.sswaa.org/res_statements/school_safety_The_Role_of_Sc.pdf.

SSWAA Resolution Statement; School Social Work Encourages the Development of Trauma Informed Schools (2016) retrieved from http://www.sswaa.org/resource/resmgr/legislation/2017_Uploads/Resolution_Statements/Trauma_Informed_Schools_and_.pdf?hhSearchTerms=%22trauma+and+informed+and+schools%22.

Suicide Fact Sheet (2017). World Health Organization retrieved from <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs398/en/>.

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