

Case 2: Why Suicide?

In March 2017 Netflix released an episodic web series based on a novel by Jay Asher called *Thirteen Reasons Why*. The series follows the lives of high school students living in the wake of a classmate's suicide. The narrative concept is that before Hannah Baker's suicide, she recorded a series of thirteen audiotapes outlining the reasons why she kills herself. Hannah leaves these tapes in the custody of a friend, Tony, who delivers them to a cast of characters—each of whom Hannah believes contributed to her ending her own life. Soon after the show was released, critics began to publicly complain.

One criticism common to many parents, mental health professionals, and teachers is that the show glamorizes suicide. The National Association of School Psychologists cautions that the show's "powerful storytelling may lead impressionable viewers to romanticize the choices made by the characters and/or develop revenge fantasies."⁵ This concern has been echoed by some parents who claim that the suicides of their teenage children were triggered by the show.⁶

The series now begins each episode with a trigger warning, but originally the show contained trigger warnings for only three episodes—the 9th, which graphically depicts Hannah's rape, and the 12th and 13th, which feature suicide scenes. Hannah Baker's suicide at the end of the first season is graphic and violent. Nic Sheff, a writer on the series, describes the portrayal as "an instant reminder that suicide is never peaceful and painless, but instead an excruciating, violent end to all hopes and dreams and possibilities for the future."⁷

⁵ "13 Reasons Why Netflix Series: Considerations for Educators," *National Association of School Psychologists*, August 9, 2017, <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/preventing-youth-suicide/13-reasons-why-netflix-series-considerations-for-educators>.

⁶ Katie Kindelan and Sabina Ghebremedhin, "2 California Families Claim '13 Reasons Why' Triggered Teens' Suicides" *ABCNews*, June 28, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/california-families-claim-13-reasons-triggered-teens-suicides/story?id=48323640>.

⁷ Nic Sheff, "13 Reasons Why Writer: Why We Didn't Shy Away from Hannah's Suicide," *Vanity Fair*, April 19, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/04/13-reasons-why-suicide-controversy-nic-sheff-writer>.

The show's production team anticipated a controversial discussion about the show, given the prevalence of suicide, suicide attempts, and suicide ideation among teens. As producer Selena Gomez puts it, "this is happening every day...Whether or not you wanted to see it, that's what's happening. The content is complicated." According to the CDC "17.0% of students (grades 9-12) seriously considered attempting suicide in the previous 12 months (22.4% of females and 11.6% of males)."⁸ Though this data precedes the release of the show, the correlative evidence in a recent study has shown that "*13 Reasons Why*, in its present form, has both increased suicide awareness while unintentionally increasing suicidal ideation."⁹

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⁸ "Suicide Facts at a Glance 2015," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, August 9, 2017, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/suicide-datasheet-a.pdf>.

⁹ John W. Ayers, "Internet Searches for Suicide Following the Release of *13 Reasons Why*," *Journal of the American Medical Academy*, July 31, 2017, http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/2646773?utm_source=Silverchair_Information_Systems&utm_campaign=FTM_07272017&utm_content=news_releases&cmp=1&utm_medium=email.